



Mike Harker

“With a lust to wander,



you are never lost”

We join Mike Harker on the last leg of his circumnavigation in his yacht Wanderlust 3, as he completes the final transatlantic passage within a year of leaving Miami, returning to port with a huge sense of accomplishment and a hint of nostalgia ...

There are 4500 nautical miles left to sail before I reach my final port of call, and my return to Miami Florida. With 3500 miles to my next stop in Antigua I reflect on what I will have achieved. Technically, when I reach English Harbor for my third visit, I will have completed my own “circumnavigation”, but on two different boats. I had sailed my Hunter 46 single-handed from Miami to the Med in 2002, crossing back across the Atlantic from North Africa to Antigua within a year. When I cross that route again, in a month or so I would complete my own personal “Lap Around”.

But this time the voyage will be different. Not only will I be sailing from south to north across the entire Atlantic from the southern tip of Africa, but I will have also transited 26,000 miles of the South Pacific and Indian Oceans within the same year. And I will be completing this circumnavigation in a leaking boat temporarily fixed with a screw and some glue.

Ascension Island was right on my route and only about 200 miles north of my present position. If my temporary fix did not hold, I could declare an emergency and request a stop on the open anchorage there. But Ascension does not offer

much in the way of help; it is really just a tracking station for NASA. Other than a few facilities for US Air Force personnel and a possibly a small overnight stopover for military families, there are neither commercial businesses nor airlines that fly in. And no “Fix-It” shops either, or repair facilities for the passing cruising vessels who might be in a spot of trouble – like myself. I planned to take a precautionary sail as close to the shore as I dared, slipping past the only shoreline village, but then continue on to my next waypoint which I set right on the equator at 30 degrees west longitude. This is the suggested route taken from the “Pilot Atlas” as a sailing vessel traversing from the South Atlantic into the North Atlantic.

I had good sailing conditions, with the wind coming ESE at a consistent 18 knots from my starboard quarter, owing to the stable high pressure system prevailing over the South Atlantic. Typically, southern hemisphere high pressure rotates counter-clockwise, generating good sailing conditions with moderate winds from Africa. But that was likely to change as I neared, then crossed the equator. The “Doldrums” awaited me, and I was not terribly excited about that prospect. Judging from the reports I’d had from other sailors, these Doldrums are as unpredictable as any weather can be, varying from complete “dead calm” to storm force winds from any direction, interspersed with any number of alternative

weather conditions. These changes can occur within minutes so you have to be perpetually prepared. Squalls are the most predominant feature of this area because of the Equatorial Convergence Zone (or the Intertropical Convergence Zone - ITCZ) where a belt of low pressure girdles the Earth at the equator. This is formed by a vertical ascent of warm, moist air from the latitudes north and south of the equator. Much is written but nothing is predictable. You have to accept what you get, be as prepared as possible for every eventuality, and then deal with it. There is no running away or waiting it out, as I had done with contrary winds so far, you just have to get through it.

Crossing the 0 degree latitude mark – the Equator – was easy enough and without problems. I had my main down one reef and the big genoa rolled all the way out for the last five days, maintaining about 8 knots average boat speed. I did not want to risk “flying the chute” – my Parasailor – because I would have to go forward to douse the sock over the spinnaker, then lower the sail down on deck with the halyard, then stow the whole thing into the forward sail locker. I did not want to be surprised with a sudden gust or wind change and have to rush forward in rough seas to accomplish this. As a single-hander it is just easier to roll in or out the head sails, genoa and stay-sail, on their roller furling without ever leaving the safety of the cockpit.

Because I was sailing an injured boat – the engine had a leak in the salt water cooling impeller housing, and the Panda generator had salt water ingress into the mother boards because of the near flooding of my bilge two weeks previously – I was reluctant to run the Yanmar engine to make forward progress. But I was obliged to run the engine a few hours each day, at low (1600) rpm, so that the Balmar alternator could keep my batteries charged. If I truly needed the engine I wanted my batteries charged, and I needed to keep electrical power to my instruments and chart plotter.

The first line squall was visible in the distance. It did not show up on my radar scope yet; the Ray Dome extends to about 40 miles, but I could see the ominous dark grey clouds gathering with frequent upper atmosphere lightning getting closer by the hour. I battened down all the hatches, donned my “foulies” even though it was warm and humid, put my harness on over the foul weather gear and had the two tethers clipped on to solid attachment points. I even got out the underwater snorkel goggles to put on to protect my eyes for when the rains hit.

And HIT they did! I had reefed the main down to the third reef, furled the genoa and had the stay-sail out in preparation. I had the engine warmed up to run if needed and everything stowed down below. I had prepared some sandwiches and, stored in containers, some other food that didn't need cooking.



