



Cat to the Cape Verdes

In April's PBO, experienced crew Huw Williams met catamaran owners John and Leigh for the first time in Gibraltar to prepare for an Atlantic crossing. Two weeks later they set sail

We're heading towards the Straits of Gibraltar in over 20 knots of wind. It's blowing dead easterly and a 1.5m swell is running. *Surfinn*, the Lagoon 450F catamaran I recently joined as crew, is being pulled along by the Code 0. I suggested this headsail as the best option for speed, control and easy reefing. We can replace it with the genoa if the apparent wind gets too much. The Aussie skipper John hasn't used it before, but as the wind and swell build he sees the benefit of not having to turn into the wind to reef the main. We could have used the

Parasail, but that's an all or nothing option, and cumbersome if we have to take avoiding action. This area is busy; commercial shipping, naval vessels and fishing boats all feature.

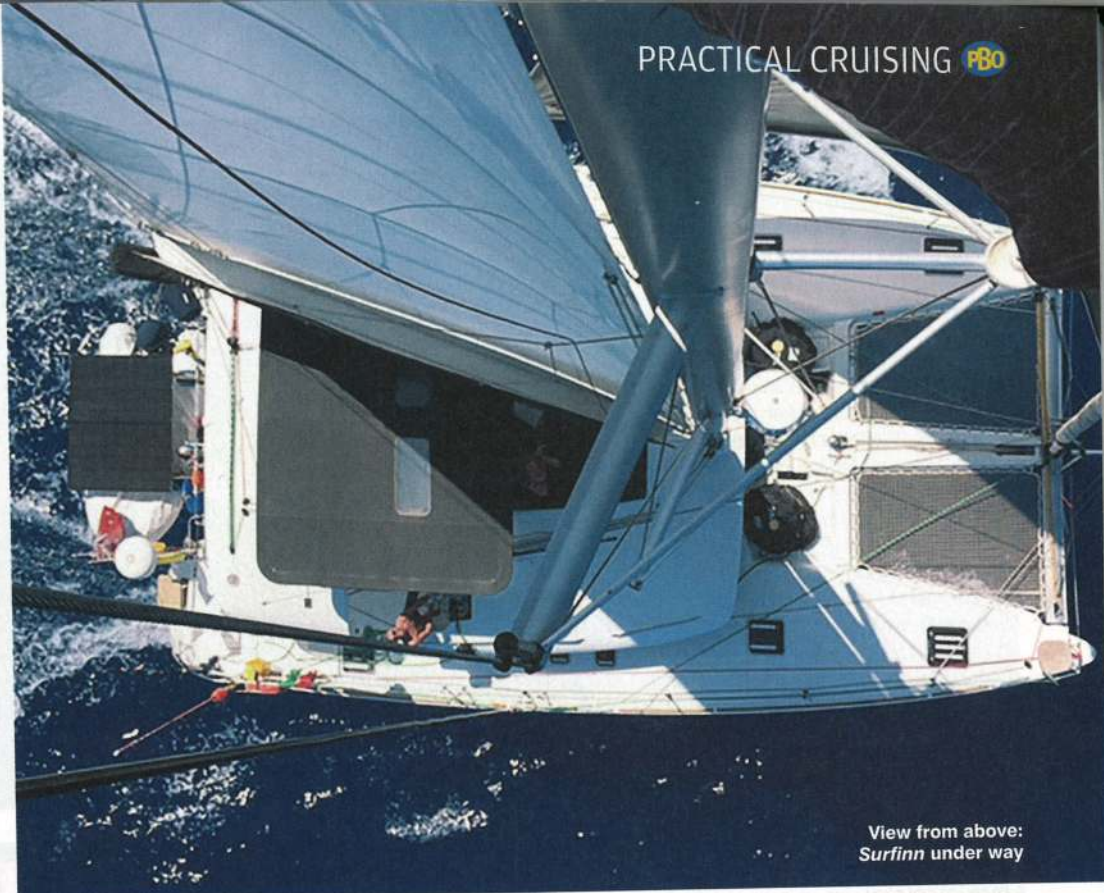
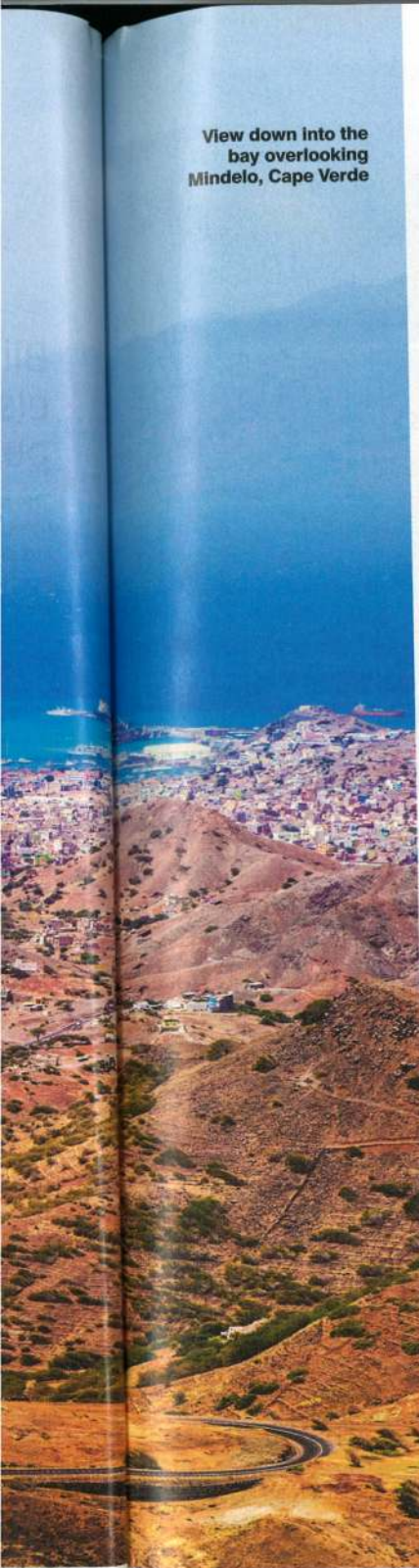
The wind is compressed and accelerates as the hills of two continents funnel it through the narrow entrance to the Atlantic. Up ahead is the catamaran that left La Línea an hour before us. They're trying to goose wing with a reefed main and genoa, but cruising cats can't really do that because the shrouds are set so far back. They are struggling. We give them a wave as we smoke past them, and

