

‘I decided to just go alone’



Chris Ayres realised a childhood dream when he sailed from Britain to New Zealand, via Panama, in a 28ft yacht – bravely setting sail solo when crew let him down at the 11th hour



Sunrise in mid-Atlantic with *Sea Bear*, Chris Ayres's Vancouver 28 running before the trade winds

A particularly vicious squall was under way when the reality of my situation hit me. I was alone in the southern Pacific Ocean, 14 days out from the Galapagos Islands 1,000 miles in my wake and bound for the Marquesas, still 2,000 miles away. Far from any shipping lanes and far from any help; I had to manage on my own.

How had I come to be here? I was sailing my boat, *Sea Bear*, a Vancouver 28, single-handed across the Pacific.

On the point of retiring from work aged 66, it dawned on me that maybe I could revive an almost forgotten boyhood dream of a long ocean trip. I had thought that things like that were not in my reach, but here I was. I had the boat, the question was, was I up to it?

Gradually plans took shape and after a hectic time of preparation and planning I slipped away from Victoria Dock,

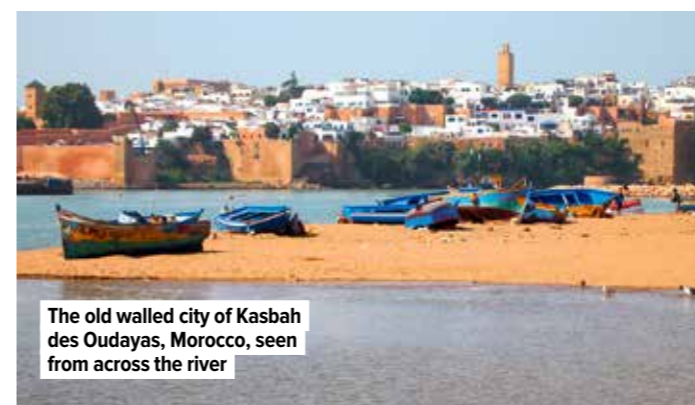


Sea Bear in Victoria Dock, Caernarfon ready to leave on a big adventure

Caernarfon to head out for the open sea.

It had not been my intention to go single-handed. I had arranged crew to go with me but with less than 24 hours before departure they dropped out. It left me in an awkward spot. I didn't want to miss the weather window or leave any later, it was already mid August and I wanted to be across Biscay before September was out. Unlikely to find another crew member at such short notice I decided to just go alone. It made

me a little nervous as I had never undertaken such a long passage solo before but I wasn't about to let a little setback get in the way of months of effort and planning. A passage down the Irish Sea took me to the Isles of Scilly where I stopped very briefly to catch up on sleep and



The old walled city of Kasbah des Oudayas, Morocco, seen from across the river

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then I set out across Biscay. I discovered that the water was really blue out there and I came to understand the term bluewater sailor. I did have a bit of a gale which was uncomfortable but I also saw a whale, which surfaced alongside.

I made landfall in Ribadeo, northern Spain after a successful crossing. I then hopped, mostly day sails, down the coast of Spain and Portugal, taking time off to visit a few sites. In Cadiz I met up with Merel, who crewed with me to Rabat, Morocco, a fantastic experience, then onwards to the Canaries. Unfortunately, although Merel was excellent company, she was badly affected by seasickness, so wisely decided not to cross the Atlantic with me. I visited several of the islands and decided to make my departure from the delightful island of La Gomera.

This seemed apt as it was from here that Columbus set out with his three ships on his voyage of discovery. I was approached by potential crew seeking an Atlantic crossing. After some deliberation they crewed for me to the Cape Verde Islands. We spent Christmas here and then set out to cross the Atlantic to Martinique. We did not have very good weather for this crossing; it was far from the sunny skies with fluffy white clouds and kindly trade winds I had been led to expect from guides and other reports. Strong winds and big seas were had.

Singlehanded again I was seduced by the pleasures of the Caribbean so I spent two seasons there. My first season I hopped northwards up the chain of the Windwards and Leewards as far as St Martin, returning south to spend the hurricane season in Trinidad.

