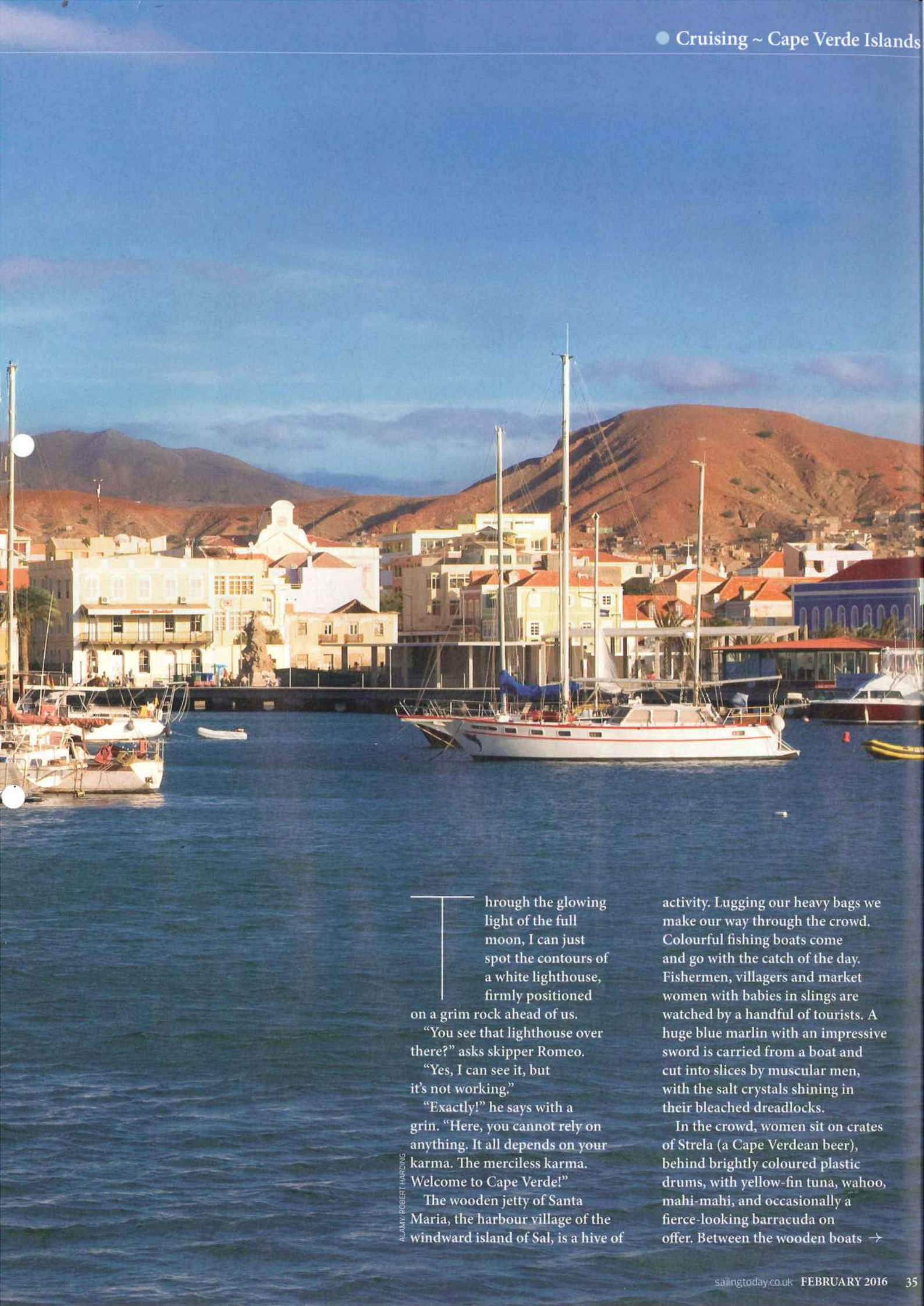


RUGGED AND UNTAMED

Adventurous sailing, towering crags and friendly locals make *Hanneke Beers* long to return to the Cape Verde islands



Through the glowing light of the full moon, I can just spot the contours of a white lighthouse, firmly positioned

on a grim rock ahead of us.

“You see that lighthouse over there?” asks skipper Romeo.

“Yes, I can see it, but it’s not working.”