a minute later they turn into the swell, drop their main and then go straight downwind with their kite. Not that it's a race of course, but we are really moving.

There's an air of excitement on board and I can tell that John and his wife, Leigh, are pleased with the way things are going. Al, who joined the crew at the same time as me, was a little apprehensive before we left, but he's acclimatised and relishing the moment. He tells me he's never sailed so fast. Love it.

It's less busy than I was expecting, but we change course several times to avoid some fishing boats. We also put in a gybe

View down into the bay overlooking Mindelo, Cape Verde



View from above: *Surfinn* under way

Bamboo whisker pole improvised in Las Palmas works a treat under way



Irnya Shpulak/Alamy

and go a little further north to stay out of the traffic separation scheme (TSS). We pass through the Straits and continue along the north side of the TSS, before turning south and sheeting in a little.

After a late lunch of chicken baguettes, more fishing boats and several longlines to avoid, Leigh makes pizzas for dinner and we prepare the boat for the night.

The wind is backing and easing so we furl the Code 0, hoist the main, put in one reef and unfurl the genoa. Then we sit on the bridge together with mugs of tea and enjoy a wonderful sunset.

Nine o'clock sees the start of our watch

rota, and John's system is a sound one.

We start with the most and least experienced – me and Leigh – and John and Al will take over after three hours. I wouldn't want to run it for days on end, but it should work well for an overnight.

The most important thing tonight is to avoid the countless fishing boats that use nets and longlines along the coast. The consensus from the pilot book and the sailors we met in La Línea is to sail along the 100m line as this should avoid most of the fishing fleet, and tonight it coincides with a good wind angle. We should have the wind on the beam all the way to Rabat. ➔

ABOUT AUTHOR

Huw Williams started sailing 15 years ago when he moved from London to Chichester. He got the bug for long passages after crewing on a delivery trip from Sweden to Monaco, then circumnavigated the globe from 2014-16. He has just returned from the ARC+ event.



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A cool night does see a lot of boats, but most of them are inshore of us so the plan seems to be working. Some of them are even showing the correct lights, which enable us to give them a very wide berth. I offer up a silent prayer to the longline gods.

Night watch

Leigh and I discover we both like old movies, and talking about them proves a pleasant way to pass the time because the breeze is very consistent and there's not much to do. We talk about *Casablanca* of course, although I suspect when we arrive the reality will be somewhat different.

