

HIPPOS TO HUMPBACKS: A NORTH ATLANTIC CIRCUIT

Megan Clay

(When Megan and Ed started looking for a boat of their own in 2015, Ed's parents offered to sell them a half share in Flycatcher, an S&S-designed Contessa 38. Built as a One-Tonner in 1973, she was raced extensively by her original owner but became a family cruiser after the Clays bought her in the 1990s.

Megan describes Flycatcher as 'a fun boat to sail, handling like a dinghy, moving in almost any breeze and going upwind particularly well. She can also take much worse weather than we can.' All the photos are by Ed and Megan except where credited.)

It was with mixed emotions that, on 15 August 2016, we motored east into a sloppy sea and watched the early morning sun bathing the mountains of southern Greenland in pale pink. We were sad to leave but, with a full year of cruising behind us and a promise to my father-in-law that his half of the boat would be in Chichester Harbour in less than a month, it was time to sail for home.

We had left Chichester Harbour on 7 August 2015 and sailed for La Coruña

via Lulworth Cove, Exmouth (where my parents are based) and Falmouth, where we enjoyed excellent Cornish hospitality, primarily in the form of Betty Stogs and Old Rosie*. Biscay was kind, treating us to dolphins in the moonlight and airs light enough for us to try out our 'solar shower' (black plastic bag) on the foredeck. We adopted a previously-successful watch system, splitting the night into two five-hour watches. The rest of the day we broke up as we pleased, sharing out time on watch and relaxing. We slipped



Flycatcher and ice in Disko Bay, Greenland. Photo Tom Smedley

* For those unlucky enough not to have sampled them, Betty Stogs is a famous Cornish beer, while Old Rosie is an equally famous (and powerful) Devon-brewed cider.



into this system whenever we were sailing overnight, and it kept us topped up on sleep and in (mostly) good humour.

In La Coruña we shopped for stores in the wonderful market, wandered the buzzing streets choosing between tapas bars, and began a love affair with *polpo* (octopus). We sailed in and out of the rías and south along the Galician Costa da Morte. Thankfully the only death was that of our (new!) dinghy, whose D-ring painter attachments couldn't withstand the strain accompanying a passing cold front as we towed her to the next anchorage.

We hid from gales in the Ría de Camariñas and Ría Arousa, enjoyed the narrow streets and epic slabs of corn bread in Muros and, sailing south, spent an afternoon exploring the Islas Cíes. We hopped down the coast of Portugal, stopping in Nazaré, where the biggest wave ever surfed was recorded in 2015, and Portinho da Arrabida, where we went for a walk and accidentally scaled a small cliff before trespassing into a convent.

We had another smooth crossing from Sines to Porto Santo, arriving on 15 September. We walked the island, from the wooded slopes and *levadas* of the Pico Castelo, where the population sheltered from pirate raids in days of yore, to the more barren northeast coast. In Madeira we anchored in the beautifully rugged, if a little rolly, Baía d'Abra, and explored the markets of Funchal and the rain-soaked *levadas* of the mountainous interior with Ed's parents, Henry and Louise. We celebrated the festival of *Nossa Senhora da Piedade* in Caniçal, and visited the remote Ilhas Desertas and Ilhas Selvagens on the way to the Canaries. Henry and Louise left us there, and we cruised the Canaries for three weeks during October. We had our trusty Avon dinghy stolen in Fuerteventura, but enjoyed good food and wine (though we couldn't drink the pine-aged *Vino de Tea*), and some great walks on Tenerife, La Gomera and La Palma.

We had an uneventful sail from El Hierro to the Gambia, broad-reaching and then running south with time spent reading, shade-bathing, and sewing together the too-small mosquito nets we had picked up in the bric-a-brac shops of Puerto de la Restinga. It was only when the wind dropped almost completely that we felt for the first time our lack of the 'fridges and fans that many who cruise the tropics consider indispensable. We kept well off the coasts of Morocco and Mauritania, before gybing to close the Senegalese coast on 30 October.

