



Cruising

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- Dangers of powered winches
- On the instep of Italy
- Careening into Guatemala



All about inspiration

One of the newly-identified core values for the CA is Inspiring. **Robin Baron** has been inspired by a number of cruising sailors he has met recently

Writing this after a succession of winter storms has battered the British Isles, it is hard to imagine that, soon after you read this, spring, fitting out and, above all, cruising will be upon us.

Work on the strategy for the Association continues. Our initial work last year identified seven core values. As one member wisely pointed out during one of our several consultation sessions with volunteers, seven is too many; no-one will remember them. We have now completed and agreed the reduction in the words describing those values (but, hopefully, not the values themselves) to four. These are as follows:

- Knowledgeable
- Trusted
- Supportive
- Inspiring

It is the last of these – Inspiring – that I want to focus on in this piece.

In January we held the annual Flag Officers' Lunch at CA House. This is the occasion when the Association thanks its volunteers for their contributions over the past year. It is the only occasion during the year when we all get together and was the usual jolly affair. It also features the presentations of our Challenge Awards. This year our

guests of honour were our Patron, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, and Honorary Member Mike Golding.

In 2025 Sir Robin cruised to Greenland with a crew. He told us how inadequate the charts of Greenland were and how the *Cruising Guide to Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Jan Mayen*, written by members Michael Henderson and Helen Gould, had been his best source of cruising information while in Greenland.

Jazz has been a full-time wheelchair user since the age of 19. Her voyage was a truly remarkable achievement

This is an excellent example of the Association being Knowledgeable and Trusted (see above) but, as I've said, my focus here is elsewhere. Sir Robin carried out his Greenland cruise at the age of 86, which I think is really Inspiring. He shows no sign of giving up cruising and would do it all again tomorrow. I think we can all draw inspiration from Sir Robin.

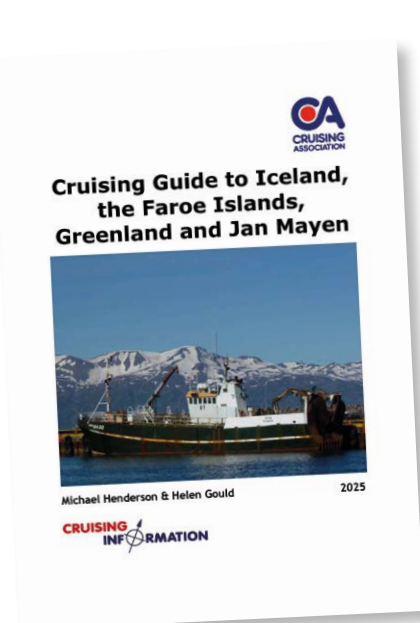
The Duchess of Kent Trophy was bequeathed to the Association by BH LePine Williams following the demise



of the Motor Boats Association. It had previously been awarded to Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay for his role in organising the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in 1940, so there's a very high bar for this award. In this same spirit, it is now presented to any sailor, not necessarily a CA member, who has achieved something exceptional in or around small boats.

This year the Duchess of Kent Trophy was presented to Jazz Turner for her outstanding and inspiring achievement in circumnavigating the British Isles solo. Not only did Jazz do this at the age of 26 but also while disabled. At the age of 18 she was diagnosed with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which in her case causes fainting and seizures. She has been a full-time wheelchair user since the age of 19. Doctors have told her that her condition is terminal, due to complications. Her four-week voyage around the British Isles raised more than £58,000 for Sailability, which helps people with disabilities access sailing. This is a truly remarkable achievement.

Jazz's story is one of dedication and positivity under the most trying of circumstances. She is an inspiration to us all. .



Sir Robin cruised in Greenland during 2025 and found the CA's cruising guide indispensable. Above, Sir Robin with Mike Golding at the Flag Officers' Lunch and right, Jazz Turner receives the Duchess of Kent Trophy



Dangers of powered winches and windlasses

A recent report highlighted the death of an experienced sailor who was dragged into a electric winch with a malfunctioning switch. **Justin Morton** looks at how to use these systems safely



A recent Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) report highlighted the sad death of a 74-year-old New Zealand man, who had been dragged into an electric cockpit winch while on passage from Chichester to Poole. Although he was with crew, they were unable to stop the winch, which had continued to run even though the on/off button had been released. The winch eventually stopped of its own accord, only to start again some time later as the RNLI crewmen attempted to release him. On investigation, the winch had no method of isolation other than the main battery isolator switch, in the forward cabin.

