

Mindelo – Santa Cruz de Tenerife

April, 2023

In my endless pursuit of widening my horizons, I caught myself drifting far beyond the borders of our tiny, yet breathtakingly beautiful pond we call home - the Adriatic Sea. My thoughts wandered toward the open ocean, toward distant coastlines that had existed for years only on maps and in imagination.

The Internet... well, what more can be said? It's a marvellous invention. A bottomless ocean of opportunities, possibilities, and occasionally, spectacular mistakes. Sure, every now and then you innocently type in the wrong web address, swipe your credit card where you definitely shouldn't have, or click on a perfectly harmless-looking link that opens so many browser windows you won't get rid of them before lunch. And, every once in a while, the Internet decides to escort you into the darker corners of human curiosity. You know... those websites. The ones you absolutely, positively had no intention of visiting—especially not from your office computer in the middle of a Tuesday morning. Funny how these things happen. But jokes aside, the Internet is, above all else, a bridge. It quietly connects people who would never have met otherwise. It throws unexpected opportunities into your lap, introduces you to complete strangers who somehow become part of your story, and occasionally nudges you towards adventures you never knew you were looking for.

This story began with one of those nudges.

So, before I knew it, I had disappeared down the rabbit hole of websites with names like Crewseekers, Find a Crew, Ocean Crew... hashtag bluewater, hashtag no-mobile-signal, hashtag what-could-possibly-go-wrong. A few evenings later, as 2022 was quietly packing its bags and making room for the New Year, with a mug of mulled wine in one hand and the comforting smell of cinnamon in the air, I stumbled across the advert. Marcin was looking for crew to cross the Atlantic. Only... the "wrong" way. Now, ever since a certain Mr Christopher Columbus pointed his bow westward, reasonably sensible skippers—and the gloriously unreasonable bunch that usually sail with them—have all been chasing the trade winds from east to west. It's the comfortable way. The ocean does most of the heavy lifting while you try to convince yourself you're an explorer. Marcin, however, had a different idea. He wanted to sail the very same ocean, along almost the very same routes...only in the opposite direction. Against the trades. Against common sense.

Naturally, the next thing I clicked was "Apply Now." Some decisions in life deserve weeks of careful consideration. This wasn't one of them.



Islanders of UK had long passed down a simple rule: sail south until the butter melts, then turn west. Geographically, that point lies somewhere around the Cape Verde archipelago—perhaps a little farther north. Whether out of unfamiliarity with tradition or sheer defiance of it, Marcin gathers us on São Vicente, in Mindelo, and promptly leads us in the exact opposite direction from the one dictated by the melting point of butter northward. Some thousand nautical miles to windward. Never mind that the Islanders always said, *"Gentlemen sail downwind."*

By the middle of April 2023, two days before our scheduled rendezvous, I found myself riding a FlixBus to Milan Malpensa, then hitching a lift with TAP Air Portugal via Lisbon, before finally landing in a cosy little hostel in Mindelo, on the island of São Vicente.

The Internet worked its magic once again: a WhatsApp message popped up from a couple of my future crewmates, inviting me to join them for a hike to the summit of neighbouring Santo Antão.

Considering the long list of commitments I had planned for that day, which consisted of precisely none, I didn't spend much time thinking about it before replying, "Count me in."

Early the next morning we boarded the ferry, and just like that I met part of the crew I'd soon be sharing an ocean with: Clément from Hong Kong, who now calls London home, and Maija from Siberia, living in Brussels. It's funny how an Atlantic crossing can begin with people from three different continents standing in the same ferry queue. Half an hour later we stepped ashore on Santo Antão.

What followed was an entire day of hiking through a landscape so spectacular that it almost made me forget the real reason I'd flown halfway around the world. Almost.

Santo Antão, hiking day



Cape Verde is not especially green in April. The islands earned their name because the Portuguese first arrived during the rainy season, when the rains fall from September through December—day after day, in generous abundance. For those few months, the volcanic landscape is transformed, cloaked in every shade of green. Even so, I can still vividly recall the breathtaking scenery that unfolded along the road from the ferry terminal to the island's highest ridge. I have to come back here, I remember thinking. Around Christmas, one year.