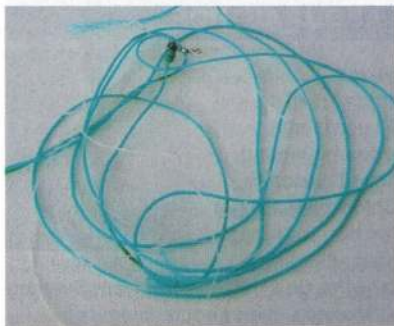
A few minutes to midnight and Al and John take over. I fill in the log, snatch a two-hour doze and by 3am Leigh and I are back on watch. The wind has backed almost 180° while we've slept, and we're now on port tack. It's also blowing off the cooling Moroccan desert and the salty air has been replaced with an indefinable, but definitely land based smell.

It's also freezing! I'm glad I packed my thermals. Aha! Another yacht has just popped up on the AIS: a big Dutch monohull. It's about 8 miles ahead and we are very slowly overhauling it. Not that it's a race, of course.

By sunrise the Dutch yacht is now only a mile or so ahead. We could probably pass it, but instead we slow down and use it as a longline detector as we slalom our way through dozens more fishing boats on the approach to Rabat.

As we get nearer, the huge fort makes the entrance to the port easy to spot. We turn into the river mouth and head to the customs pontoon where we tie up. That really was a perfect passage: safe, fast, lots of variety and everyone learned something. Now, lamb tagine beckons.

The following day the weather forecast has changed for the worse. A deep depression is heading for Morocco and a 6m swell is on the way. In two days the Rabat port authority is planning to close the river entrance to all boats, so there are two choices. We can stay here for a week, or head off this evening, bypassing Casablanca and keep on going until we reach Agadir, which is well south of the expected swell. We discuss the options. The breeze looks favourable, so we'll go tonight and I'll never know if *Casablanca's* Captain Renault was right about Ilsa...



After cutting the snagged longline we pulled this off the rudder

Passing the Kasbah. The fort at the mouth of the Bou Regreg river is an unmistakable landmark as you approach Rabat



Rescue demonstration at Las Palmas



Fresh fruit provisions for the crossing

Short stopover

After a repeat performance of the first leg, and almost colliding with an unlit fishing boat, we're tied up at Marina Agadir, which will be our departure point for Lanzarote. We spend three days here. It reminds me of a Queensland beach town, but only a few western women are wearing swimsuits and the marina has armed troops on patrol. While they're glad to smile and say 'hello', they won't let me include them in a photograph. John wisely keeps his drone in its case. We meet a few other sailors, some of whom are booked on the ARC, and exchange pleasantries and fishing boat anecdotes. One of them snagged two longlines on the passage from Tangier and is now referring to this area as 'Longline alley'.

After provisioning at a local supermarket and an early dinner, we set sail once more. Another great sunset and we're back in the groove of watches and sleeping. Being woken at 3am is my least favourite part of sailing, and at this latitude you don't get the reward of a nice sunrise when you finish at 6am. On the plus side, coffee has never tasted better. Later, we pass a solitary fishing boat, and several whales, which I think might be Beluga. Lovely.

John has been explaining his plans for the ARC in more detail: Leigh will return to Oz and two of their children and several friends will accompany him across the Atlantic to St Lucia. He'll be the only person with any sailing experience on board. I reflect on this for a day and think it's a little foolhardy. I put on my extra-large, diplomatic hat and gently tell him this and he sort of accepts my view. He's actually going on the ARC+ which breaks the passage in Cape Verde, so how about if I accompany him from Las Palmas to Cape Verde? That way we can split the watch leading duties, he'll be able to get some quality sleep on the passage and we can train the crew together. They should then be better prepared for the crossing to St Lucia. He ponders on this.

It's just before dusk, and I'm dozing in the cockpit when I realise something is amiss. The boat doesn't feel right. It's yawing. I look behind and see we've picked up some rope on the port rudder, and not just a few metres, but an entire longline, which is probably several kilometres in length. We slow down and try to use the boat hook to free it, but there's too much pressure. We try coming up on the wind, but it's still stuck; it must

The rugged coast approaching Agadir



be jammed between the top of the rudder and the hull. It's now nearly dark and we have no option but to cut it. I hate doing that, but diving at night to free it is a definite no-no.

We reach Puerto Calero on Lanzarote, and spend a lovely week cruising the islands before I bid farewell in Tenerife. But I'll be back: Cape Verde is on!