Experiences of winches and windlasses running on once on/off buttons are released appear to be common. Without too much effort, RATS found several

members who could report having experienced a rogue powered winch or windlass.

- While testing an anchor windlass in a marina, one member pressed the down button, and the windlass continued to pay out chain uncontrollably.
- Another member's windlass displayed both uncontrollable payout before the up button took over and, perhaps worse, uncontrolled retraction. Fortunately in both instances turning off breaker switches stopped proceedings in time to prevent any damage or injury.
- A third member, having previously had an issue with sporadic pulsing of the windlass, was disturbed while at dinner by the anchor spontaneously retrieving itself and setting them adrift.

■ Finally, the winch of a member cruising off Brittany continued to run as he was sheeting in the genoa. Repeated pressing of the button did nothing and to make matters worse, trying to remove the sheet from the winch led to a riding turn. Fortunately, the manufacturers had installed a "kill" switch in the cockpit for such occasions, but even so, it took several seconds of watching everything wind up tight before remembering the switch was there.

In neither the MAIB incident nor our own examples were the winches or windlasses themselves at fault. The MAIB found that the winch switch on the New Zealander's yacht had an intermittent fault and the winch was known occasionally to keep running.

Using your powered winches safely

1. Understand your system. Know how to stop your winches and windlasses in an emergency and test that you can cut power to a running winch/windlass to prove your knowledge of the system.

2. Timely intervention. Think about how long it will take you to cut the power if there is a rogue activation – and where you need to get to. If it's too far, add a kill switch or reconfigure the system to make shutting it down faster. Keep it as simple as possible, and protect the components from the elements.

3. Safe practice. Once you've experienced a rogue activation, it will naturally instil a healthy respect/fear in you. Instil the same necessary caution in the crew as part of your safety brief and develop a safe system of operation. This may be operating the anchor at distance with a wireless remote, or loading and checking that hands, clothing and tethers are clear before operating a winch. Also make it second nature for others onboard to think about the "kill" switch while a powered winch /windlass is in operation.

4. Power off when not required. Keep breakers / isolators turned off when not in use. Don't assume the power is off before conducting maintenance: test!

5. Positive presses. It's tempting to lightly tap the button first to see if it works. While doing so you may inadvertently press and release a number of times causing arcing, which will wear a relay over time and may actually weld the contacts closed, causing the issue you are trying to avoid.

6. Just let it run. However tempting, **don't go near a rogue windlass.** Your first and instinctive response should be to power it off from the breaker/kill switch.

7. Maintain consumables. Consider your switches, relays and solenoids as consumable items. Check your deck switches every season for water ingress (easy to do). Check/replace relays and switches at the first sign of any delays or running on when starting or stopping. Intermittent faults don't get better.

8. If you experience any fault in a powered system, address the root cause. Do not leave it to later. These systems are dangerous.



In our examples, all but one were caused by either faulty switches or a seized relay that powered the winch or windlass. The down-then-up fault was caused by a faulty wired remote that was known to be temperamental. Fortunately those onboard had an installation that allowed power to be cut quickly.

However much you pay for well-engineered winches and windlasses, the control systems they rely on are often less reliable. Deck switches come in a number of types, all needing to remain watertight while often in exposed areas. Relays are prone to arcing and solenoids can stick, and both types wear out. It is probably just a matter of time before all of us who have electric winches or windlasses experience them just running on once the on/off button is released.

This highlights a number of issues. Often our deck foot switches are close to the

windlass, and an uncontrolled speeding windlass is not a pleasant thing to be near, either with the chain heading down or with the anchor on its way up. Also, with windlasses, while it may be possible manually to release the capstan to allow the drum to freewheel, getting the winch handle into a speeding windlass, or to the release lever, is dangerous and may not work. Also, the momentum gained, particularly on a two-speed version, could damage the windlass if it stops abruptly, rip the bitter end of the anchor rode out of the boat, or fling the anchor free of the bow roller on the way up. It might be hoped that a rogue winch would trip under excessive load but it might not. If the winch is not stopped quickly, significant damage and expense could result. Even when injuries have been avoided, losing a sail or damaging running rigging could still put a vessel in danger.



