

## LAST MAN TO THE AZORES AND BACK



Jonathan and Jane Snodgrass before the AZAB start

... bp, bp, bp, BP, BP, BP, **BP, BP, BP** ... penetrated into my poor, tired, brain. The alarm on the AIS! Wake up! Get up! Climb out over the lee cloth. Night. Stagger across the dark, violently rolling cabin, from handhold to handhold. Prise my eyes open and read on the display: *CPA 0.0 miles. TCPA 8 minutes. F word!*

Experienced offshore sailors will understand the above and understand the laxative effect. For others I will try to explain as briefly as possible. AIS (Automatic Identification System) is a wonderful collision avoidance aid for shipping and now also for small boat sailors. Vessels transmit their identification, position, course, speed and other information by radio and it is received and displayed on all vessels within range which have an AIS receiver. The information is displayed as words but also on a display rather like a radar set. CPA means Closest Point of Approach, but I refer to it as Closest Point of *Attack*. TCPA means Time to Closest Point of *Attack*. In 8 minutes I would be run into by the *Esperanza*, a vessel of many thousand tons travelling at 20 knots. I was hove to in a near gale in *Lexia*, a 32 foot glass fibre junk rigged schooner, and I was alone. I was in shorts and t shirt and still half asleep. It would be ... no contest.

I have since talked with other sailors about what I should have done or what they would have done. Should I have called the vessel immediately on the VHF?

Maybe, but my VHF does not have the automatic Digital Selective Call (DSC) link from the AIS display. Some have said that they would have gone up into the cockpit immediately. However, I knew that it was blowing a near gale with horizontal rain and spray and that it was very rough. (That's why I was hove to and in my bunk, sleeping, exhausted.) For good or ill, I decided to get my foul weather gear and harness on first. In retrospect I think I should have put on my life jacket which has a light and a personal locator beacon (PLB) attached rather than my harness. What I did which was definitely correct was to get the engine start key from its hook over the chart table and clutch it in my teeth.

I did still have some things going for me. I had upgraded my AIS from a passive to an active set so I should have been visible on his AIS. I had upgraded my Sea Me radar target enhancer to provide an enhanced image on both his X and S band radars, giving me the equivalent radar signal of a much bigger vessel. I had a new mast head LED tricolour light which was certainly clearer than the old incandescent light with its crazed Perspex cover. He should be able to see me, particularly if I drew his attention, but how to do that: VHF, white flare or use the lamp, the traditional "steamer scarer"? But that was all passive. I had an engine that I was confident would start and I could take some collision avoidance myself. That would be active and *"God helps those who help themselves"*.

Hatch open, clip on whilst still inside, climb over the Perspex wash board which was lashed in place, key in, start engine, look around and there she was, classic red and green lights with a white steaming light above, and not far away. *"When both lights you see ahead, starboard wheel and show your red."* Trad. Take a decision, turn and motor towards his port and show my red light. Whilst guiding the tiller with one foot, reach into the cabin for the VHF microphone. Call the Esperanza by name on Channel 16. There was a quick response with a burst of to me unintelligible Greek and then silence. A wave broke over the boat and into the cockpit. Shortly after the vessel called me, in calm clear English with a Greek accent: "This is Esperanza. This is the Captain. I have just come onto the bridge. What is your heading?" A glance at the magnetic compass: "Two two zero degrees". Immediately: "Two two zero degrees, I am turning to starboard." And he did. His green disappeared; his port side slid past, his white stern light came into view and then headed away. I lived to fight another day.

I called him to thank him and, as I had had no working wind measuring instrument for some days, ask for a wind speed reading. "25 knots but with higher gusts. Have a safe passage." Little did he know ...

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I wrote two years ago about reading Paul Heiney's book, Last Man Across the Atlantic, his account of completing the 2005 OSTAR (Original Singlehanded Transatlantic Race) in his family cruiser and my deciding to have a go at OSTAR 2009. I wrote how, only three months before the race, I bought Lexia, a 33 years old junk rigged cruiser, which had been very neglected for some years.

It has been said that the OSTAR consists of two races: the first is to get across the start line; the second is to get to Newport, Rhode Island. Lexia and I did manage to

stagger across the OSTAR start line, but we were both very unprepared and we retired early in the race. A consolation was that so did many others. Also I learned a lot.