Las Palmas reunion

Five weeks later I'm back on board *Surfinn* at Las Palmas in Gran Canaria and I meet the crew. Martika and Chad are John's adult children, and Steve, Russell and Scott are friends.

Departure date is in five days. Hundreds of boats are using the marina as a departure point for the Atlantic, and there's a manic air as crews rush to complete their preparations. John's already been out doing MOB drills with the crew, so while he's arranging a rig inspection, engine service and chasing deliveries, I show Chad and Steve how to rig the Parasail. They then show the others, using my favourite learning principle of 'see it, do it, teach it.'

After lunch we use the spinnaker halyard to move the 45kg anchor back from the bow and stow it in a locker at the mast foot. We also drop the genoa and inspect it for wear; all good team building exercises that encourage an exchange of views and a safe environment in which to make mistakes. The following day the local SAR team put on a rescue demo with a helicopter. We appreciate the crew's skill and hope we never have to call them.


Our secret weapon, another Parasail, arrives: this time a smaller, higher-wind version in a slightly heavier fabric. I also show John photos of how I improvised a bamboo whisker pole on the World ARC and explain how it's used. He likes the

idea and the following day we all work together to make one. We're limited by the materials available, so it has to be made in two parts, and we reinforce the joint and both ends with whipping and constrictor hitches before covering them with tape. Then I demonstrate how to rig it, much to the amusement of our neighbours, the super cool 'Atlantic Women' on board *Lucky Lady* who are leaving next week on the ARC (I think they're secretly impressed). The pole is about a foot shorter than I'd like, but should enable us to run a wing-on-wing rig if something untoward happens to the Parasails. After dinner I keep the drip feed going and get everyone to tie bowlines and rolling hitches with their eyes shut. John suggests I have the nickname of 'Knots', which I think may be an Aussie sign of respect and affection.

Two days to departure sees us attending the legendary ARC party, and a fine evening it turns out to be. The open bar

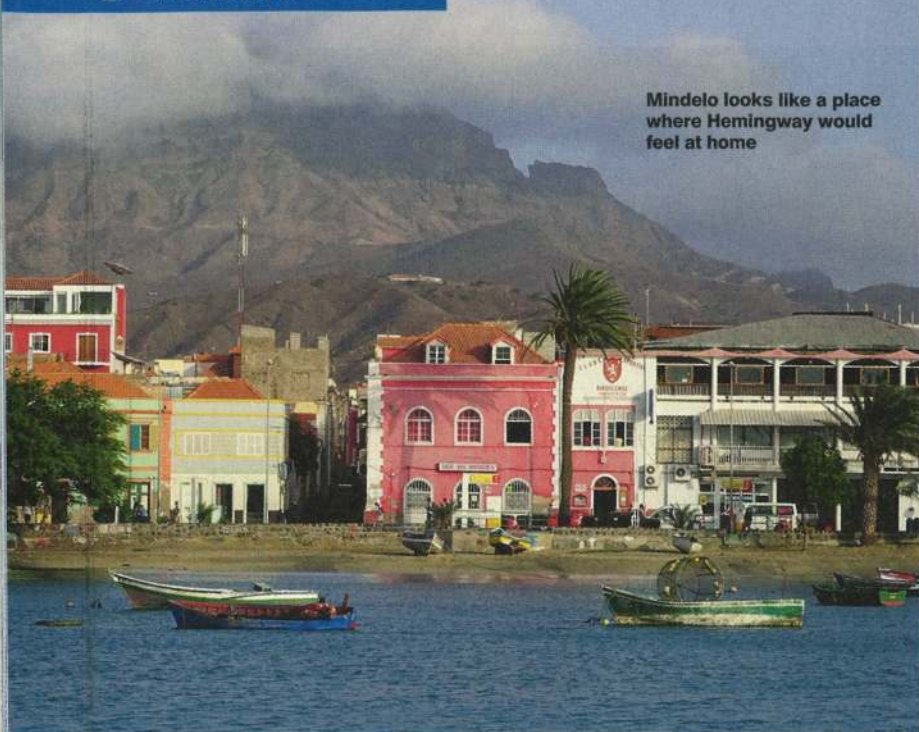
ensures multiple hangovers the following morning, and they get worse when I run another knot session, this time including the sheet bend. I ignore their pleas for mercy.