RATS (the Regulatory & Technical Services Group) represents the CA in understanding and explaining how regulatory and technical issues affect cruising sailors. We represent their interests in dealings with government departments, offshore developers, statutory authorities and the marine industry. We also produce policy papers and technical questionnaires, write articles for *Cruising* and develop material for the CA website. RATS responds in detail to members' queries where it can. To contact RATS, email rats@theca.org.uk



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CREW: "I live in Rugby, which is about as far from the coast as you can be, so I can travel in any direction. I started sailing dinghies, then completed Day Skipper in 2016. I probably need to brush up on theory! I've crewed for a few skippers in the CA and learned a lot from them. I had a GibSea 76 for a while but sold it in 2023. I work for myself, so I can do midweek as well as weekends, but I have to fit in around my wife's shift patterns, so that she can look after our Labrador. However, once I've committed to someone, I'll be there come hell or high water."

Join the Crewing Service to find crew... or cruises

The CA's Crewing Service puts skippers in touch with crew and crew in touch with skippers, with regular crew meetings at CA House and online over winter. You can also find crew or a skipper by posting your details on our listings (the quotes here give a taste of what's on offer), or post on the Crewing Service Forum. Find out more on the **updated Crewing Service page** at www.theca.org.uk/crewing/welcome or contact Malcolm Davidson at crewing@theca.org.uk



SKIPPER: "I would love to get back to Brittany (north or south) this year, as I had planned to, before the sad and sudden loss of my wife who was a very enthusiastic and reliable crew member. I am thinking about heading off roughly mid-June via Portland / Dartmouth / Roscoff then west & south as far as I can get crew to accompany me. Return will be when I come back! The boat has accommodation for up to two couples plus myself or three individuals. It would also be nice to get a few local trips in the Solent area."