During 2010 Lexia and I got to know one another better and as 2011 approached I began to think about the AZAB (Azores and Back) 2011 race. Like the OSTAR, the AZAB is organised every four years. It is from Falmouth in England 1,250 miles to Punta Delgada on the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores and, after a restart, back to Falmouth. It was originally for single-handers but since the second race it has been open to double handed crews which are now the large majority. It is popular because it is shorter than the OSTAR and crews can be varied between the two legs. However, it is still a serious ocean passage. It is now open only to monohulls from 30 to 50 feet and attracts both serious ocean racing boats and more modest cruisers. I hesitated and hesitated about entering but on the day before the deadline at the end of January I sent in an entry form and a very large cheque.

But why enter an organised race? Why not just cruise to the Azores, or indeed to somewhere else? In her book, *Ocean Cruising on a Budget*, Anne Hammick, by her own admission, paints a “negative picture of organised ocean crossings”, either races or rallies. She has a number of objections: firstly cost; secondly she writes that “the popular ‘hold hands across the Atlantic’ theme is totally unworkable in practice, and you will be as much on your own as if the race or rally did not exist.”; thirdly “If you are setting off on your first major ocean passage a predetermined departure date is one more potential problem you simply do not need.” However, there can be an opposite view: a race does provide an encouraging and supportive structure, as far as it can, and a predetermined departure date is a great incentive to get ready and actually “to boldly go”. How many cruisers are “off next year when I have completed modifications”? I was going to depart Falmouth at midday on 4<sup>th</sup> June, or lose a lot of face and waste an awful lot of money.

I had until 1<sup>st</sup> May to complete a 500 mile qualifying passage: non stop, solo and under sail alone. The boat had to be made ready for that passage but also, by the race start in early June, had to comply with the regulations for a Category One ocean race in terms of build, equipment and paperwork. Again I was on a preparation treadmill but this time I was a bit further advanced and was able to keep ahead of the curve, just, by dint of considerable time, effort and expense.

I have mentioned above some of the necessary equipment upgrades. The regulations that the boat and I needed to meet are the same as those for a fully crewed 60 foot racing boat. In a few respects they were therefore a little irksome. However, the large majority are very sensible, and are designed to help to improve my chances of survival. I needed to attend a number of courses, usually to get lapsed qualifications up to date eg offshore survival, first aid, VHF. I had to make some modifications to the boat including storm proofing the cockpit locker hatches which opened into the body of the boat and also building in a second water tank. I also added a wireless wind speed measuring and display system. In total I spent a number of thousands of pounds. I also arranged insurance cover, at a significant extra premium, but I must commend Fastnet Marine Insurance, who were prepared to provide comprehensive cover for a single handed entry in an ocean race, albeit with an increased excess.

I also addressed the business of storm survival. My previous arrangements had consisted of an ex Royal Navy sea anchor, two old climbing ropes and a head in the sand attitude. I studied the options for improving this. For anyone who has not done so, it is worth looking on the internet for information about the Jordan Series Drogue (JSD). Unlike a sea anchor, which is a large parachute designed to be deployed from the bow and to remain fixed in the sea, the JSD consists of many small parachutes attached at intervals to a long rope which is deployed from the stern of the boat. It is designed to allow the boat to keep moving forward down the face of the big waves and thereby maintain stability and control. It is fixed to the stern by a split bridle which ideally is attached by shackles to horizontally mounted chain plates on the quarters. I had a JSD made for Lexia by the one British manufacturer. Including the manufacture of all the parts and the fixing of the chain plates, it cost several hundred pounds for equipment that I hoped would never be used, but when you need it ... you need it.

The whole JSD is a big bundle which I could just lift. Deploying it from the stern in storm conditions needed some consideration. The manufacturer's solution is a special canvas stowage bag. At a cost of £80 it was too expensive and also not really suitable for Lexia's small cockpit. I returned that and asked for a refund. Then I went to the local branch of large national DIY shop. I had an idea that a "gorilla tub" would be the answer; after all it had all cost "a gorilla"! However, the builders' mortar mixing tub, similar but bigger, looked to be ideal, and at £7 was acceptable. I had taken the drogue and bridle to the shop to check that it fitted in the tub, which it did. Of course I needed also to check that it deployed from the tub ... and the shop had a long central aisle ... Tub on the floor at one end of the shop, end of the drogue in hand, march smartly forward. 200 feet of drogue deployed without a snag. To say that the management raised its eyebrows would be an understatement. However, when I had generously been given me some free advice, particularly about health and safety and risk to the public, I agreed to put it back into the tub, which gave me an excellent opportunity to practise packing it. I then lugged it to the girl at the till and asked to pay. "Where's the bar code?" she asked. "Well", I explained, "it's in the tub underneath that 200 feet of rope and mini parachutes but I could get the rope out for you if you hold the tub and I take this end and march down the shop ... !" Do other offshore sailors have the same problems that I do? Certainly they don't teach things like that on an RYA course.