One day to go and our enormous fruit and veg order arrives. It's brought aboard, stowed in the new food hammocks and we are careful to leave the cardboard boxes ashore because of cockroaches. Then John arrives with a whole leg of Serrano ham, which must weigh about 30kg! We later attend the skipper's briefing at the enormous Real Club Nautico de Gran Canaria, where there's a very good weather presentation and an emphasis on collision regs at the start line, and later we plan our start strategy. I still haven't sailed with the crew, so we decide to go out a few hours early and get some time in together. The weather is looking promising with a forecast of 20+ knots of wind and a 2m swell.

That evening everyone is a little subdued as we each come to terms with 



Lanzarote: the ocean is part of the culture here – even on a roundabout



Mindelo looks like a place where Hemingway would feel at home



Surfinn cruised the North African coast from Gibraltar to Mindelo

heading across an ocean. The crew have lost some of their bravado, which is probably a good thing, and I do another safety talk and reassure them that it's normal to feel apprehensive. All skippers feel the burden of responsibility that comes with taking family and friends offshore and John is no different. We sit together on the bridge and talk more about the following day. He's glad I'm aboard, and so am I. We're no longer just acquaintances.

The ARC begins

Finally, it's showtime. It's traditional to blow the foghorn on departure and we don't skimp. We are the first boat to leave the marina and the main office starts blaring out salsa music and wave as we motor past. Next stop Mindelo: the capital of Cape Verde.

We practise tacks for an hour with everyone taking a turn at helming and manning the winches. They're getting quite slick. Confidence is growing.

Catamarans start at 1pm and I want to be the last boat over the line to minimise any risk of collision, because this is meant to be a rally and not the start of the Fastnet. We stay clear of the start line and tack back and forth before hoisting the main. Damn it. As we're hauling, the ARC banner under the port spreader snags the main halyard. It takes an age to clear and instead of starting at the back of the cats we head over the line in the middle of the large monohull fleet.

After that mishap we get back in the groove: one reef in the main and full genoa sees us reaching in a south-easterly direction at nearly 10 knots. This is not only great for morale, but ensures we get offshore quickly, avoiding the vicious acceleration zone that lurks near the coast and the wind shadow cast by the island. We're really in the sweet spot

and we maintain this speed for the rest of the day, eventually going further south and overhauling several boats that started ahead of us. Not that it's a race, of course.

We replicate the watch system we used from Gibraltar. John and I take turns to be the watch leader and the others join us on a rota system. After the first night we have enough confidence in the crew to let us doze on the bridge while the others sail the boat. Very civilised, although I confess I stayed awake for most of the first session, feigning sleep.

There are about 70 boats on the rally, and after three days they're becoming well spread out as different strategies take shape. We head south-south-east towards the African coast and eventually the wind

begins to ease and veer. It's time to go straight downwind for Cape Verde with the Parasail, but first we'll try running for a while with twin headsails and the bamboo whisker pole. It works! The passage is going well. Everyone is enjoying the experience and picking up skills that will be so important for the next leg. Just as important is the esprit de corps that is continuing to grow. I'll be sorry to leave.

Another day, and it seems to be getting hotter by the hour. There's now only 4 knots of true wind and we're motoring. We take the opportunity to use the washing machine and festoon the lifelines with our laundry, which dries in a few minutes.

Russell is on watch when he has to alter course to avoid the longest longline yet. We motor along it for over an hour before we can get back on course, and I call in its position to the fleet. Another day of motoring, and as dusk falls the wind picks up and we hoist the main, cut one motor and watch another great sunset. We'll be in Cape Verde in a few hours where my adventure will end.

The last leg

Six days later the ARC+ fleet left Mindelo, and an hour after that my flight took off for Lisbon. I caught a brief glimpse of *Surfinn* before we turned north. John told me his intention was to sail to St Lucia, not motor, and during the crossing I watched their progress on the ARC fleet tracker and we communicated most days via email. At the halfway mark they were in the middle of the field. The winds were variable, and I suggested they head further south to pick up more breeze. The new,

smaller Parasail allowed them to run a safe, fast, downwind rig as the Trades began to kick in, and they kept it up day and night. Martika posted on their daily blog, "We have had a taste of real sailing. We like it".

With 300 miles to go they came back north with a great wind angle, overhauling bigger and faster boats and reached St Lucia after 17 days at sea.

At the awards ceremony they took second place in the catamaran category, with only an Outremer 51 recording a faster time: a fantastic achievement.

Not that it was a race, of course.



Surfinn's ARC+ crew (from left) John, Martika, Chad, Scott and Steve

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