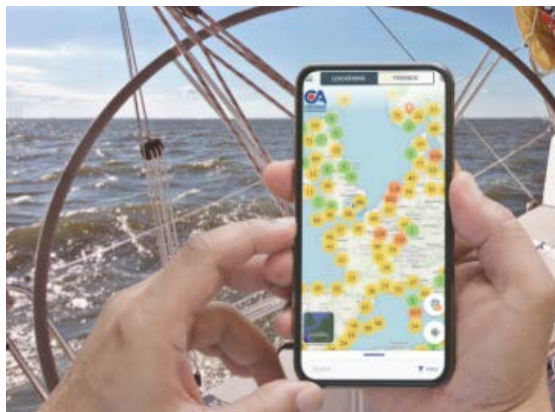
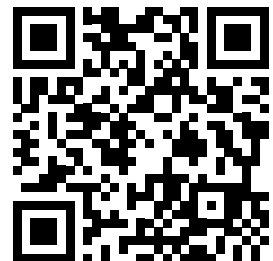
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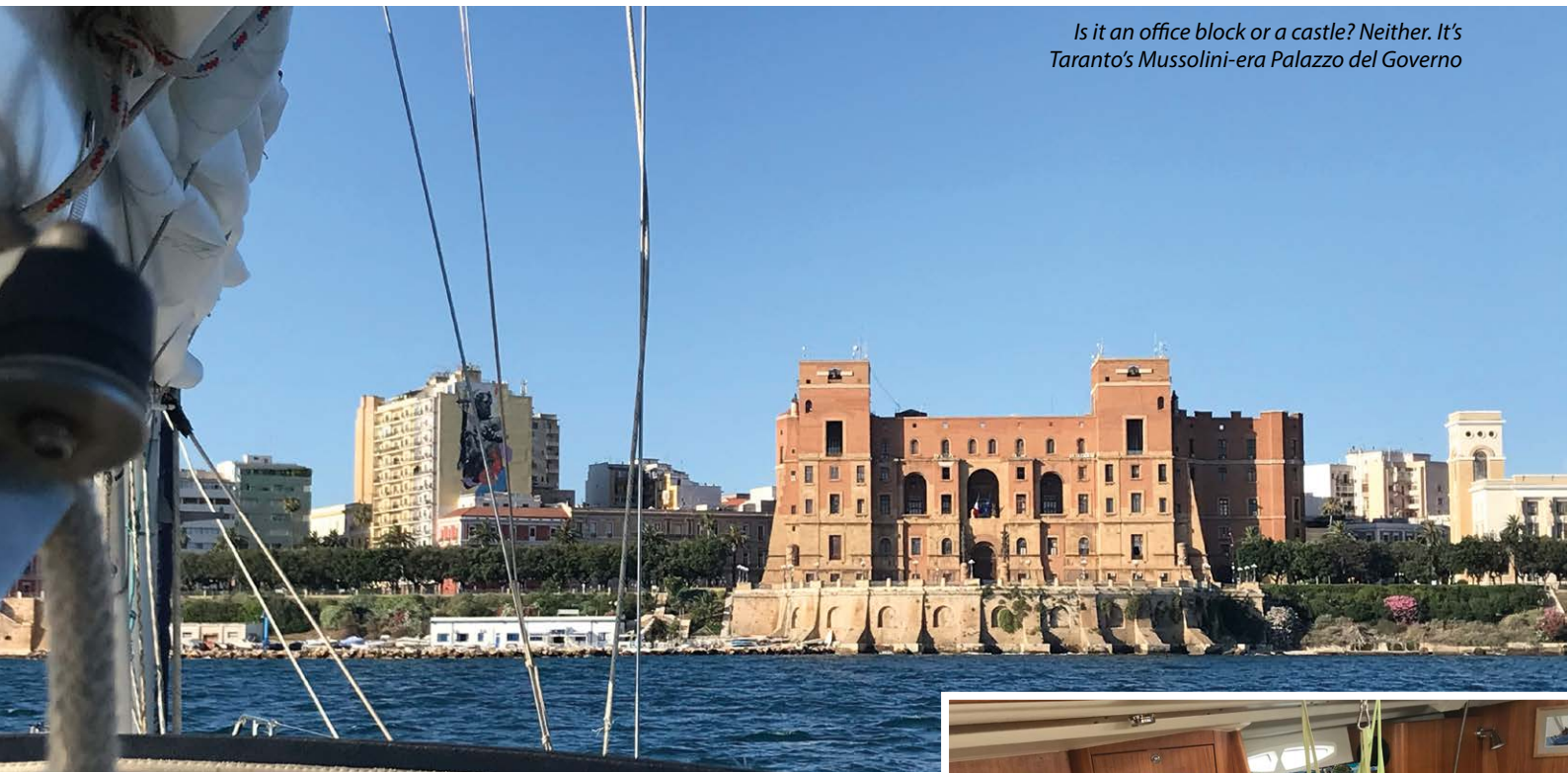
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Is it an office block or a castle? Neither. It's Taranto's Mussolini-era Palazzo del Governo



The instep of Italy

Cath Bruzzone and her partner David sailed their X-Yacht *Minx* between the heel and toe of Italy in 2024. Her log of the voyage won the Dolphin Cup, one of a number of awards made in the CA's annual log competition



11 June 2024 Large cylindrical metal wine vats are visible onshore, the area's DOC region. We're anchored off **Cirò** and starting at dawn tomorrow to cross the Golfo di Taranto to Gallipoli (not that Gallipoli), 45nm. If we could manage 5kt it would be nine hours but more like 4.5kt, so ten. Will do an update if 4G is available. Will be interesting to find out if/when we run out of signal.

12 June 2024 Set off promptly at 0630 (dawn actually around 5am) after quick swim. Just had breakfast. Main up but wind feeble: 6kt and a bit of swell, not quite broadside but makes it bumpy and the boom occasionally bangs. Pity... long way to go! A few fishing boats when we started but now nothing on the horizon in all directions. That's not unusual in these parts at this time of year. Cloudy, but keeps it cooler as it could be baking later. Can still see Calabrian coast, though mountains clouded, but not yet Puglia.

Some of the abbreviations are left as in the original text, which was a WhatsApp blog written for friends and family.

Still got 4G, eight miles off. (4G just went at 0827, 9nm offshore. This may not send until we're near Puglia.)