The 500 mile qualifying passage was interesting. We had high pressure and therefore easterly winds on the south coast. "Leave Plymouth, turn right, run downwind for 250 miles into the Western Approaches, and then the next depression will bring south westerly winds that will bring you back" said the pundits. I got to the edge of the Continental Shelf in two days and peeped over at the Atlantic Ocean:

*"They didn't think much of the ocean  
The waves they was piddling and small  
There were no wrecks and nobody drowned  
'Fact nothing to laugh at at all!"*

*Albert and the Lion by Stanley Holloway.*

That was of course Blackpool and the Ramsbottom family's ocean was the Irish Sea.

I had a beautiful sail in fine weather and I saw a number of dolphins. So the first part of the pundits' plan worked. As for the second part, do you recall in spring this year we had a month of continuous high pressure ... ? Oh well, I did get back eventually, after tacking between England and France for a number of days.

Then off to Falmouth in early June for final registration and approval by the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club (RCYC), the organisers. Their arrangements were commendable. Jane came to Falmouth for the splendid pre race supper. On the last day she helped me raid Sainsbury's supermarket for weeks worth of provisions. On the morning of the race she kissed me goodbye, potentially for the last time, (sob), and then she and the dog went to Pendennis Castle to watch the start which was between the castle and the notorious Black Rock.



I thought that Lexia's two brown rectangular fully battened Chinese lug sails made a splendid sight compared with all the boring white triangles. There were 61 fully paid up and qualified entrants listed in the programme of which 59 crossed the start line. Remember - "two races". Two entrants hadn't actually made it to the start, one because they had been delayed by bad weather on the way to Falmouth. One competitor, singlehanded on Foula, a Rival 32, only completed his qualifying passage on the way from North Wales to Falmouth by diverting into the Atlantic, arriving the night before the start. Class One, the slowest boats, was the last away, amid much noise of cannons from the club starters and from the castle. As we crept over the start line the wind died and we drifted for the afternoon. The tide turned and, as we drifted back towards the start, Jane and the dog gave up watching the lack of action and headed back to Derbyshire. There is only so much sailing non action that a dog can take.

Lexia was always going to be last. She is definitely a cruising not a racing boat. She was the smallest in the fleet. Her IRC handicap, at 0.79 was the lowest in the fleet and this year had an increased age allowance. Lexia like me is getting slower with age. When I submitted this year's handicap to the race organisers it appeared on the list of entries as 0.8. I queried this and pointed out that it was actually 0.79. The answer was "the software only allows handicaps down to 0.8". In other words: "Computer says no!" Clearly nobody ever expected a boat as slow as Lexia to be entering an ocean race. I did suggest that there might be a Class Zero for boats with a handicap of less than 0.8 but this was not greeted with enthusiasm, as I would have been the only one in it. My entry in the race programme included: "Getting safely to the finish before it closes would be 100% success for Jonathan."

Boats in ocean and offshore races now have trackers fitted. These show their position, speed and direction at all times graphically on a web site. This has added considerably to the interest for spectators. Those watching the trackers saw that I had a good start and first few days. For a long time I was not actually last. For almost the first week it was nip and tuck for last place with Foula.