Our first taste of the African continent, though, came an hour or so before dawn on 1 November, when we were inundated by a swarm of crickets. I was on watch, trying to keep track of the erratically-flashing lights of the first few *pirogues* we had seen, when the crickets began their haphazard aerial assault, flying into me and crawling around the cockpit. Before I knew it, the boat was covered in them and the noise was maddening. As the sun up came the invaders scuttled into nooks and crannies in the deck, rigging, mast and cabin lining, and our initial horror gave way to pragmatism. In spite of our best efforts with dustpan and brush (with which you could scoop up at least half a dozen at a time) we did not hear the last chirp until nearly a month later. What a welcome!

The wind had died and we had a sweaty time motoring into the River Gambia, trying to get rid of the worst of our clamorous cargo while dodging fishing marks, nets and the low-freeboard *pirogues* that were hard to spot in even the modest swell that was running. Slipping through the brown river water past the city, we were excited to be sailing into Africa, and gazed at the number of *pirogues* pulled up on the beach, the palm



*Sunset over
Kuntaur, River Gambia*

trees and the low cityscape of the capital. We rounded Banjul's southwest corner, passed the main docks, and dropped our anchor in the afternoon of Tuesday 1 November after 988 miles and seven days at sea.

In order to clear customs, visiting boats are required to anchor at Half Die (so called since a cholera epidemic in 1869 wiped out much of the population). To enhance the yachtsman's pleasure, the anchorage is poor holding in soft mud, has a fetch of a dozen or so miles of open river stretching away to the south, and is littered with wrecks. We had been warned that the clearance process in Gambia could take several days and were ashore before 9am to find very friendly security guards

who insisted we try some of their breakfast. Then it was along the dusty red roads to the container port, weaving between lorries belching blue smoke, open sewers, stalls selling *baguettes* and SIM cards, and the odd chicken or goat rummaging in a pile of



Hippo, River Gambia

Megan drinking tea with the port police in Banjul

rubbish. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between customs, immigration, port authority and cashiers to secure the correct paperwork, and a packet of Love Heart sweets did not prove an adequate 'present' for one official, but by 2pm we had finished. Though we were exhausted, everyone had been friendly, some incredibly so, and we could see why the Gambia's tagline is the 'Smiling Coast' of Africa.



Our time in Gambia was a world away from the rest of the trip and unlike any sailing (well, motoring) either of us had done before. Taking tides upstream and working off 19th century data on black and white charts, we watched the flora and fauna change as we moved upriver into fresher water. It was hot. With windless days and the engine radiating heat into the cabin, we took to pouring buckets of river water over our heads to cool down. In Bintang Bolon we saw riverbanks full of flamingos and went ashore to buy groundnuts cooked over charcoal and wrapped in paper under the eaves of corrugated-iron roofs. At Kudang Tenda, scores of children swam out to meet us and we were given a meal of fish before being taken for an exhausting paddle around the Deer Islands in a *pirogue*. The further up the river we went, the more wildlife there seemed to be: African fish eagles, vultures, herons, egrets, kingfishers, village weavers and other birds we failed to identify. Anchoring west of Bird Island, a hippo snorting 20m from the boat reminded us that we weren't alone, even when we were miles from the nearest village. We didn't swim that evening!

Keeping *Flycatcher's* 60 litre fuel tank topped up gave us adventures ashore. Our most memorable was at the ferry crossing at Mandina, where I stayed with the boat and Ed took two jerry cans to the nearby town of Farafenni. Returning, he was stopped and searched by the police. While the bread and vegetables were easy to explain, the roll of cling-film (one of the jerry cans leaked) and bundles of cash wrapped up in foil (you need a lot of Gambian notes to buy diesel) apparently looked suspicious and a policeman and drugs squad officer asked to see the boat.