I thought I was in a good position to hold out for three or four days of the Doldrums. After six hours of strong winds from ever-changing directions, pelting rains and confused seas, it all stopped. Within hours I was again in the dead zone. Hot, humid air, no wind and rolling swell but no wind generated waves. However, I could see another squall line in the distance: another direct hit. This went on for three more days. I started the Yanmar and kept her going at 1800 rpm for the following five days non-stop except to check the oil level every 24 hours. She never needed a drop of oil nor did the coolant level need a top up. The engine was flawless, except for that little stainless screw covered in 3M 5200. I checked that area and the bilge every few hours, but there was not a drop of salt water anywhere below.

On my GRIB weather files, the wind lines were again appearing steady from the East at about 11 degrees N latitude and 40 W longitude. The strong Azores high pressure was turning the air mass in a clockwise direction with the southern extremities just a hundred miles to my north. Finally I had consistent winds again, 18-20 E, so out with the genoa and up the main to first reef. Again over 8 knots average boat speed and all was well. I let the Yanmar rest for three days because my 900 amps of battery juice were topped up with days of consistent charging.

With over a week of constant wind and good boat speed my spirits were lifted to a new high. I was nearing the Windward Islands to port with my waypoint at English Harbor just 400 miles to go.



Then all hell broke loose. The biggest dark grey to purple clouds rose to new heights ahead of me with lightning strikes down to the ocean surface and bolts across clouds, something I had never seen before. Within hours I was surrounded by the storm, with the wind gusting to over 40 knots. The main was all the way down in the lazy jacks, the genoa rolled in and the stay-sail was set tight to centre just to give me some stability.

I turned off all the electronics, put the two handheld GPSs, laptop, SAT phone and two VHF radios in the gimbaled oven thinking the “Faraday Effect” could save at least some of my electronics. I got out a rubber mat that I normally keep below deck and just sat on it in the cockpit, keeping away from any metal. I remained sitting like this for almost two days, just waiting to be hit by lightning. From early on the first morning to late at night the second day, I was surrounded by the most intense lightning storm I have ever witnessed, or even heard about. Between storm cells I would turn on the chart and radar for a few minutes. Radar showed storm cell after storm cell closing in on me, encompassing my boat for hours with heavy rain, then passing by with the next one approaching from behind. It was absolutely amazing that I wasn't hit by lightning. When you see two or three strikes at the same time on three different sides of the boat, and hear the thunder just as the lightning strikes the water, you know it is close.

Then, at the end of the second day, it stopped just as suddenly as it started. The winds died down to steady 12 knots and a beautiful and welcoming rainbow appeared. I turned on all the electronics and the chart plotter showing Antigua only

40 miles to port. I had deliberately kept out to sea by sailing compass due north avoiding all islands, but the strong SE winds and current had pushed me closer to my waypoint than I had anticipated. I turned due west for the safety and sanctity of a welcoming island.

Prior to the approach of the narrow channel of English Harbour, I called on VHF channel 16 for the harbourmaster of Nelson's Dockyard. He came on to advise me that the harbour entrance was closed because an 18-20 foot swell was breaking on the entrance reef. No boat was allowed in or out. He advised that I head around the corner to the much less dangerous entrance of Falmouth Harbour. Following his instructions I dropped anchor across from the largest sailboat in the world, the

Maltese Falcon, finally back in familiar territory. After customs and immigration clearance, I wandered around to Nelson's Dockyard and greeted old friends who seemed astounded that I had just come from South Africa and around the world. My last visit two years previously, I was just a novice sailor with no experience to talk about. I did not even know the specific sailing terminology; in my mindset as a single-hander, I had thought who are you going to communicate with?

After an evening of reminiscing with old local friends and some new acquaintances, I enjoyed a calm, full night's sleep, the first in over a month of non-stop sailing!

I had e-mailed both Florida distributors for Yanmar and Fischer-Panda about my ongoing problems with my onboard SailMail. I had contact addresses for each in Antigua and now phoned for an onboard inspection. Yanmar had already sent the replacement impeller housing to Antigua for me. The local Yanmar mechanic had a look at the engine mounts blocking the bolts to the pump housing and recommended that, if I thought the temporary fix I had done at sea would last, then I should carry on to Miami and let Yanmar do a complete engine inspection after the Miami Boat Show. Mastery Engine, the Yanmar distributor for SW USA, e-mailed that they, and the Hunter mechanics, wanted to take a look at the engine and do a complete overhaul after arriving in Miami anyway. Fischer-Panda said the same about their generator. I guess Hunter had talked them into offering me complete overhauls after I succeeded in completing an eleven-month circumnavigation. ►



I upped anchor from Antigua after only three days, heading north east to the neighbouring island of St Barts. Richard Spindler, the publisher of *Latitude 38 Magazine*, had been following my voyage in his sailing magazine and, as a long time friend, wanted to do an extensive interview to publish in his next issue. After talking for three hours on his Profligate cat he invited me to dinner at Le Select restaurant where I had met him years before. The next day was Richard's 60th birthday, so before casting off on *WanderLust 3* for Culebra, I presented him with one of my spare Olympus underwater cameras. He was thrilled and has since included many underwater photos in his reports.