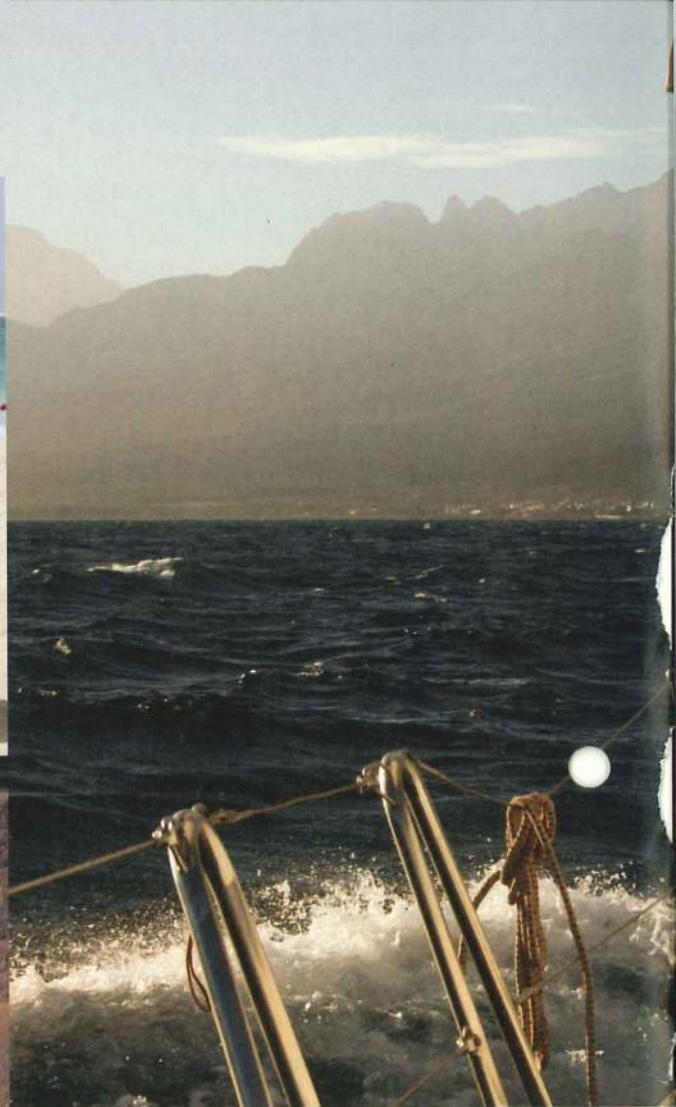
“Exactly!” he says with a grin. “Here, you cannot rely on anything. It all depends on your karma. The merciless karma. Welcome to Cape Verde!”

The wooden jetty of Santa Maria, the harbour village of the windward island of Sal, is a hive of

activity. Lugging our heavy bags we make our way through the crowd. Colourful fishing boats come and go with the catch of the day. Fishermen, villagers and market women with babies in slings are watched by a handful of tourists. A huge blue marlin with an impressive sword is carried from a boat and cut into slices by muscular men, with the salt crystals shining in their bleached dreadlocks.

In the crowd, women sit on crates of Strela (a Cape Verdean beer), behind brightly coloured plastic drums, with yellow-fin tuna, wahoo, mahi-mahi, and occasionally a fierce-looking barracuda on offer. Between the wooden boats →

ALAMY/ROBERT HARDING



‘THERE’S NO MERCY. IF SOMETHING HAPPENS, WE GO ADRIFT AND END UP IN BRAZIL. THERE’S NO RESCUE SERVICE’

a small RIB with two men in bright blue polo shirts approaches us.

Romeo is the Romanian skipper of Sail Cape Verde, with whom we will take a tour of the windward islands in the coming week. Lindani is the South African first mate, who manoeuvres the RIB between the fishing boats, across the bright water to the *Perseverance*, the 54ft Sun Odyssey anchored nearby.

“You guys want a Strela?” He offers photographer Jeroen and myself ice-cold beers. While sitting in the cockpit enjoying the balmy breeze and the warm sun, Romeo tells us about his experiences here. As an RYA Yachtmaster he

● **TOP**
Perseverance anchored off Santa Maria beach

● **ABOVE**
 Anchored under the crags of São Nicolau

● **MAIN**
 A strong wind in the beam takes the author towards Santa Antao

has wandered all over the world, and has only been in these waters a month. Although he finds it amazing here, he soon discovered that sailing in the Cape Verdes was something completely different. “There’s no mercy. If something happens, we go adrift and end up in Brazil. There’s no rescue service.”