However, it was not easy. At the Continental Shelf the ocean sea bed rears up in a cliff from 4,000 feet deep to 400 ie it is the underwater edge of Europe. There had been some days of strong wind from the South West which was continuing. The Atlantic Ocean swell broke against the underwater cliff and made conditions very rough. For the first two days I had taken sea sickness tablets. I thought that I had got my sea legs and stopped taking the tablets. I was then very sea sick for some days. Also I was very concerned about the noises coming from the foot of the unstayed main mast. I was really frightened that if the foot of the mast came free it would tear through the floor boards and take off my head as I lay alongside it in my bunk. Twice I turned back and sailed some hours back towards England. Twice, like Dick Whittington, I turned again. Before the start of the race I had had a brief conversation with Mark Fishwick, yachting journalist and photographer. Mark had been very supportive of my attempt in the OSTAR and very kind about my retirement. I said that this time I was better prepared and hoped that I could find the key to getting to the finish. He said bluntly but not unkindly: "Well, it helps not to turn back!" How those words echoed in my mind. I couldn't bear to fail again. Someone wrote: "The pain of continuing will be temporary. The pain of retirement lasts forever." I reduced sail and speed to ease the strain on the mast foot. At times I dropped sail completely for many hours in order to undertake repairs to the rigging, principally chafing of various ropes and lashings, which although nearly new were not proving to be 'ocean proof'.

After about a week we got to the Charcot Seamount, an underwater mountain about 200 miles off North West Spain. Have you ever heard of Charcot? No, neither had I but it came to dominate my life for some days. It gives its name to one of the continental sea areas. By then I was out of range of British Navtex weather broadcasts but could receive broadcasts from Corruna, including forecasts for the areas of Charcot, Altair and Azores. The forecasts were for Force 6 and it was blowing at least that, but I had no way of knowing as the new expensive wind measuring instrument had given up the ghost, presumably broken by the violent motion at the mast head, another item not 'ocean proof'. I had again stopped taking the sea sickness pills because I must have my sea legs by now. Would I never

learn? I descended into a hell of sea sickness as bad as any I have ever had. The Charcot Seamount proved to be covered with fishing boats. Incidentally, none of them appeared on the AIS. Now we all know that sailing boats have to give way to fishing boats actually fishing and for that reason and for self preservation I tried to avoid them. However, one of them seemed intent on hunting me down and whichever way I turned he followed me. Eventually I put on the engine and motored back the way I had come to get away from him. When I was clear of the Seamount and fishing fleet, I hove to and got my head down. My two noon positions on day 7 and day 8 show that for 24 hours I made no progress towards the Azores. During that night Foula overtook me and I was last. However, shortly after she suffered failure of her self steering and retired from the race. By then a number of other boats had also retired with damage, eg Becca Boo, a Nicholson 32, legendary as being bullet proof, had retired with forestay failure. That night I had my close encounter with the Esperanza. The next day I sent a text to the web master of the Junk Rig Association (JRA) to ask him to put an advertisement on the web notice board: *Junk rigged schooner for sale in the Azores, delivery not included!*

However, I plodded on. I began to think in terms of weeks not days. The rough conditions and head winds gradually changed to warmer, smoother and calmer conditions of the Azores high. I decided to keep taking the sea sickness pills all the way to the Azores or until they ran out. I would then raid the sealed first aid kit and after that if need be the liferaft for pills. The daily routines were simple: noon, record a GPS position and put it on the chart and record the daily distance by log and as measured on the chart since yesterday's position; think about doing some celestial navigation using the sextant, and then generally be overcome by laziness; eat when I felt like it; sleep when I could; read occasionally; and always repairs, repairs, repairs. From time to time, when I felt particularly good or particularly bad, I would open one of a number of 'Red Cross parcels' given to me by the family for the OSTAR which were still on the boat unopened because of my early withdrawal from that race. Two year old sweets still tasted pretty good.

I monitored the state of the service batteries and ran the engine to charge them. Initially this had been for the expected two hours per day, but over the course of the trip the batteries, which were over two years old ie in lead-acid battery terms far from new, seemed to require morning and evening charging, sometimes amounting to four hours in a day. My only other potential sources of electricity were one small flexible solar panel, which would not have done much more than maintain the LED tricolour light, and a towed generator. I had been lent this by a friend and had wired in the necessary electrical connections. On day two I streamed the trailing propeller to test it for the first time. I was disconcerted to find that the ammeter swung the wrong way. It seemed that either, simply, the ammeter had been connected the wrong way round or, more seriously, the wiring from the generator had been installed in reverse. I wasn't able to sort it out on the outward leg. I was also reluctant to use the generator if not absolutely necessary because the streaming and recovery of the towed propeller is not without some difficulty and indeed danger, and, being single handed, even the slightest prospect of wrapping a finger or hand in the rope was not attractive. So my source of electricity was the engine. Therefore every day I checked it very carefully and serviced it regularly; a 35 year old Volvo MD 11C thumper, it never missed a beat, but I did need to wear ear defenders in the cabin whilst the engine was thumping. I used the electricity solely to run the electronic

