



# SOLO IN THE ATLANTIC

COULD YOU TAKE ON THE ATLANTIC OCEAN ALONE? **ED GORMAN** HEADED OFF ON A SINGLE-HANDED CRUISE TO MADEIRA TO FIND OUT JUST THAT

**It was just before midnight in the eastern fringes of the Atlantic Ocean, about 130 miles south-west of Cape Finisterre.** To my right I could see an ominous wall of dense black cloud, switching off the stars as it advanced at sea level towards me.

The waiting game was filling me with dread. "What's in that thing?" I thought as I furled the genoa, set the Solent staysail and put two reefs in the main. I was on the wind in 20 knots of true wind, but expecting the breeze to veer as a front came through. First, the breeze clocked up to 23, then 25 knots and the sea state turned surprisingly violent. A few minutes later the cockpit display was showing 27 knots and *Albertine* was charging ahead as I wrestled the third reef into place.

Then the shift came through as if God himself had flicked a switch and the wind increased again. At this point I completely lost my bearings – my windward from my leeward, my port from my starboard – as *Albertine's* bow ploughed towards the Portuguese coast. Cue a Chinese gybe, headsail flogging, sheets thrashing. I shouted aloud at my incompetence and took a couple of deep breaths before finally setting her up on a starboard-hand reach.

"I am exhausted, bewildered and very unimpressed with my response. What would I do in 37 knots?" I noted >

**'My longest trip alone had been about 30 hours – now I was planning up to 11 days non-stop'**

in my journal as we powered south towards Madeira.

The idea of going solo on the ocean had always been a dream for me. As a boy growing up in the 1960s in landlocked Warwickshire I devoured stories about Francis Chichester, Robin Knox-Johnston and Chay Blyth. Then as a journalist with *The Times*, I covered Ellen MacArthur's spectacular sailing career and the equally extensive exploits of men like Mike Golding and Francis Joyon.

Looking back, I used to think I understood the challenges and difficulties those people faced. But I was wrong. Only by doing it, even on relatively small scale (and not even racing) can you understand the psychological pressures that solo ocean sailing can bring.

At heart it is a romantic notion: the idea of one person on a sailing boat, completely free on the vast expanse of the ocean, looking after oneself and the boat 24 hours a day, travelling alone for hundreds or thousands of miles and dealing with whatever the weather throws at you. There's a purity to it, not unlike solo mountaineering. To me, it always felt like the ultimate test.

For years I sailed mainly solo around the coasts of Britain, Ireland, north-west Spain and Greece in a succession of cruising boats, always dropping anchor at night or finding a harbour to settle down in.

Long passages were completed with at least one other crew on board. The notion of going offshore day after day, and doing it alone, remained a distant prospect.

Then I happened upon the website of an east coast cruiser named James Tomlinson. An experienced coastal sailor in his early 60s, like me, he had always wondered what it would be like to go solo properly. So last year he did it. At the helm of his Westerly Typhoon, *Talisker 1*, he sailed from Suffolk to Madeira and back via the Azores.

I read his blogs and watched his videos of an ambitious 4,000-mile round trip. He seemed to love every minute of it and what's more he looked completely calm and in control at all times. I found myself thinking: "If he can do it..."

Having made up my mind in an instant I ran into the kitchen to inform my bewildered wife: I was finally going to sail solo on the Atlantic.

To make it a reality, the first thing I did was book her a flight to Madeira on a date in early June. From that moment on the flight became the anchor point of the whole adventure.

I had to be in Madeira by 10 June, when we would have a week's holiday

together on the boat come what may.

It sounds simple. Just sail alone to the latitude of southern Morocco and back, but I was to learn that this would be a demanding proposition from the moment I started planning it.

Two years earlier I'd bought a new Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 389. *Albertine* was quick, nimble and fun to sail. With a deep keel, single deep fin rudder and a chine in the after sections of the hull, she goes to windward beautifully and surfs fast downwind. She came with a fully battened main and 135% genoa and a Code Zero. To that I added an A3 asymmetric reaching spinnaker in a cruising chute.