Picking Ed up in the dinghy, I was somewhat alarmed by his escort. We tried to make friendly conversation, but were both thinking that at best this was going to involve some big 'presents'. Back aboard, the officers quickly found the medicine cupboard which they started taking apart. It was very hot, and seeing Ed crouching in the forepeak in a puddle of sweat explaining what contraceptive pills are was frankly



Walking on São Nicolau in the Cape Verdes

surreal. Thankfully, they didn't realise the full extent of *Flycatcher's* stores, and after an initial inspection began to relax. Moses (the policeman) took an interest in the wine box, and I had to give a demonstration of the accordion. Back on deck we were invited to come for a meal on our return leg downriver. We parted great friends and were reassured to see that even Gambians thought it hot down below.

When at last we tore ourselves away from Gambia (after spending a week at anchor in the mangroves while Ed recovered from an unknown tropical illness), we sailed for the wildly beautiful Cape Verdes.

Sal, our landfall, was a flat, gritty sand dune, but São Nicolau was mountainous and green. We took an *aluguer* (a privately-run minibus carrying everyone and everything from chickens to whole tuna) across the island and walked up Monte Gordo. We spent a windy night anchored off the deserted island of Santa Luzia, before sailing on to Mindelo, São Vicente, where we spent two days exploring, stocking up, eating *cachupa* and *pastel de nata* (my vote for the best pastries of the trip) and listening to the local music, before setting sail for Barbados on 5 December.

Unstable trades for the first few days saw us pushing south in light airs, and even beating, before they and we settled into our respective rhythms. After a relaxed crossing, with Monique (our Monitor self-steering gear) by far the most active crewmember, we rounded the northern tip of Barbados accompanied by dolphins after 15 days at sea. We spent Christmas anchored in Carlisle Bay, where my parents joined us, before devoting January and February to cruising the Windward and Leeward Islands from Grenada to Saba, visiting 40 anchorages in 11 countries.

It was a sociable time as we met up with old friends and made new ones, and Ed's sister Jo and her boyfriend Oli joined us for a couple of weeks. We had some great walking, particularly in the rainforests of Grenada, to a boiling volcanic lake on Dominica, and up the steep sides of Saba. On Montserrat we stumbled across Winston, the former Head

*White Island,
Carriacou*

of Police. He is one of only two people allowed into the southern part of the island, including the former capital Plymouth, which was destroyed by the (still active) Soufrière volcano



in the 1990s. Due to a cancelled ferry we were the only people on his tour. It was fascinating and eerie to see the buried buildings and hear about the evacuation he had planned and executed. Thankfully only 19 people died, but many lost everything and the population fell from 12,000 to 5000. While there is rebuilding in the north, with the only wharf untenable in even the slightest swell things seemed to be progressing slowly.

A whistle stop sail around the British and US Virgin Islands took us to the unspoilt Passage Islands off Puerto Rico, which offered a choice of deserted anchorages. Then we rushed along the south coast of Puerto Rico, sad not to have more time to explore, or to visit Hispaniola and Cuba, but if we wanted to see the States it was time to head north. The last day of our passage from Puerto Rico to the Bahamas brought such light airs that we were radioed by a friendly American skipper who was “just checking everything was okay”; we were sailing at under 1 knot while he motored along at 6. We reached the white sand beaches of Conception Island on 16 March, marvelling at water which went from dark blue to the colour and clarity of a bottle of Bombay Sapphire as the depth dropped from several hundred metres to twenty in under a minute.

*Buried houses in Plymouth,
Montserrat*



The following day we sailed on to Georgetown, where we met Ed's sister Philippa and her now-fiancé David. The Exumas seemed to be a theme-park archipelago, with Staniel Cay offering snorkelling in James Bond's very own 'Thunderball Cave', and Normans Cay on the submerged remains of an aeroplane that crashed trafficking cocaine for the local drug baron. Other uninhabited islands offered delightfully pink, free-range pigs trotting along the white-sand beaches (Big Major Cay), or hundreds of indigenous iguanas relaxing in the sun (Allen Cays). As we hopped from cay to cay we became more confident reading depth from water colour (broadly speaking, lighter is shallower, though with lots of caveats) and grew accustomed to a depth of 3m being commonplace.