Across the archipelago, consisting of ten islands, there is only one marina. “If you have a good anchor and good karma, then you’re OK.” The fact that good karma provides a better guarantee than sound seamanship does not put me at ease.

After an afternoon stroll through town, we walk past a bar advertising:

“Happy Hour 6-10pm. Caipirinha 150 esc”, which is about £1. Without any hesitation we go inside and it appears we are not the only ones. The terrace is loaded with Europeans.

A Belgian couple explain why they decided to settle down here: “Very friendly people, relaxed life, the fantastic climate and the best thing is: it is unbelievably cheap.” The others all nod in agreement as another round appears. The caipirinha served here is not made with cachaça, but with *grogue*, local rum distilled from cane sugar grown on local island São Nicolau.

After a few rounds we can no longer keep up with the retirees’ tempo and walk over to a restaurant on the corner. Here we try the national dish of the islands: *cachupa*, a Cape Verdean delicacy with corn, onions, green banana, sweet potato, yam, tomatoes and meat. It is hearty but delicious.

Tunny treat

Returning to the boat, we buy two fresh tuna at the jetty, then set sail



ALL PHOTOS: HANNEKE BEERS & JEROEN VANDER LEIJIE

west along the flat salty island. After a few hours of a strong 15 to 20 knot backstay wind, we start looking for a suitable place to roast our 'catch of the day'. The white beaches and unavoidable resorts that initially escorted us soon become less abundant and we seem to be the only ones in the world.

We anchor near an isolated beach. While Romeo stays on board to keep watch – "I do not trust our karma" – we take the dinghy to the beach, where big waves are breaking.

Just before hitting the sand we jump overboard and drag the RIB – as quick as we can – higher up the beach. A split second later the next thundering breaker collapses behind us on the sand. Phew!

Just behind the paradise white beach, a reddish-brown desert reveals itself to us. It's a very dry steppe with some small bushes and a lonely acacia tree. "The nothingness of nothing," as our philosophical skipper Romeo so beautifully describes it and we imagine we have just entered the next episode of *Expedition Robinson*.

Then Lindani rigs the barbecue and, armed with a huge knife, Jeroen attacks the tuna as if he has been running a fish shop his entire life.

In no time only a few neat fillets remain. With some lime, garlic and sea salt they are thrown on to the barbecue.

Meanwhile I pour a few glasses of ice-cold rosé and we toast the sunset on this magnificent day. All three of us are in agreement:

● **TOP**
Green valley to the northwest of San Antao

● **ABOVE**
No bags required at Mindelo

none of us has ever eaten such divine tuna.

Windward islands

Back on board, we discuss our programme. The first leg is to Sao Nicolão, about 90 miles west of Sal. Since it is pretty risky to arrive at night, we leave around midnight, so we can find an anchorage in daylight. Besides →





JEROEN VAN DER LEIJE

the lookout, we must also keep a close eye on the autopilot.

As soon as we leave the shelter of the island, the waves throw us back and forth in our bunks. At 3am, I take Lindani's place after he has explained to me how to keep the boat's log. I make myself comfortable behind the starboard wheel.

We continue until we are slowly overtaken by the approaching dawn. At 6am, Jeroen replaces me and I disappear into my bunk. Sleeping is tricky and after an hour I drag myself, exhausted, into the cockpit where I behold the wondrous beauty of the 1,300m-high contours of Sao Nicolão in the morning haze.

Desert by the sea

The first impression is desolate. A brown mountain range looks down on us. We are, like Romeo, deeply impressed by the ruthless desert rising from the sea before our eyes. We continue along the coast to the port town of Tarrafal, in a bay filled with anchored yachts. There we swim in the warm, turquoise water.

That afternoon we walk through the village, taking pictures of the

● **ABOVE**
Unravelling fishing nets on the jetty at Mindelo is a communal activity

sunset and groups of schoolchildren wrapped in their light blue aprons. We end our afternoon in a fish restaurant on the corner of the harbour, and again enjoy the taste of a delicious tuna with fresh Portuguese *vinho verde*.