## REALITY BITES

As I began my planning, I quickly realised how much I needed to add to make *Albertine* fit for offshore long-distance solo sailing. My longest trip alone in the yacht so far had been from Falmouth to Cork – about 30 hours – now I was planning for anything up to 11 days non-stop.

Starting to think though safety issues, what could go wrong, and what spares you need, you very quickly have a huge to-do list. The key additions were a storm jib, a third reef in the main, an inner forestay and Solent sail on hanks for big breeze upwind, a radar unit, an EPIRB and handheld GPS, spare fuel cans and the hardware for the satellite communications system IridiumGo! on which I could access the PredictWind weather service.

Unlike the hardcore long-distance sailors I would go on to meet in the Azores, I planned to rely on my hydraulic integrated autopilot for self-steering, as opposed to a wind pilot. This meant that the engine would be used for charging and the state of my batteries would become an obsession.

To go offshore for a long time (in my case it was a two-month trip altogether) you have to be ruthless. You have to cut the ties that secure you to the land and focus on one thing only: getting ready and being in place at your departure port on time.

For me this was Falmouth, where I learnt to sail as a boy and have loved ever since. I have sailed to Cornwall from my home port of Chichester many times but this felt different. I was taking the first steps on the most ambitious voyage I had ever attempted by a long chalk. From the moment I started beating up towards the Solent I was thinking about trying to sail the boat within itself – not pushing as I usually do – and



**Gorman makes his mark on the harbour wall at Porto Santo**

Ed Gorman's *Albertine* is a Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 389



Gorman's route tracker shows how he temporarily looped back to the Azores for repairs to problem batteries



The hydraulic autopilot was used for long periods of self-steering, which meant heavy reliance on batteries and recharging

## 'How I'd cope with loneliness or lack of sleep were the big unknowns'

thinking through every manoeuvre before I executed it to ensure I did not risk damaging the rig in any way. This was going to be a marathon not a sprint.

### MAKING THE LEAP

On the day I left the Cornish coast, the weather was foul. I had up to 25 knots across my deck as I beat out past the Lizard lost in the murk off my starboard bow. In the back of my mind I was wondering if I was about to make a complete fool of myself. But the thrill of going long-distance, single-handed was electric. Not since I crossed the border illegally from Pakistan into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan as a young journalist in the mid-1980s had I experienced a similarly delicious combination of excitement, fear and adrenalin.

I decided from the beginning of my planning phase to try and sail the 1,200 miles from Falmouth to Porto Santo, just east of Madeira, non-stop.

I had a far from ideal weather window with a slow upwind slog ahead of me and in the later stages of my eight-day voyage, a vast weather system called Storm Miguel would make its way across the North Atlantic encouraging me to get south as fast as possible.

How I would cope with loneliness or lack of sleep were among the big unknowns.

'I can't believe I have been at sea for just over a day,' I wrote in my journal off Ushant. 'It feels like a lifetime. I have suffered the classic "first 48 hours" baptism with sudden mood swings – moments of joy, loneliness, frustration, resignation and then... determination.'

On the first night I caused the only damage to the sails in the entire 3,800-mile trip when a flogging jib sheet punched a small hole in the sail when I forgot to furl it inside the inner forestay while tacking to avoid a freighter. When I discovered the damage in the morning I was furious with myself for making such a basic error.

### FINDING A RHYTHM

But then I gradually settled down. I remembered, as I had planned, to check my position against landmarks on shore. It was not long before I had passed the latitude of Paris – I was sailing below the Champs Élysées! It was a simple trick to measure progress on a long journey.

For the first time in my long sailing career I managed to properly sleep. I could 'see' cargo ships on AIS and the alarm was working perfectly: it gave me the confidence to drift off in the saloon and I got into a pattern of sleeping for about an hour at a time, almost all of it at night. Overall I probably managed about four to five hours out of every 24 and never came to close to hallucinating through exhaustion.



**Right: after nine days at sea, the island of Porto Santo was a spectacular sight off Albertine's starboard bow**

Cracked off on a nice east-south-easterly breeze blowing up from Biarritz, I cruised south and came within touching distance of the Spanish coast west of La Coruña. After agonising about whether to pop into one of the Rias, I decided to stick to my non-stop plan and tack back out to sea.