navigation and safety systems including: Sea Me, AIS (and VHF aerial splitter), chart plotter, Navtex, VHF, Iridium telephone charger, tricolour light, speed log, battery monitor, gas alarm and, when necessary, the light for the magnetic compass. This amounted to about 80 amp hours per day. The switch panel for the electrics is old and the switches had red neon indicator lights. These consume a surprising amount of electricity and so before the race the lights had all been removed. I never turned on the interior lights and only ever used an LED headtorch. In the Azores I made sure that the towed generator could be used on the return leg but again I did not use it because it would have slowed the boat by a significant amount and, as it was doubtful that we would get to the finish before it closed, every bit of speed was needed.

I was required by the race regulations to have some form of satellite communication. I bought a new Iridium telephone and an externally mounted marine antenna. I devised a home made docking station and antenna connection on the chart table. I signed up to Mailasail for e mail and for wind and weather information via the sat phone and a laptop. However, I didn't use this as my lap top is ancient and its batteries could not be charged and the lap top had to be run from the ship's batteries. I did not write a blog. My principal method of communication was by text messages using the Iridium telephone. This worked well. I could send or receive 160 character text messages from and to computers, Blackberries etc, or even some mobile phones. James, my neighbour in the marina in Plymouth and friend from the OSTAR (who lent me the towed generator) kindly volunteered to send me weather information and routing suggestions every day. This was not of much practical use in my case. The proper racing boats have so much speed that they can sail to the weather that they want to be in. Lexia was so slow that there was really not much choice except to plod on and accept the weather that I was given. However, it was a great source of comfort to have a text from James every day, and also from a few friends and family and from the JRA. On the return leg James did make the correct judgement to tell me to keep well west of the rhumb-line in order to have westerly winds from the Scillies in the last days.

I should say something about sleep and watchkeeping. The International Regulations for the Prevention of Collisions at Sea (IRPCS) require all vessels to keep a proper look out at all times. There is no doubt that after the first say 48 hours, the single hander cannot do this. Therefore all single handers break the regulations. As I have described above, AIS and Sea Me (and radar sets with alarms) can reduce the risk of collision to some extent. Also for the single handed sailor, it is not just the risk of collision that is a concern but also the need to ensure that the boat is sailing properly and in the right direction; it would be no good having several hours sleep if the wind had changed and the wind vane self steering had taken you back many miles. Single handers rationalise the situation by saying that they accept that they are at risk, but their sailing boats are so small and slow relative to merchant shipping that they pose no risk to a big ship. They do also minimise the risk by sleeping only in short bursts eg for 10 or 15 minutes at a time. I do try to do this, at least at the start, and live with a clockwork kitchen timer on a string around my neck. Initially I find it quite hard to lie down and go to sleep even for 10 minutes because quite frankly I am frightened. I have to force myself to keep my head on the pillow even though I am not going to sleep. After some days I find that I have no problem dropping off because I am so tired. Some days later the problem is to wake

up, even with the kitchen timer ringing in my ear. Then I might wake up and think "It's light, it's after dawn, I must have been asleep for an hour or two or more." Then I am not sure whether to be pleased for the unexpected extra sleep or to be concerned about the extra risk taken. As I settled into a routine, I generally tried to keep alert at night and to sleep in bursts during the day. I thought that if I did hit something whilst I was asleep, then I would rather do it during the day, when I would at least have daylight, than do it at night with all the extra problems caused the darkness. Paul Heiney in his book discusses the problem and comes to a conclusion that he could not trust anything that any other single hander said to him about their sleeping and watchkeeping. Certainly we all have an ambivalent attitude to the matter. When Francis Chichester and later Ellen McArthur returned from their round the world singlehanded voyages, they were honoured by the Queen, being made respectively a Knight of the realm and a Dame, despite clearly having spent some months breaking the law!