[Later] 4G back! We're 9.27nm away from Gallipoli (2 hrs?) and can see the low lying land and a lighthouse in the cloudy haze. Uneventful (so far). Engine on again but had a good bit of sailing, a reach with 10-13kt wind. Quite a bit of swell but I managed to finish my book. We each had a little nap. Completely alone for most of crossing but now surrounded by small trawlers. Phone signal back too, so soon I'll call a marina (or two) and hope for a place for the night (or three).

No room at all inns in the old port but finally found a place in a small harbour, **Porto Gaio**, 1.5km north of Gallipoli. Lovely people. Manager is from Termini Imerese in Sicily and I was wearing my t-shirt, a gift from Artemar, the Termini marina we left *Minx* in last summer. So lots of goodwill. Crossing plus messing around took 11.25 hrs so we headed off for pizza, then collapse.

14 June 2024 Last night was our second

sleep-deprived night of the trip. The first was a bay near Roccella Ionica, surround-sound heavy beat music, a shouting DJ and strobe lights from a club we hadn't identified on the beach. It went on until 0415! No music this time, unless you count the squeaking and squealing of the squashed fenders and the odd unidentified banging and crashing and splashing of the waves against the wobbly floating pontoon. We knew it was coming and sure enough, at 11pm, the wind moved from the south to the north, rising steadily until it was howling round with gusts of around 30kt (forecast 21kt).

Buying and eating pucce (singular, puccia) – stuffed focaccia bread





Castle of Taranto



Our friendly little port is entirely open to the north and we were in prime position.

Feeling a bit woozy after the scary night, we did the long trek into **Gallipoli** and round the winding streets but recommended restaurant closed because of broken gas pipe. Bought *pucce* instead – focaccia bread stuffed with yummy fillings. Then suddenly police, men in dark glasses and ambulances everywhere. What's going on? Hah! Mrs Erdogan on a shopping spree, leaving her husband at the G7, hosted by Meloni down the road.

We're heading north to Taranto tomorrow. We've got a good price for *a terra* in Crotona over the summer and the winds are favourable to get us round the gulf. So Bari and Leuca will have to wait... again.

15 June 2024 Having a lovely sail to Taranto, the best yet. Steady wind of 8-12kt giving us a close reach and now a bit broader. Sea not too bad and speed well over 6kt for several hours. Saw a small pod of dolphins, the first this trip. We think the previous rather distant big fish was a swordfish. They come straight up out of the water. *Puccia* eaten for lunch, tuna, delicious. I'm in my (smart, bought in the New Year sale in Ambleside) fleece. If you sit in the sun,



it's scorching but in the shade there's a welcome cool breeze.

Beaches visible now (west coast of Puglia) absolutely covered in serried ranks of parasols and deckchairs. First serious weekend of school summer holidays. Puglian land low-lying though we can just make out the mountains of Calabria way in the distance on our left. (Sorry, on our port.)

We were kept awake by the squeaking, squashed fenders, and crashing waves against the wobbly floating pontoon

Always fascinating to arrive by sea right into the centre of a big city. Our first sighting of **Taranto** is an odd building: office block or castle? Discovered it's neither. It's called Palazzo del Governo, a Mussolini special. It's a giant very fascist building now used for the Polizia and the Provincia di Taranto. Large entrance in the seafront not used, in favour of huge entrance to gloomy courtyard at back. (Grim building.)

Impressed with Taranto. Loads going on: commercial shipping, oil terminal (ships plug into a pipeline out in the bay), cruise terminal, Navy, fishing, tourism (but not too much). Aragonese castle renovated beautifully by the Navy. Spectacular exhibits in the archaeological museum. The athletes on the vase are measuring the height for the high jump.



Marina Molo Sant'Eligio in Taranto – friendly and cheap, for Italy)

The *centro storico* is on an island and there are two "seas", the Mar Grande that you come into from the gulf, a complex route with buoys, dykes, lights etc, and the Mar Piccolo linked by two canals. The Mar Piccolo has the fishing fleet and mussel and fish farms. The Mar Grande has the commercial and cruise port and our marina.