Next morning, for the first time since we arrived, it is completely windless and we start the engine bound for Santo Antão, the most westward island of the archipelago. Before long, the wind picks up and within half a minute, we are tortured by gusts of more than 30kts. "Can you believe this?" Our skipper is not yet used to this either. We continue on the engine for half an hour to see what the wind will do, then hoist the sails when it reaches 25kts, double reefed.

Then we see the spectacular Santo Antão looming up ahead of us. The third largest island of the archipelago is solely responsible for the 'verde' in Cabo Verde, although that is hard to imagine from where we are standing. All the rain falls on the northeast side of the island; in the south it is dry. Tomorrow we will take a tour of the island to explore for ourselves. That night we find ourselves

beam-on to a huge swell and are smashed back and forwards.

Refreshed the next morning after a swim and a few mugs of strong Cape Verdean coffee, the world looks much better and we take the RIB to shore. Local guide Rony welcomes us. He drives us up a steep cobbled road that seems to take us into the →



Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 54DS *Perseverance*

LOA: 54ft 9in (16.7m)

Beam: 16ft (4.9m)

Draught: 7ft 2in (2.2m)

Cabins: 5

Sail area: 448sq ft (4139m²)

Engine: Yanmar: 110hp



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The Cape Verde Islands, DM Street Jr, iUniverse.com inc

Imray chart: E4

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WE DRIVE PAST THE CRATER OF THE 1,170M COVA DE PAÚL VOLCANO...

heavens above, when we disappear into the dense mist that hangs around the mountain peaks, and we find ourselves in the middle of a pine forest. It is at least 10 degrees cooler than down at the harbour. The fog is so heavy that water droplets form on the pine needles, like rain. We drive past the crater of the 1,170m-high Cova de Paúl volcano and with steep ridges on both sides, deep ravines and vistas, the road winds up and down, like the Great Wall of China.

Tropical abundance

Out of the blue, the environment explodes in a large tropical oasis. Coconut trees, citrus, papaya, mango trees, bananas, sugar cane, agave and passion fruit, framed with roses and bougainvillea... What abundance and what an incredible contrast to the hostile landscape that we had seen so far. Occasionally we stop to pick some fruit growing just by the side of the road that leads to Ribeira Grande, the lively capital of the island.

We stop for lunch at The Place, a tiny restaurant in the living

room of the beautiful Calinda and her husband who, looking at his dreadlocks and the portrait of Haile Selassie hanging in the hall, I assume is a true Rastafari. Calinda prepares a wonderful cachupa for us, followed by a dessert of goats' cheese and fig marmalade washed down with passion fruit caipirinha.

We ask her to prepare some more of this drink of the gods, which is poured into a plastic water bottle we happened to bring with us. Towards sunset, when we raise anchor, Rony shows up at the beach to wave us goodbye.

With over 30kt of wind and a little bit of genoa as support, we head for Mindelo, the colonial capital of the nearby island of San Vicente. In the gathering dusk we recognise the dorsal and tailfin of a big shark in our wake. Entering the bay of Mindelo, it is clear that the city is on the edge of a huge crater. The lighthouse is out of service but fortunately our skipper has sailed here many times before. Moored in the marina, we pack our bags and – reluctantly – leave the ship and her great crew.

● **ABOVE, LEFT**
Taking a risk with the egg trays

● **TOP**
Catch of the day in Ponta do Sol

● **ABOVE**
Skipper Romeo shows off his catch of flying fish

Life ashore

We spend the last couple of nights at Villa St Aubyn, a guesthouse in the city, also run by Sail Cape Verde. Looking out over the bay that night, we are silent – touched deeply by the relaxed, welcoming and friendly people and the untainted islands, bringing together so many extremes. The sailing here was rough and pure and that has given us – except for a few sleepless nights – a great experience: a tremendous feeling of freedom and peace. ✦

FACT FILE

Because of its geographic location in the Atlantic, Cape Verde experiences trade winds of about 20kts coming from easterly directions.

From November until May temperatures vary between 24 and 30°C. In the summer months the winds are less strong. The rainy season, albeit with very little rain, lasts from September until October. There are years without any rain at all.

Cape Verde has a tropical climate, so protective clothing (hat, lotion, etc) is advised.

Most flights have a stopover at Lisbon and cost around £400-£500 (€550-€700). Early booking is advised.