

Charlie and Paula Tait in MAIA

Pictures requested, to follow.

Three parts fueled our dream to circumnavigate the Earth under sail. Firstly, a profound love for the sea; engineered by 'Enid Blyton-esque' holidays in Cornwall and my upbringing on the North Yorkshire coast. Secondly, an avid consumption of inspiring nautical books. And, thirdly, a zest for foreign travel to 'unpeopled' places. What were we missing? Knowledge and, crucially, a plan.

Meanwhile, despite hearing about my crazy ambitions, my girlfriend (who possessed zero sailing experience) became my wife. She is fearless when it matters. On the Helford River, we found a suitable boat; a steel, 36-foot clone of a Westerly Conway. In a less-than-perfect state, with grass growing on her decks, she was undoubtedly (for some time) the scruffiest yacht on the Solent.

Summer 1991 was a steep learning curve; from observation, most boat owners either grow up in the culture of boat ownership or are relatively affluent, we were neither. My mother moved to France that year, and we were able to assist on the logistical front. A voyage to Arcachon saw us transporting the three most useless articles on a small craft: a wheelbarrow, an umbrella and a senior naval officer famously. On the return trip, I proposed at night in a violent electrical storm of the Gironde entrance. Her reply was robust and bore little resemblance to a Hollywood romance, but was not entirely dismissive.

Thus, the stage was set for the fitting-out process. Rather than have her shot blasted, we chose to apply a nasty rust bonding paint having scraped off what remained of the original (a million square centimeters, by the way). It was like painting with runny chewing gum. A fascinating aura of curiosity surrounded the enterprise, generally positive, but we had insight into how poor Noah must have felt. It was heartening how attitudes slowly changed as launch day came along. Things started to appear, advice was given, assistance offered. Another summer cruising Brittany and the western Channel enabled us to glean further experience to be gathered and Maia's rudimentary systems to be tested further.

The late summer of 1993 saw us on our way. I set off with crew, with Paula set to join up in the Algarve later in the year. We had a free wind nearly the whole way to Faro enabling as many stops as we could manage. A sickly engine was (mercifully) rectified with a genius engineer welding freehand a fitting on the side of one of the cylinders. So, then it was time to go, late in the season, with my wife and elderly mother as crew in lively weather. Seasickness reared its ugly head. All were glad to reach the Canaries.

And so it was finally just the two of us, we felt the adventure was commencing for real. We chose to cross via the Cape Verde islands. A decision we were glad of but possibly one we would not necessarily repeat. What followed was my happiest Atlantic crossing; I have now done a few! It took us exactly 14 days with perfect trade winds. Paula's memory is one of seasickness, but she always managed to rally for happy hour- there is clear photographic evidence of this. Christmas 1993 was spent precisely halfway to the Antilles, with landfall on Bequia on New Year's Day. From then on, we were living the dream, albeit on a pretty modest budget.

Further engine problems made for a challenging Panama transit but, working on the philosophy that an engine that isn't working can never fail, it was never much of a worry. The echo sounder failed shortly after, and the lead was duly swung. One learns how little one needs in life, but that those things one does need must work or be fixable or be replaceable at sea.

Yes, island hopping across the broad Pacific is as magical as it might appear. The distances are so vast and the population density so low it will be a while before humanity finally wrecks this corner of the globe. Even the French testing their warheads haven't yet managed it. The archipelago of the Marquesas was a memorable real-life fantasy of improbable names and skylines. The group has suffered a population crash since Cook's day resulting in their farms and plantations carrying on without them. It was a glimpse of Eden before the fall.

The atolls of the Tuamotus were a more serious proposition, and we chose our options with care as the passes needed to be taken at slack water, particularly under sail. Still, all was worth the challenge as we saw places that the earliest navigators would have easily recognized, The Society Islands, Niue, Tonga and the various Islands of Fiji came in blissful succession. Tonga is traditionally the place where cruisers rekindle their enjoyment of sailing as the Vava'u group is seemingly designed for short easy day sails to incredible anchorages in more moderate trade winds. Paula's parents joined us in Fiji. They were our shore party to be dispatched ashore to pay respects by offering Kava to the headman on the more remote island as is the custom.

One of the problems of trade wind sailing is the apprehension when leaving their benign embrace. Our engine finally died for good shortly after we departed for New Zealand. While this is not an issue offshore, it is nice to have power if needed for a landfall. As events transpired, we arrived at night in the Bay of islands, engineless in a gale. The morning was sweet though...

