

Tallulah goes south to the Azores

Alan Rountree



Where to go this year? I had now been to Galicia ten times and felt a change was called for. My wife Angela loves the sun so it must be south and we decided where else but the Azores? I had been there twice before and with maturing years it might be my last chance.

Most of my trips to Galicia had been single-handed but I thought a bit of company would be good for the longer trip. My friend Greg McGarry who is a horseman with no sailing experience, but is up for anything, had joined me for one of my trips to Galicia. There was fog all the way and he had put up with the discomfort admirably so I asked if he would be interested and he jumped to the challenge. Now I had crew and I set about preparing *Tallulah*. I replaced the standing and running rigging and upgraded the insulation of the fridge. Everything was checked and in perfect working order.

Greg and I provisioned *Tallulah* with twelve fillet steaks, four striploin steaks and loads of mince, all vac-packed, with the intention of sailing west towards Mizzen Head, all the while looking for a suitable forecast to depart Ireland. However, on reaching Kilmore Quay, there appeared to be a very stable high pressure stretching from the Azores to Ireland, giving NE winds, so off we went. With sunshine and calm seas, we glided off and had wonderful sailing and sumptuous meals. The forecast proved accurate and we had a great trip all the way to the Azores, using a bit of diesel on the last two days. Our only challenge was to get some colour on our skin so we wouldn't stand out too much on arriving at our destination.

On my first trip to the Azores in 1991, *Tallulah* was one of three yachts anchored in Ponta Delgada but this time we found a massive marina and a concrete jungle. Ponta Delgada was destroyed! The coffee shops and bars on the waterfront blared out loud music into the late hours and the streets were jammed with cars. Michael O'Leary can take the blame as he, and others, now fly tourists daily from all over Europe. I phoned a friend I had made all those years ago, Carlos Pato, to complain about what he had allowed to happen to the Azores in our absence. Within ten minutes he joined us for a drink and informed us that, while Ponta Delgada was destroyed, the rest of the island had not changed. We hired a car and toured Sao Miguel, where the scenery was as wonderful as ever. The hydrangeas line the roadsides, which are manicured like private gardens. We bathed in the hot pools in Furnace and walked the magnificent gardens there. It was a thrill to swim in the Atlantic Ocean where the temperature of the water was 35°C. A thermal spring spouts water into the ocean at 60°C and when mixed with the waves results in 35°C.

Greg was keen to see other islands but, as his return flight was only a week away, our only option was to sail to Santa Maria, which is 60 miles. We hired a car and did a quick tour of the island. On my earlier visits to the Azores my friends in Ponta Delgada had phoned ahead to islands we were visiting and arranged for a welcoming party on each. So it was this time as Carlos Pato phoned his friend, Angelina, to welcome us to Santa Maria. A festival was underway in Vila Do Porto and we partied into the small hours. The Azores are famous for their festivals honouring every saint the Pope has heard about and when they run out of saints, they invent one.

It was now time to return to Ponta Delgada for Greg's flight home and for Angela to arrive. The following week Arnie and Georgina Poole were joining us so there wasn't time to visit other islands, resulting in me again hiring a car and touring Sao Miguel. Our friends Carlos Pato and his wife had us to their home for a party, where they gathered old friends from 1991, and of course we returned the compliment aboard *Tallulah*. When Arnie and Georgina arrived we again toured all the sites in a hired car. We sailed to Vila Franca do Campo. The offshore island of Ilhen da Vila is as perfect a natural swimming pool as one is likely to find and the main harbour is an old fishing port where traditional fishing boats are painted with the faces of saints, who are believed to keep them safe.

The following week Angela and I set sail for Santa Maria, as other islands were too far away to ensure that we could return in time for Angela's flight home. The weather was really hot – too hot. We hired a motor bike which was marvellous, cooling us down as we toured the island visiting different beaches each day. This island is unique in that it has white sandy beaches which are approached by land down really steep twisting roads. The views are breath-taking and the swimming was marvellous. All the beaches are patrolled by lifeguards. There are flags flying that denote whether there are stinging jellyfish present. Apparently, as the sea temperature has risen, the jellyfish have become more common. After ten days Angela took the ferry back to Ponta Delgada and I sailed alone. The ferry, which was a large displacement vessel, was amazing in that it has the same propulsion as a high speed catamaran and travelled at 30 knots, completing the journey to Ponta Delgada in two hours.