From Hope Town in the Abaco Islands we sailed for Charleston, South Carolina on 31 March, feeling our first cool night for six months as we crossed the Gulf Stream in a southwesterly gale. We had studied the weather forecasts before leaving, and decided that strong winds from the south were better than moderate winds from the north when crossing the Gulf Stream, so settled down to fast progress surfing downwind.

It was a passage of birds as well as breeze, with an exhausted snowy egret making an emergency landing on *Flycatcher's* toe rail. Separately, a second, unidentified, bird made it down below to flap frenetically against the deckhead and rouse me, very confused, from a deep sleep. Later, tired of the waves washing along the deck, the egret took to the cockpit, standing on whichever sheet we needed and squawking reproachfully whenever one of us tried to move about. He rejected food and water and looked increasingly bedraggled as waves sluiced through the cockpit (one large enough to set off my lifejacket). We were sad, though, when he jumped overboard after a particularly bothersome manoeuvre, leaving him floating alone on the waves only eight hours before we made landfall.

We spent April and May chasing the start of the sailing season from the Carolinas up to Maine. This meant quiet anchorages, though it was mooring-laying season

and the harbours were often full of buoys but no boats. We had thought that the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) might help us make progress when the weather was inclement, so set out along the



Stowaway egret looking unhappy as we cross the Gulf Stream

Sailing into New York

ICW from Charleston towards Georgetown, revelling in the beautiful early April mornings that greeted us as we moved north. Watching eagles circle overhead as we set out from Awendaw Creek and motored through the low marshland was magical, though the sharp, cool air ensured that only the helmsman was on deck to experience it until the sun was higher in the sky!

Long stretches on the ICW were not for us, however. Perhaps it was that *Flycatcher's* 1973 Perkins 4108 is louder than many of her more modern brethren, or that our first day was spent with eyes glued to the echo-sounder with less than 2ft under the keel.

Or maybe the enforced cup of tea when we ran aground near the bottom of the tide. Either way, we sailed back out to sea and jumped to Beaufort and around Cape Hatteras. In the Chesapeake we developed a taste for the historical sites, myriad creeks and excellent oysters, before taking the C&D canal into the Delaware (less picturesque, unless you like power stations). A stunning morning sail into New York harbour, past the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan, was followed by four days exploring the city with my parents.

Ed's sister Bridget, and her boyfriend Ben, joined us in Long Island Sound, to be bored senseless with our enthusiasm for the excellent maritime museums and beautiful wooden boats built in this part of the world. We were constantly surprised by people's kindness to visiting sailors, and loved Maine's Scandinavian-feeling islands. From Maine we crossed to Nova Scotia, where we fortuitously arrived in Shelburne during their annual lobster festival, happily eating lobster 'creamed', gratinated and boiled, and receiving the best hospitality of the trip at Shelburne Harbour Yacht Club.

In early June we met up with Ed's parents in Lunenburg, and explored the south shore of Nova Scotia before cutting through the Bras d'Or lakes for a few days out of the fog and some Cape Breton music in the pub. We sailed on to the Bay of Islands, western Newfoundland, where we were greeted with 45 knot katabatic squalls. We



found shelter at Woods Island – though the house that had blown over suggested it wasn't always so sheltered.

Fresh southwesterly breezes blew us to the Straits of Belle Isle, where we visited Port au Choix, Red Bay and then L'Anse aux Meadows. Though the right whales the Basques hunted from Red Bay are long gone and the fish stocks have collapsed, the welcome was warm, and we had to force money into the hands of one fisherman who gave us diesel from his own stores when none was available.

It was getting colder – lots of layers and big gloves were required on deck, and we met our first iceberg in the straits. We re-crossed to St Charles Harbour and Battle Harbour, known, when cod was at its peak, as the capital of Labrador and now a museum settlement. We had read that Labrador had two seasons: winter and July, and with July starting we were tempted to stay. But it was time to sail for Greenland, so we consoled ourselves with thoughts of returning.