Clement & Maija



A hitchhike back to the ferry terminal, bound for São Vicente.

Before the Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth century, the Cape Verde Islands were uninhabited. In 1456, Portuguese navigators claimed the archipelago and founded Ribeira Grande—today's Cidade Velha on the island of Santiago—the first permanent European settlement in this part of the tropics.

Over the centuries that followed, the islands became a vital hub in the Atlantic slave trade and an important waypoint on the sea routes linking Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The archipelago is divided into two island groups. To windward lie Santo Antão, São Vicente, Santa Luzia, São Nicolau, Sal, and Boa Vista. To leeward are Maio, Santiago, Fogo, and Brava. Even their names—Barlavento and Sotavento—speak the language of sailors.

Today, Cabo Verde is celebrated not only for its seafaring heritage but also for its music. The haunting strains of morna carried the voice of Cesária Évora far beyond these volcanic shores, introducing the world to the soul of the islands. The Portuguese, it seems, left more than harbours and churches behind.

And then there is Carnival. Nowhere is it embraced with greater joy than in Mindelo, where, for a few dazzling days each year, music and colour take possession of the streets.

By noon the following day, we were aboard our boat.

A Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 52. Nothing exotic, nothing special. Just the sort of production charter yacht you see every summer in the Adriatic, hired by two or three families with a paid skipper, or a group of friends looking for a carefree week at sea. She had seen better days, too. There was a familiar looseness about her - the gentle wear and tear of a boat that has carried many lives and many stories. Our skipper was Marcin, a Pole who lives in Germany. He had organised the passage and posted the advertisement that had brought us all together.

Then there was Richard, an Australian who also lives in Germany. Michael, an Irishman living in England. Neil, an Englishman who, rather surprisingly, still lives in England. There was Colin from Canada, another memorable character. He had once rowed across the Atlantic. Not a typo. He had actually crossed the Atlantic alone, in thirty-three days, powered by nothing but his own arms. Johann, from Germany, and Alexander, from the Netherlands, spent much of the voyage cheerfully reinforcing every stereotype the rest of us held about Germans and the Dutch, each convinced that his nation had perfected the art of doing things properly. Then there were Maija, Clement, and me. Ten souls aboard. Complete strangers. Well... almost: Clement, Maija, and I were old friends. Since yesterday.

Provisioning, watch schedules, safety briefing, standing orders... Marcin handled them all with considerably more competence than Captain Francesco Schettino managed aboard the *Costa Concordia*. For all the relaxed atmosphere on board, safety was taken very seriously:

- A lifejacket was mandatory in the cockpit whenever the weather hinted at a change or the barometer began to fall.
- From the first light of dusk until sunrise, the lifejacket came with a harness, clipped on at all times whenever you left the companionway.
- A storm jib was ready in a bow.
- The first-aid kit was unusually well stocked - even an epinephrine auto-injector was tucked inside, should anyone ever need one.
- An EPIRB, SART, Iridium satellite communicator for downloading the daily weather forecasts. Everything was aboard, checked, tested, and ready to work.
- But the most remarkable piece of equipment on the entire boat had nothing to do with electronics or emergency procedures:
 - o She was completely dry.
 - o Which meant that, as the sun slipped into the Atlantic each evening, there wasn't the slightest chance of watching it disappear over the horizon with a glass of wine in your hand—not even the cheapest bottle of Cabernet from the shelves at Lidl, Tesco or Carefour

Loaded to the gunwales, we slipped our lines from dock No. 6 in Mindelo. The first gusts of the trade winds caught us on the starboard beam, and the bow turned north. By the following day, we had settled into the easy rhythm of the open ocean. The long Atlantic swell dictated our pace, and we stopped resisting it. Our little crew—gathered from every corner of the globe, each of us carrying different lives, different histories, and probably very different opinions - came together almost effortlessly. For the next eleven days, without a GPS signal on our phones and without a speck of land on the horizon, we ran with the quiet precision of a Swiss watch. It may sound improbable, but not once during those long eleven days did anyone raise their voice. Perhaps we had simply come for the same reason.