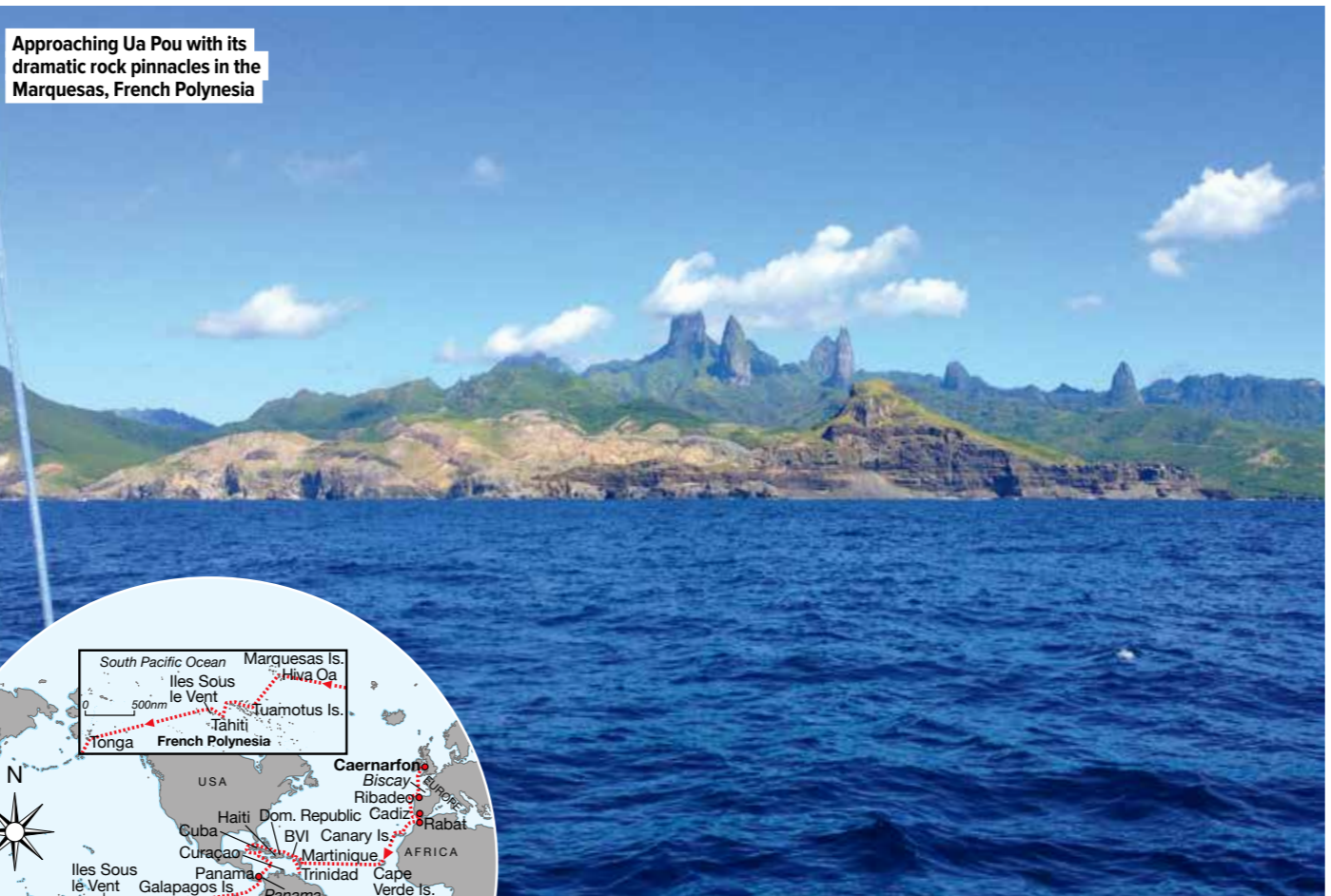
The following season I was sailing back up the chain but this time continuing on to the British Virgin Islands, and to the Dominican



Boat building the traditional way at Windward, Carriacou in the Caribbean



Fishermen at work in a small sailing boat from the island of Ile-a-Vache, Haiti



Approaching Ua Pou with its dramatic rock pinnacles in the Marquesas, French Polynesia



Republic, Haiti and Cuba. After visiting Santiago de Cuba I cruised the Gulf of Guacanayabo, the Gulf of Anna Maria and the Jardines de la Reina; a labyrinth of hundreds of uninhabited cays, reefs and shoals, there are just a few fishermen – it is an unspoilt wilderness.

It was a very intense experience – the silence was outstanding at times. After visiting the historic city of Trinidad and Cienfuegos I headed south again to the Cayman Islands and Jamaica. Other cruisers I had spoken to earlier in my cruise had shaken their heads when I mentioned my intention to visit Jamaica; too dangerous was the general opinion. I enjoyed my time there, visiting Montego

Bay, Ocho Rios and my favourite place, Port Antonio, nestled at the foot of the Blue Mountains. I took a bus across the mountains to visit Kingston and the Bob Marley museum, which was a bit of a pilgrimage for me.

With hurricane season approaching I chose to head for Curacao. Although I realised it would be a hard passage, I underestimated its difficulties and eventually I diverted to Panama, whose virtues had been extolled by an American

cruiser I had met. Anchoring in the bay of Portobello I realised that there was more to Panama than just the canal. I laid up the boat for the hurricane season and returned briefly to the UK. Returning to Panama later, I explored the Guna Yala islands, a semi-autonomous region towards the Colombian border. These islands are inhabited by the Kuna Indians who keep largely to their old ways and who are famous for their Molas – elaborate embroidered



Anchored at the delightful Chicame Cays in the Guna Yala island group, Panama



Schoolchildren put on a dancing display in Tonga

panels that traditionally form part of the women's dresses.