The *centro storico* is *trascurato* –neglected (our neighbouring boat's description) but is due to get some much-needed renovations. The little lanes and tall crumbling buildings were a bit menacing but are still inhabited and they are the canvas for some v original street artists. There was a poster advertising flats for sale for €1.00!! And you can still get these incredible prices... ➤



Cornetto is a croissant. Caffè (espresso), is usually €1.20 in southern Italy. (The other sign says €2 to "correctly use" the loo)

Crab found by divers
in the harbour canal



In the castle was a photographic exhibition by marine biology deep-sea divers who had surveyed the very deep canal between Mar Piccolo and Mar Grande. They'd found the most extraordinary creatures, really rare but flourishing in the undisturbed waters. Pictured is a crab!

18 June 2024 On our way again to Policoro, newish marina in Basilicata. Basilicata has a tiny strip of coast on the Mar Tirreno (Tyrrhenian Sea) and we even stopped in the only port, Maratea, in 2022. It has a little more coast here in the Mar Ionico, or Jonico (Ionian Sea) but only this marina. Beautiful day, calm sea, wind 7-9kt, close hauled but going in the right direction at around 5kt. ETA 5pm.

19 June 2024 We've arrived safely. The marina is small but posh with holiday flats round it. They're obviously trying to develop some tourism in this remote area. The marina looks like it's thriving but some of the flats have a lot of weeds round them. We had wondered why in almost every port there was a *progetto* to develop a brand-new marina but it had been *bloccato*, usually for years. Then in **Policoro**, we met Paola, an Italian single-hander sailing round the gulf on her way to Trieste. She was told that the criminals don't want tourism to flourish on the Calabrian coast because they control the fishing fleets which might be displaced, and they also do all their dirty dealings and smuggling: drugs, arms and people trafficking in the area. We have seen several yachts with shredded sails moored in the corner of ports, apparently stolen in Greece for smuggling refugees.

20 June 2024 We're off again. Baking hot! 42°C forecast today. Policoro was on a flat plain and not a breath of air reached it. The boat was like an oven all

day and during the night – it usually stays cool. Laundry done, dried instantly. This morning, the mountains in the distance are in a thick haze and the sea was glassy until a 5-6kt breeze got up from the east a few minutes ago. Breathing again

Apart from the heat, the marina was probably the best yet. Very clean *bagni* with functioning flush, good toilet paper and good shower head and aircon!! Tempted to spend the day in the loo but sat under the shade in the bar right opposite the boat and watched the swifts swoop all round, feeding their young. There were even petals in the water instead of oil slicks, plastic bags etc.

Very clean bagni with good shower and aircon!! Tempted to spend the day in the loo

We're going to anchor tonight off the beach near **Rossano** and it looks like it'll be calm, for once. The coast and sea is swathed in mist, quite eerie. Just had a dolphin visit! They're all round us. One baby came along under the bow.

21 June 2024 Anchoring was a bit of a challenge last night as the contours on the e-chart read 6m deep when our depth gauge read 67! We had some trouble with the gauge earlier in the trip and the chart has been super-accurate, so we weren't sure which to trust. On the first try, the anchor disappeared into the depths and after 30m of chain, we don't think it touched the bottom. So second attempt we went into what read 1.5m on the chart but 6.7m on the gauge and this time we could see the sandy bottom so the gauge seemed correct. And it held.

David adjusts the
main



We were running low on fuel so needed to top up from one of our cans. It was obviously essential not to let a drop fall in the water, so after getting the can out of the locker – everything else out first, aaargh – we used the clever and effective system shown us by the young *ormeggiatore* (marinero) in Salerno last year. The blue pipe went from the can to the funnel and then David blew into the can. Hey presto! The fuel started gurgling into the funnel without needing to tip the can. Not a drop was spilled. Finally we added a 10ml capful of anti-diesel-bug liquid.