Life at sea soon settles into its own quiet routine:

- Breakfast is at eight, when everyone is awake, though the crew on the morning watch are already well into their day.
- For a few hours afterwards, the cockpit becomes the heart of the boat. Coffee mugs are refilled, conversations drift from one subject to another, and no one seems in any particular hurry.
- If the orange disc of the sun is kind enough to show itself, noon is marked with a sextant. The first line of position - the noon latitude - is ours.
- By lunchtime, those who have stood the last night watch have usually disappeared below to catch up on sleep. The rest gather around the cockpit table before the boat grows quiet again, with only the watch on duty remaining above deck.
- Three or four hours after local noon, the sextant comes out once more. Almanac, sight reduction tables, corrections, calculations... and, eventually, a position. Carefully plotted on a paper chart with a sharp pencil, parallel rulers, and dividers. There is a quiet satisfaction in watching a tiny pencil mark tell you where, in all that ocean, you happen to be.
- Towards evening, almost with Swiss precision, a pod of dolphins arrives to escort us for ten or fifteen minutes before vanishing again into the blue.
- As twilight deepens, the sextant returns to the cockpit. The first stars and planets appear while the horizon is still clean and sharply defined. Three celestial bodies are enough. Their angles above the horizon. The exact UTC time of each sight. More tables. More corrections. More patient arithmetic. By nightfall, the ocean has yielded our position once again—this time through the stars.
- Then comes the night. Four-hour watches. Coffee or tea. Long conversations beneath a sky so full of stars that it hardly seems to belong to the same world we left behind. The strangers from the beginning of the voyage slowly become friends. For many of us, it will not be the last passage together. Some will meet again the following year. Others will simply remain in one another's lives, somewhere beyond the horizon.
- And then, quietly, another dawn rises in the east. Time to hand over the watch. Time to crawl back into the bunk.



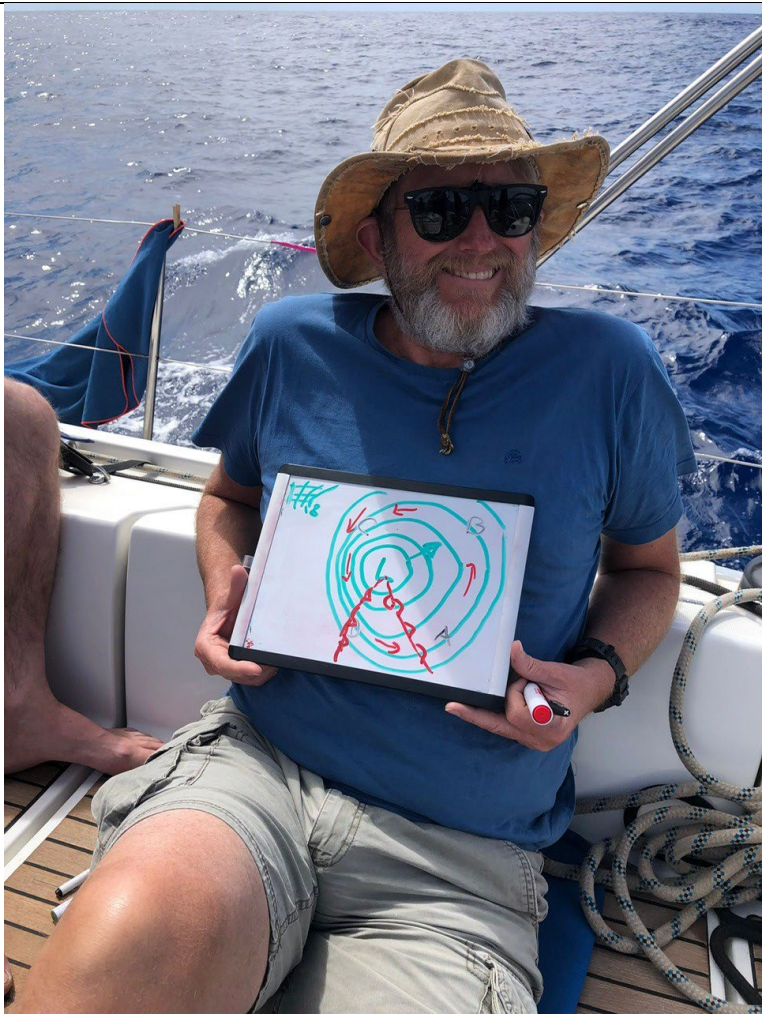
Finding the ship's position with a sextant in your hands is one of the quiet joys of an ocean passage. There is something undeniably beautiful about it, something that belongs as much to another age as it does to the sea itself.