Baía de São Lourenço

Having said goodbye to Angela, I set sail to return to Ireland. My plan was to break the journey in Galicia and there await a suitable break in the weather to cross Biscay. However, the winds were light SW and to keep wind in the genoa, I was forced to sail more north than planned, resulting in me being 500 miles west of Finisterre when I arrived at that latitude.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked about sailing alone is how do I put in the day with no-one to talk to? Well, I took on board a family of flies, three in number, one quite large, one medium sized and a baby fly. The weather was extremely hot and I was almost naked, perspiring a lot. I took three cold showers on the first day. However, it was a bonanza for the fly family who took it in turn to land on me for their dinner. I had a sticky fly catching strip on board and hung it from the ceiling. I quickly discovered that flies will not land on a moving object. So the plan was for me

to lie motionless, with the sticky strip on a piece of paper positioned on various parts of my body, and await a kill. Each day I got one fly and that was how I passed three days – busy all the time.

Now at the latitude of Finisterre and 500 miles west of it, I had to make the decision whether I would continue to Ireland or divert to Spain. The distance to Ireland was only 700 miles so I decided to use the satellite phone I had borrowed from Frank Ranalow, ICC, and ring Bruce Fennell, ICC, to get a weather forecast. The following day gave 14 knots SW, the next day 30-35 knots and then dropping back to 20 knots for the next two days. I decided I could live with that and kept on towards Ireland. Before I left Ireland, Philip Watson had put a fourth reef in the mainsail and, as I had never used this tiny sail, I decided to put it in while the weather was calm in preparation for a bit of a blow the following day. Two hours after securing this reef the wind rose to a strong gale, probably F9, and I was surging along at great speed. Both the staysail and the genoa were rolled in and I surfed down the face of huge breaking waves. The wind continued to blow and the Navtex gave strong gale force 9 for the following two days. As the seas grew, the breaking waves rolled over *Tallulah*, filling the cockpit and pouring in through tiny cracks around the companionway. Everything in the boat was soaked and I was forced to lie on the floor for the next three days. One wave caught the spray hood and bent the stainless steel bars into S-hooks. On peeping through the companionway I noticed that the outboard motor was hanging off. A stainless steel bolt head had been pulled through the stainless steel bracket. I donned my life belts with two lines so that I could tie onto each side of the boat and managed to replace the bolt using large washers and also tied down the now mangled spray hood. Meanwhile the Aries wind vane continued to do its job perfectly, steering from one complete lock to the other in two seconds. I would have preferred to have a tiny bit of staysail up, with no mainsail, but I was in no position to secure the mainsail so decided to keep going as I was. On reading a book some years ago the famous sailor, Bernard Moitessier, advocated speed when running before a gale. The other option was to deploy a sea anchor but I judged that I would be dangerously swamped if I did that so the easier option was to keep going. The wind vane on the Aries was continually hit by large breaking seas but didn't break, as I had reinforced it with fibreglass and epoxy resin. Also its leading edge was facing into the waves.

I was worried and nervous as I approached the continental shelf as, in 1991, *Tallulah* had been rolled through 360° there and I didn't want a repeat of that event. For about five miles while crossing the shelf the seas were indeed dramatic and confused but, to my amazement, as I approached shallower water the large waves had been broken up in the confusion, resulting in a much less dramatic sea. The wind continued to decrease to about F7 but it felt very moderate. I was glad I didn't have crew as they would have been no help and there was only space for one on the floor. While still 150 miles out, I had the strange feeling that I need to slow down in case I ran into Ireland. It was all the time reassuring that I had new rigging, that Philip Watson had reinforced the sail and put in the tiny reef and that *Tallulah* seemed to be up to the job.

On arrival at Kinsale I was welcomed by Bruce and Barbara Fennell, ICC, who had arranged a berth for me on the marina. We staggered up to the Dock Bar for a couple of pints and Barbara cooked a lovely steak aboard *Bees Nees*. Bruce's friend Hal is the manager of the Trident Hotel and he arranged to have the cushions dried in a hot room in the hotel. My clothes and four wet sleeping bags were all washed and dried.

The following day Frank Ranalow, ICC, arrived to accompany me back to Dun Laoghaire. We stopped off in Youghal, Kilmore Quay and Wicklow. I had sailed 3,120 miles, had a wonderful holiday but will not be asking *Tallulah* to take on the Atlantic again. The routing charts for August in the Atlantic show no wind over F7 from the south in the area of the Atlantic that I was sailing.

My recollection of water temperature in the Azores on past visits was pretty chilly for swimming, whereas this year, according to the local forecasts, the present temperature was 23°C. I wonder if this increase in water temperature has anything to do with creating unusual weather systems. Perhaps there is something in global warming....



Marina at Vila do Porto