As we got further south Lexia and I had some wonderful days sailing, reaching across a smooth, clear, green sea with crystal clear nights, a bright full moon and some magnificent sunrises and sunsets. On day 21 a beautiful high island appeared out of the cloud and I got my first sight of the Azores. I was surrounded by numerous dolphins. Then suddenly they all disappeared and a whale approached us in a direct line from a long way away, turned and swam alongside the boat and then dived under it and away. It was as big as the boat and I held my breath. I have never seen a whale before and that one had come to visit us. It was boys' own adventure stuff.

Then the wind died. Other competitors who had been a week or more ahead of me had also found that the wind died as they got to the islands. Some had even retired from the outward race because they could make no progress, and perhaps because they had schedules to keep to. Being a pensioner I had no schedule and I stuck it out. Punto Delgada is on the south of the island and it was far from clear if I would go clockwise or anticlockwise. Gradually a faint breeze took me to the eastern end and so my course was decided. The island looked even more spectacular by night with strings of lights. I wondered if, as night fell, I might get a land breeze to help me on my way. There are high mountains on the eastern end of the island which fall straight into the sea and they had been covered in cloud; clearly there was some dirty weather up there. Around midnight the dirty weather all fell off the mountains and found me. I was suddenly in a gale, if not a storm. I managed to get all the sail down and held on tight as we were blown away from the island at up to six knots for a number of hours. Katabatic wind. They do teach that on the RYA courses, but I had never experienced it before. I even considered deploying the drogue, but did not need to as there was no fetch and therefore no big waves. Then suddenly it stopped and I was becalmed. As a still, clear dawn came up I heard loud thunderclaps, or was it quarry blasting? Later I could see accompanying bursts of smoke from fields and woods and villages. Was it an army training area or firing range? Was it the game shooting season? Later I was told that it was a saint's day and the island was celebrating with fireworks. So I had lots of noise but absolutely no wind. I had about thirty miles to go. The GPS showed that for some reason I had a current going westwards at about half a knot. I still don't know why. I know that some competitors carried long sweep oars because on previous races they had also been becalmed here. I experimented and found that if I waggled the tiller I

could get another quarter knot, so I waggled and waggled from dawn until midnight. How I ached. I was intrigued that as night fell I was surrounded by hundreds of small brown birds that settled on the water and proceeded to gossip with each other. I got within sight of the lights of Punta Delgada but then the current stopped, and then it turned against me. There was quite a bit of shipping moving. I had been without sleep for 48 hours and I was not sure that I could continue to stay awake. Earlier in the evening I had passed a small offshore island with an anchorage marked on the chart. I now very much regretted that I had not anchored there and got my head down. I had about four miles to go, but in a text message to Jane and James I said that I regretted that, for safety's sake and in common sense, I would probably have to motor in. A text came back from Jane very smartly saying "Hang on in there!". She who must be obeyed ... In the small hours of the morning a gentle breeze started, perhaps this time genuinely a land breeze. I crept towards the final waypoint. An unknown harbour, a night approach to what Anne Hammick describes as a narrow entrance and I was tired. I put on the engine in neutral ready to take evasive action from either vessels or harbour walls. At 0330 hours UTC I crept across the finish line after 22 days and 15 hours. The remainder of the competitors, after some days of festivities and tourism, had all started the return leg 5 days earlier.

The next morning I was visited by a member of the committee of the Club Naval and the club's full time boat man. The latter was very sorry that he had not met me at the finish line because he had met everyone else. I hadn't minded! I booked into the marina and was told that there were actually other AZAB boats there. Embla 3, a Van de Stadt 40, had suffered steering damage on the outward leg and had not started the return. She was in the marina but her crew had returned to Norway and would come back with parts. Equilibrium, a Sweden 38, had started the return race but after some hundreds of miles her alternator failed and, as she has no other means of generating electricity and her self steering was electrical not wind vane, Graham and Roy had returned to Punta Delgada and were addressing repairs. Because all the RCYC people had left the Azores, Graham and Roy kindly became my reception committee and support team as far as they could, and we also went out for a couple of very good meals. I had a compulsory 48 hour stop. As it happened I did not need to stop because I still had enough diesel, water and food to get home to England. However, it is a sensible rule and a good safety measure. For two days I worked flat out doing rigging repairs and topping up food, water and diesel. Everything takes twice as long if you are single handed. I also got in some sleep. I saw nothing of the island other than the immediate harbour area and the walk to a big supermarket. Maybe I will be able to return as a tourist one day. I found out that I needed to recharge the battery on my tracker and that this would take 24 hours, so my departure was delayed by some hours. On the way south I really had decided that I would not race back, and I had thought about all the options, including flying back to England and then returning in the autumn with a crew to cruise back. Starting from Falmouth had been easy because one was carried along with others in a wave of enthusiasm. Starting the return singly was a much more cold-blooded thing and required me to screw up my courage.