I passed through the Panama Canal and then set out across the Pacific. First stop was the fabulous Galapagos Islands, which fully lived up to my expectations and fulfilled a long-held wish. Then it was the long haul to the Marquesas, a 2,995-mile passage which took me 34 days. It was a long time to be alone.

I made landfall in Hiva Oa and later visited some of the other spectacular islands. The Tuamotus are a group of coral atolls, which I visited en route to Tahiti. Tahiti was paradise and I wanted to stay forever. However, it was on to the Leeward Islands comprising Huahine, Raiatea, Taha'a and Bora Bora.

I had intended to call into the Cook Islands but the weather was bad and I decided not to risk the reef entries so pressed on for Tonga. After a while here I headed for New Zealand. I had sailed 15,400 miles since leaving the UK – it had been quite an adventure.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 SELF RELIANCE

Out there on the ocean you can be far from help so it is important to be self-reliant. It may be an old-fashioned and controversial view these days, but I go to sea knowing of the risks and I'm prepared to accept them, rather like Blondie Hasler, Eric Hiscock and HW Tilman. Realistically you have to accept that there are some places so remote that there will be no hope of outside assistance. On a more mundane level, self-reliance comes in the form of being able to fix things. The better you know your boat and its systems the more able you will be to do this.

2 PREPARATION

That famous cruising couple, the Pardeys maintained that preparation was the most important part of cruising. I wholeheartedly agree. Preparation includes getting the boat ready; checking over the rig and all the systems; laying in the stores, spares and provisions you will need.

Plus, thinking of how you will deal with unexpected eventualities. And of course passage planning, which means studying charts, pilot books, guides and the accounts of other sailors.

3 SELF STEERING

Whether you are single-handed, shorthanded or even crewed, a reliable self-steering system is an essential for long passages. I know that boats regularly cross oceans with electronic autopilots and tiller pilots but this is not for me for two reasons: Firstly, they do fail and I encountered cruisers with problems with failed autopilots who had been forced to hand-steer for hundreds of miles, arriving at their destination tired and harassed.

Secondly they are generally power-hungry. Wind vane self-steering is the way to go; they are sturdy and reliable and usually fixable if they encounter a problem.

4 KEEP IT SIMPLE

It is a fact that things go wrong. Someone once said that cruising is fixing things in exotic locations and there is an element of truth in this. The more complicated a thing the more likely it is to go wrong, and the more gadgets you have, the more problems might occur. By keeping things simple you reduce the risk of gear letting you down. This is partly why my boat has no fridge, no power shower or electric-pumped water – there is less to go wrong. The other reason is that all your electric

and electronic systems use power. I hate running the engine – or even worse a generator – to keep my batteries topped up so I minimise my electric usage. With my batteries kept charged by a modest-sized solar panel, I was able to make long passages without running the engine to keep the batteries charged and to remain 'off grid' when in some idyllic anchorage.

5 PAPER CHARTS

Electronics can and do fail, so don't rely on them exclusively. Crossing the Pacific my Global Positioning System (GPS) failed with a burnt out screen. However, I did have GPS position from my Automatic Identification System (AIS) and also from two hand-held GPS systems as a back-up. I also had a sextant and the necessary tables to fix a position if electronics failed.

Besides systems failures there is always the possibility of lightning strikes, which are fortunately rare but do occur. When I was in the Marquesas a boat came in that had been struck by lightning, taking out all of her electronic systems – so no lights, water, navigation, communications, autopilot or anchor windlass.

I am a believer in paper charts both for planning, passage-making and navigation. A particular problem with vector charts is that when zoomed out, detail disappears. When I crossed the Pacific at least two yachts relying solely on electronic charts ended up on reefs. One skipper claimed he did not know of the existence of the Beveridge Reef. I am not a total Luddite, I do use electronic charting but always in conjunction with paper charts.

6 SELF PRESERVATION

Being single-handed means that there is no one to rescue you if you go overboard. Fit strong jackstays and wear a harness and safety lines where appropriate. I always had a harness and lifeline within easy reach and wore it when it was rough and always at night, even calm nights.

7 KEEP AN OPEN MIND

I visited many places, some of which others advised against. For instance, I nearly passed St Vincent because of its bad reputation but I am glad I visited; I found the people very welcoming. Similarly I enjoyed Jamaica and Haiti. I am not the most gregarious person, yet I didn't once struggle to communicate with islanders. It is said that travel broadens the mind but only if you journey with an open mind.