My next waypoint was one of my most favorite sailing destinations, the small Spanish Virgin Island of Culebra. After two wonderful and relaxing days anchored behind the reef in calm, clear waters, I weighed anchor for my penultimate waypoint, Matthew Town, Great Inagua Island, Bahamas.

Matthew Town has a very small opening in the rocky cliff along the west coast. It was a 100-metre square hole in the rocks dynamited out some years ago when you were still allowed to do such things. Its primary purpose was to protect the Bahaman Navy's only ship, an old converted mine sweeper mustered out of US Navy war surplus. This waypoint had great significance for me. When I arrived back there on 5 February, my Hunter 49 *WanderLust 3* and I had crossed over our outbound passage course that we had taken towards Panama some months before. We were officially circumnavigators. Ten months and twenty days of sailing, mostly alone, "Around-the-World".

For the second time in a year, I moored in this little "hole-in-the-wall" and walked the short distance to town. Everything was closed, for it was Sunday. I wanted to celebrate but nobody cared. Finally, I found a small street vendor and his wife. I explained that I had just sailed around the world and completed the voyage that morning and wanted to celebrate with a cold beer. He explained that on Sundays, beer sales are forbidden. But he went back to his old pick-up truck and produced a Red Stripe Jamaican beer for me to open – a gift he said. Even though I don't drink alcohol, this beer tasted wonderful and the effects of it combined with my injuries from my hang-gliding accident – I stumbled back to my Hunter 49 and took a nap.

That afternoon I woke, untied, set sail and left, but I had a different feeling down deep in my gut. I was a circumnavigator. I had sailed my new Hunter all the way around our globe and it felt pretty good; a personal challenge had been achieved, and I felt the satisfaction of joining the ranks of the other generations of sailors who had done the same. ▶



The northern coast of Cuba lies only a few miles from my route down the "Old Bahaman Channel". This was my second voyage along this busy route and as I was boarded by the Cuban Navy last time, I stayed to the very outer edge of the northern shipping lane, only a mile or so from the shallows and shoals of the Bahamas. The winds were perfect for flying my Parasailor again so, for three days and nights without sleep, I traversed that long, narrow channel at an average 8.5 knots. Turning WNW into the Gulf Stream brought me swiftly to the entrance of the Port of Miami, within a week of leaving Culebra, over 1000 miles in less than six days. I was really happy to get into the Miami Marina at Bayside.

The annual Miami Boat Show would begin in five days so the marina was empty of all boats except one last fishing vessel having motor trouble. The marina officials were expecting me and directed me to a slip near to where Hunter would have their exhibits for the show. There was one empty slip between *Wanderlust* and the fishing vessel with engine trouble.

I plugged into US shore power, the first time since leaving here 11 months ago, and secured my boat for the night. I got out my little boat bike and rode around the marina to the far side and up the walkway to Hooters. I wanted a good burger and a terrific view from a table at the window. The cute waitress was very friendly and talkative; there were not many customers that night. Conversation with a cute, young girl is something I had missed over the last six months. She didn't really understand what a circumnavigation was so I dropped the subject and continued with banal small talk.

Suddenly there was a big explosion, and smoke and a tower



of flames erupted from exactly where I last saw my boat out the window. Fire! My boat was on fire!

I sail all the way around the world and that evening my boat explodes. My head sank into my open palms and I shook at the table unable to move. Slowly my thoughts turned to all the nice things I had aboard. But then I thought that at least I wasn't on the boat in the explosion. Somehow I always try to see the bright side of a bad situation. At least I made it all the way around before she exploded.

I paid my bill and slowly road the bike around to the marina, full of dread with what I should find. There were fire trucks and police all around by then. The sheriff's car was blocking the entrance. When I told him that I thought it was my boat that exploded, he told me to wait a few minutes; he would talk to the fire chief. Ten or fifteen minutes later he came back with the chief and we walked around the trucks and powerful hoses to the last dock in the marina.

On finally reaching the area where my boat was docked, heavy smoke hung in the air and a fire boat had pulled into the slip between my boat and the fishing boat. The fishing boat was smoking and smouldering; *Wanderlust* appeared okay. We walked out onto the bow of my boat and looked over to the other. I took a picture – nobody would believe it. The only two boats in the marina and one blows up – the other one!

"Welcome back to America and congratulations on your voyage," was all that the fire chief could say.

If you would like to read the previous instalments of Mike Harker's circumnavigation you can find them in the magazine archives on www.yachtworldmagazine.com.