In the company of silence, and with the modern world left far beyond the horizon, so much of what we consider essential quietly loses its importance. Before long, it becomes difficult to remember why it ever seemed indispensable at all.



The long days found their own ways of passing. There were the books we had brought with us, and those that quietly made the rounds among the crew. There were improvised lessons in subjects one ought to have mastered before venturing out onto the open ocean.

And then there was Richard's lecture on meteorology. It happened after breakfast on a bright, untroubled morning. No one had planned it. Richard simply began talking, and before long we were all listening. By profession, Richard was an engineer of something or other, but he also held a Commercial Pilot Licence—a qualification that demands a solid understanding of the weather. Before long, we found ourselves happily enrolled in his floating classroom.



Unlike the Adriatic outside the charter season, the Atlantic is ruled by long swells—low in frequency, generous in amplitude. If your crossing is spared the company of a deep low-pressure system, you can expect a remarkably gentle passage, even close-hauled. And so the days slipped by, one after another. Until the eleventh morning. Just after breakfast, our phones quietly found a GPS signal. Technology reached us before El Hierro—the southernmost of the Canary Islands—had even risen above the horizon. Ten devices began chiming almost in unison, filling with messages and emails that had been waiting for us on both sides of the Atlantic. And just like

that, we slipped back into our old lives. It had taken no effort at all to leave the modern world behind when we cast off our lines in Mindelo. It took even less to step back into it. That morning, hardly anyone spoke. Heads were bowed over glowing screens as fingers hurried across keyboards, answering messages, sending photographs, assuring those at home that we were well, and trying - never quite successfully - to put the ocean into words.



Cabo Verde Islands



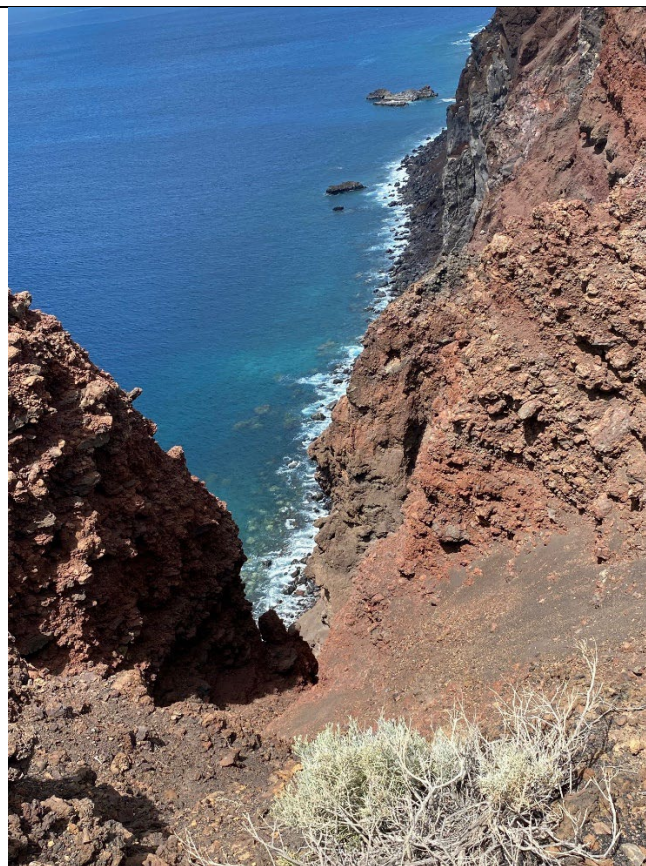


One morning, not long after breakfast, the wind simply died.
More than 3,800 metres of water lay beneath us.





Bluewater



El Hierro, the southernmost and westernmost of the Canary Islands.



I ovi su vulkanski



November 2025