Due to calms, I made a slow start round the other, west end of the island and, due to proximity of the coast and tidal currents, had to be on my guard. However, after about 36 hours I picked up a steady reaching breeze from the west and started to

make much better progress including runs of 140 miles per day. Both Lexia and I were at last beginning to sail something like our handicap predicted speed. The return was not without incident. At one time, whilst still well out in the Atlantic, I took a look round the horizon and spotted a sail dead ahead. As it got nearer I thought it was not a sail but a motor boat. Then I gradually realised that it was a yellow and black buoy. It was in a charted depth of almost 4,000 feet. The Atlantic chart states that; "ODAS buoys mostly of Lanby type are to be found in the waters covered by this chart." But it doesn't give any indication of positions. So, was it a weather buoy and was it really secured by a cable 4,000 feet long? All I do know is that I would certainly have hit it if I hadn't seen it and changed course. That might have been the end. Later I was overtaken by a large, fast sailing boat. She was sailing at 15 knots compared to my 3. She called me on VHF. She was *ICAP Leopard*, a 100 foot Maxi, making her way to England after a transatlantic race. What a sight. I also had a close encounter with a merchant vessel. Again I had a look round the horizon and spotted him on a collision course. At the time I was becalmed. I called him on the VHF and got no response and so started the engine and got out of his way. In my indignation I took down his details from the AIS and recorded the position and told myself I would report him to the Maritime Accident Investigation Branch. Surely he should have seen me on AIS. However, when I eventually got back to England I noticed that the VHF antenna which serves the AIS and the VHF through a splitter was no longer at the masthead. There was a length of cable flapping in the wind and I think that this, rather like the bent metal clothes hanger stuffed into the broken aerial on a car, was sufficient to receive VHF and AIS at close range but possibly not to transmit. I don't know at what stage the antenna had broken off, but it gives pause for thought. I had assumed that vessels were seeing me on AIS but I may well have been deluded. Later Jane and James reported by text that I had disappeared from the tracker web site. Jane contacted the tracker supplier, Yellowbrick, and they eventually admitted somewhat sheepishly that my display had been turned off. Apparently they couldn't believe that anyone from the race could still be out there.

Eventually I got to the Scillies and turned east on a run to skirt the southern edge of the Traffic Separation Scheme. In the evening gloaming I saw Land's End and then started serious navigation and watch keeping to get round the Lizard with its strong spring tidal streams. The next morning I drifted towards Falmouth and the finish. The RCYC had very kindly organised a fleet of boats to come out to meet me. They did know that I was still out there. I was 48 hours ahead of the closure of the finish.



I stayed overnight at Falmouth and next day had a wonderful sail to Plymouth on my 64<sup>th</sup> birthday. After a long sleep, I put the boat to bed and drove back to Derbyshire. I was supposed to spring into action to start to prepare for the wedding of our daughter. However, I was pretty inoperative for about 10 days. Initially I was charged with adrenalin. When that wore off I was still rocking and my sleep pattern was very disturbed and so I was pretty dozy and useless.

I had returned safely from my adventure and I achieved my stated aim of reaching the finish before it closed. Formal results therefore are pretty unimportant. However, here goes. I was certainly last to finish on the outward leg, 41<sup>st</sup> position. For their various reasons, 18 did not finish. On the return leg I was 45<sup>th</sup> **but not last** as Equilibrium, after finally completing her repairs, had gallantly set off in pursuit and arrived in Falmouth just after me. She then received a time penalty for the assistance she had received. For the combined outward and return I was 38<sup>th</sup> and last out of the 59 starters because 21 did not finish one leg or the other. However, in Class One, for the combined outward and return legs, ie the AZAB, I was 6<sup>th</sup> and last out of 16. But, only one other single hander in Class One managed both legs so I suppose in that respect I was a runner up! I fear that my ocean racing career may have peaked after just two races.