Bluewater cruising is all about timing. A game of musical chairs if you like, played out in slow motion on a vast scale. Essentially it is about not being where you shouldn't be rather than being where you should when you should, i.e. only sailing in the tropics when the sun is on the opposite side of the equator. Hence a delicious sojourn in New Zealand: A move to terra firma, the purchase of a car, cruising with a tent.

Then off again as the southern autumn prodded us northwards. The south-east trades often extend some distance to the south, and this was to be our good fortune, with a hassle-free crossing of the Tasman, a stretch of water with a nasty reputation. Our next stop after departing Cape Regina was Lord Howe island and then Middleton Reef, a vast temperate water atoll, maximum elevation 2 meters. A run ashore here involves going equipped as a dragged anchor while 'ashore' would have desperate consequences. These two locations underlined like no others the great privilege of being in control of one's means of transport. Sharks were in garrison strength; Curious to discover what they tasted like, a snapper head was attached to our biggest hook on the end of a piece of rope and dangled in front of the smallest on offer. Although small, he was in an ill mood as he was dealt with on the cockpit floor. His confederates dined with relish on what we didn't. It was a culinary exercise that was not repeated.

Central Brisbane was our next stop, a great luxury to cruising folk, who rarely have the opportunity to live in the middle of any large city. And then up the east coast of Australia propelled by a relentless trade wind that went on and on. Our last night at anchor in the Pacific before Cape York was a poignant event with a real sense of the best being behind us.

Maybe it was, but travel takes on many forms. We decided to take a shortened course for the journey home: via the Red Sea and the Med, rather than the original route around the southern tip of Africa and the eastern seaboard of the US. We feared our spacecraft would be no longer up to the challenge of a significantly higher number of miles. Possibly neither would we!

India was a delight, albeit the very civilised state of Kerala. It was a great attraction of being able to see India on one's own terms; if it became a bit too much one could retreat to one's own space and, dare I say it, own facilities... The Red Sea is no one's idea of smooth sailing. Large areas were no-go

zones on a practical level for various reasons, and other places lend shelter simply because no one knows you are there. Still, delights were to be had. Suakin shipped out its' last cargo of slaves only in 1956 and a personal caller of the faithful to prayer, rather than the ubiquitous loudspeaker, added to the Arabian nights' air of much of this part of the world.

Suez was pretty grim. The canal transit was a mechanism to separate the cruiser from their money and possessions in a pretty tawdry manner. While this is understandable and we were fair game, it was sad to see the levels some resorted to. We declined the services of the last pilot, for the final 400 yards out to sea. A clumsy attempt to ram us amidships resulted only in damage to the pilot launch and the annoyance of its' crew. Never had I feared engine failure more than for the next few miles out of Egyptian territorial waters.

It was then it was the Mediterranean, in at one end, and out at the other. Unless you have plenty of time, the place can be a challenge with its' fickle winds. We felt that the further west one travelled the more challenging it became as well as the less rewarding. We had front row seats to the infamous Mistral wind barreling out of the Rhone valley like a mad thing. We elected on another shortened course option, home via the French inland waterway system rather than via Gibraltar and the Bay of Biscay. This was a real gem and proved to be one of the highlights of the whole journey. Not only is it the very best way to see rural France, but the cities as well. We were quite late in the season by the time we negotiated the heart of Paris, but it was a great joy to have our floating flat in central Paris for the equivalent of £12 a night.

We arrived home on a chilly, bright, windy autumn day. People were glad to see us, and we were happy to see them, but it was rather a shock. We were surprised by how excited we were by even the most mundane activities, and how complicated life ashore was. It was a revelation to see how much we had merrily done without over the preceding three years. Perhaps we made for awkward company for a while as we found ourselves questioning so much, having gleefully lived the high life with so little.

What would I offer in terms of advice for anyone contemplating such an enterprise? Well, number one, to go with your heart and go for it. We only get one shot at life. It is an enterprise that favours the practical, since it is a cascade of problem-solving or, ideally pre-empting them arising in the first place. Time and again, I have witnessed the folly of couples sailing boats that are too large and too reliant on superfluous technology. What you don't have can never break down. You need so very little, and if you cannot step off the land for a while with all the accoutrements of contemporary lifestyles, then you must ask yourself if the cruising life is really for you. Keep it simple, stupid...