We pushed offshore to clear the icy Labrador current before heading north for two fairly hard days of cold, wet weather, with up to 30 knots against us and a large pinch of seasickness. The wind slowly moderated before dying completely, leaving us motoring over glassy seas in the midnight sun to Paamiut. After buying fish at the local hunters' market and enjoying showers at the fish plant, we followed the inner leads north to Nuuk, snaking between sporadically-charted islands and skerries – Greenland's motorways. We had a cold, foggy time of it with light headwinds, but explored deserted Faroese fishing stations and found ourselves new anchorages between the skerries. Local supermarkets were a treat, not only selling excellent





Flycatcher on the wharf at Qeqertarsuatsiat, Southwest Greenland

Danish-style bread, pastries, fruit and vegetables but also rifles, ammunition, flotation suits and anchors, alongside frozen whale meat.

Ed's parents left us in Nuuk and we were joined by Tom Smedley, a friend from university. With a southerly wind blowing we put to sea half an hour after he arrived in the midnight twilight. A following breeze with sunshine and spinnaker took us north to the Arctic Circle, which we crossed under motor in a flat calm. We saw more bergs as we neared Disko Bay, where several active glaciers calve huge icebergs. Many of the bergs we saw in Labrador had started life here a season or two earlier, and thousands process across Disko itself.

In Asiaat it was so warm ashore that we were walking around in T-shirts. But next morning the fog descended once more and we carefully picked our way through islands and ice, able to hear whales blowing but not see them, although we convinced ourselves that we could make them out on the radar. Approaching Ilulissat we were treated to two groups of humpback whales bubble-netting – corralling the fish, diving down and erupting, mouths agape, out of the water through the middle of their 'net'. We had to tack to avoid one group but got an amazing view, and overpowering smell, as they passed a few lengths in front of us. Next day we walked along the side of the ice-fjord, which is crammed with ice from the glacier at its head.



Humpback whales feeding in Disko Bay. Photo Tom Smedley

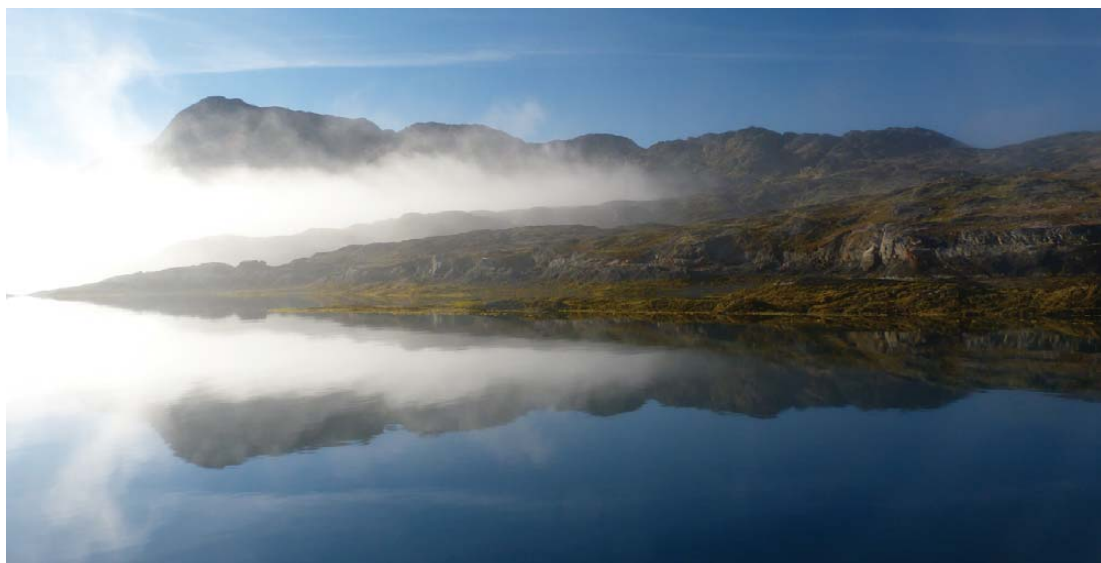


*Sailing amongst the ice in
Disko Bay. Photo Tom Smedley*

We sailed north through the bergs to Paakitsoq Fjord, where we celebrated our furthest north of the cruise at 69°31'N. The next morning, we took a mosquito-ridden walk to a waterfall and, in accordance with *Flycatcher's* one-in-all-in policy, all got underneath it. It was icy but at least there were no mozziez in the water.