Arriving in Porto Santo was a wonderful moment; a feeling of achievement and contentment that I have rarely experienced. Like James Tomlinson and many others before me, I painted my name on the harbour wall in the traditional way. I had sailed there non-stop and discovered that precious skill in a traveller: enjoying the journey and not obsessing about arriving at my destination.

After our week's holiday on Madeira, the trip to Santa Maria should have been straightforward but a 36-hour bout of food poisoning that took hold eight hours into the four-day voyage turned it into the journey from hell. Food poisoning and going upwind solo in a monohull in the breeze is a very bad combination.

The third leg proved the hardest psychologically. Unlike the voyage south there are no places to stop on the way back from the Azores to Falmouth and this caught me out a little. It is a 1,500-mile marathon and you are hundreds of miles off the coast. Charging problems with damaged batteries forced me to restart this leg three times and when I finally went for it, sailing to the Lizard in just under 11 days, I was permanently on edge about whether the pilot would have sufficient power.

Although there were some huge downers (not least >



## WHAT I LEARNT ALONE MID-ATLANTIC

- **Mood swings** The trick is not to get too carried away by the highs and not sink too low in the troughs. That way you can navigate a psychological middle way that is more balanced.
- **Sleep** The most important ingredient for energy, optimism and enjoyment. Whenever you can get it as a soloist, take it.
- **Radar** Don't bother with it. Offshore almost everything is on AIS. Within 30 miles of the coast you are on watch in any case.
- **Food** You can load the boat with all sorts of dry stores but in the end all you want is fresh food and your appetite is limited anyway so don't take too much, it's just dead weight. I returned with 24 cans of baked beans and ten tins of creamed rice.
- **Light v heavy?** *Albertine* is quite a light boat; for big seas in the Atlantic a heavier boat might suit some people more.
- **Batteries** Find out as much as you can about what you have and how they work. Go for the most powerful ones you can find that fit your designated spaces.
- **Pilot** I got away with using the hydraulic autopilot but really you need something like the Hydrovane or Monitor (which I had on my previous boat and was a black art to master but superb once sorted out).
- **PredictWind** Absolutely brilliant. With this service you rarely navigate. It's all about the optimum wind angle for the next 12 hours and the routing programme helps you work that out.
- **The Atlantic** Don't forget it's huge!



Above: the marina at Santa Maria in the Azores made a well-organised base as Gorman prepared for the long voyage back to Falmouth. Left: inland on Santa Maria, which Gorman describes as a 'bucolic paradise'



**Top:** *Albertine* lies to anchor in Porto Santo harbour. "Not the prettiest of spots, but that was the least of my worries. I'd got there in one piece" he recalls. **Above left:** the 15th century church in the centre of Vila Baleira, the capital of Porto Santo. **Above right:** the author on the pontoon next to *Albertine* at the well-run and quiet marina at Quinta do Lorde in Madeira

having to turn back to the Azores for the second time, sailing 350 miles in the process) there were exceptional moments and long periods when I tasted the joy of the soloist often accompanied by music and sea birds, as well as the dolphins, porpoises, plus the odd shark and fin whale that swam alongside.

### ON REFLECTION

'Sitting in the cockpit, it's a beautiful evening with the ever-present shearwaters gliding and wheeling around the boat on a deep blue ocean in a light northerly breeze,' I wrote as I finally cleared the Azores on the way north.

'Watching the stunning island of São Miguel gradually dissolve behind me; the rich greens of the pastures and reds of the dramatic rock faces on the cliffs steadily draining of colour as *Albertine* heads north-west at 40° apparent.'

I understood that solitude is the joy of being alone and

loneliness is the pain of isolation, and that the former reigns when things are going well, and the latter grabs you when the going is harder: a nasty head sea, an awful tacking angle, an engine that doesn't start, a battery that won't hold power or a body afflicted by sickness.

When I got back the first question from many was "What next?" My answer was unequivocal. I had loved – and occasionally hated – my experience alone on the Atlantic but, having done it, I have well and truly scratched that itch and will not go back alone. ■



A former war correspondent, deputy foreign editor and deputy head of news at *The Times*, Ed Gorman now divides his time between writing and his responsibilities as editorial director of a sports management company.