At Kangaatsiaq we moored alongside a fishing boat and I got a big surprise next morning when, while Tom and Ed filled fuel cans ashore, I felt *Flycatcher* start to move. Jumping up on deck, it quickly became apparent that our mooring lines were still intact and our neighbours hadn't thought to mention the small matter of getting underway. Fortunately, we were only moving for a ferry and were soon alongside again.

Fog lifting in our anchorage at Manîtsorssuaq, Western Greenland



They even gave us seven snow crabs. We tend to eat well on *Flycatcher*, but the snow crab thermidor that Tom created as we ran south took cooking onboard to another level. Our bellies full, we kept going through the night to Sisimiut.

Beautiful anchorages at Manîtsorssuaq (south of Sisimiut), Cruncher Island (near Kangerlussuaq fjord) and Appamiut cemented Greenland as our favourite place of the trip. A detour up Sermilingnaq fjord, with hills and glaciers reflected in the still water, was breathtaking. Alas, it was (again) time to press on and we headed offshore to Nuuk, where Tom left and Ben Lister joined us.

We hopped to Paamiut and followed the inner leads from there, with three relatively sunny days and some more lovely anchorages. Approaching Kap Desolation we met katabatic squalls, and beat into a gale up Torssukatak, the narrow gap between the mainland and the Kap. After 45 tacks we had done enough for the day, and sat out the rest of the gale in the nearest bay marked 'havn'. At Sildefjord we couldn't find the reputed remains of a Norse settlement, though we did gather mussels and blueberries for supper.

Appamiut – the best anchorage in Greenland (and the mosquitoes agree)



At Unartoq, a small island with a hot spring apparently used by the Norse, we spent a surreal twilight hour sitting in the small pool drinking beers and watching icebergs. But we had been studying the weather models and, with a possible window for an Atlantic crossing opening up, kept moving towards the fjord system around Kap Farvel.

Having stocked up on fuel and food at Aappilatoq, an amazing key hole harbour, we motored down Ikerasassuaq (Prins Christian Sund), a channel which runs for some 40 miles between mainland Greenland and its southern tip. Glaciers reach the water and mountains rise up on either side, and we spent an incredulous day motoring, negotiating brash ice and passing seal-topped icebergs. We tied up at the Danish weather station at the entrance to the fjord, which this year became unmanned. Everything remains intact, with tens of buildings, bridges, cable cars (still working), fuel tanks and aials. A kayaker had told us that you could get into



Motoring up Sermilingnaq, Western Greenland

one of the buildings and, after a bit of exploring, we found an entrance to the living quarters. It was as if it had been left yesterday, with the power still on, furniture intact and freezers and stores full of a year's supply of food.

We sailed from Greenland early on 16 August, with initially slow progress and a worst run of 66 miles in 24 hours. But we had escorts of pilot whales and fulmars and, five days out, we met the next low pressure system. Having worked south to keep the wind behind us, we had four days of favourable winds of between 20 and 35 knots, albeit rainy and grey. The wind dropped and veered to the east as we approached Ireland, and our final night was a beat past the Skelligs to Lawrence Cove, Bantry Bay, where we tied up after 11 days at sea.

From there we stopped at Crookhaven, the Scillies, Falmouth and Exmouth, where we were fed well by my parents and spent our first nights ashore for 13 months. On 11 September we finally picked up our mooring in Cobnor, Chichester Harbour, 400 days, 16,450 miles and 240 harbours after leaving. We were surprised to find that we had been underway nearly a third of the time – perhaps we should go more slowly next time.



Victory awaits him who has everything in order – luck we call it.
Defeat is definitely due to him who has neglected to take the necessary precautions – bad luck we call it.

Roald Amundsen, the first man to sail through
the Northwest Passage, in 1903–1906