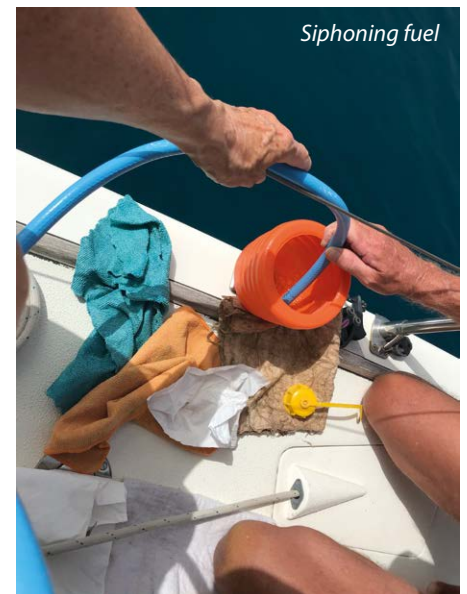
Just as we were about to set off today, around midday, the Guardia di Finanza turned up in one of their silver torpedo-like RIBs with four young guys in black uniform and shades. I'd decided that I'd not speak Italian in any future encounters with The Law as I think it can annoy them.

"Where are you from?"

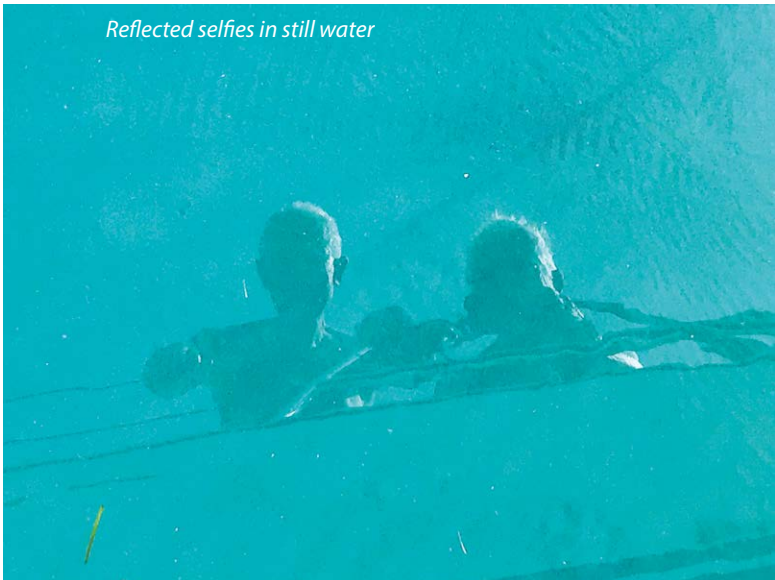
"England."

"Do you speak English?"

Siphoning fuel



Reflected selfies in still water



End of this voyage at Crotona



"Er, yes, we're English, from England."

"You're too close to the beach."

"We're just leaving."

"You must leave now!"

So they circled round while we pulled up the anchor and left.

It's true that we mustn't anchor within 200m of the beach but because of the problem with gauging the depth, we'd gone in a bit closer. (The beach was deserted, with a herd of cows with cowbells.) Anyway luckily they didn't ask for our documents like last time... when I found to my dismay that I'd lost my logbook with my RYA Day Skipper certificate and the details of all my sailing trips since the '80s. The RYA won't re-issue the certificate as they don't keep records that far back and there's no trace now of my tutor at Chiswick School evening class or the practical course centre in La Gomera, the Canaries. D still has all his certificates. Phew!

22 June 2024 We reached our bay for



the night yesterday around 1930. The wind (naturally!) blew up to 17kt as we were anchoring but the anchor dug in and the swell was minimal. We woke up this morning to a glassy sea and sea mist and one of the best spots ever. No other boats, an almost deserted beach, pine tree smells and tweeting birds (though we were a regulation 300m away from the coast). Several swims in warm water – said to be 25°C – before we left at 1100 in a light breeze. We took a selfie over the bow of our reflections.

Elio communicates exclusively using brief WhatsApp audio messages. Great service

On our last sail. So far a very pleasant beat in 5-6kt, round. Punta Alice and south to Crotona. The Windy app shows some nasty purple balloons blowing out of the Golfo di Catanzaro and Messina. We're curious to understand how these blasts form, after experiencing a whopper along the coast off **Roccella Ionica**.

Safely back in Club Velico, Crotona on Sat eve. A few days to sort ourselves out – enjoy the delights of the buzzy town – then to Porto Vecchio Service *cantiere* (boatyard) in the commercial harbour, to be hauled out for the summer.

25 June 2025 Early start, alarm at 7am. Bar outside marina for coffee and croissants. (They open at 5am.) Fuel dock first, so that the tanks are full and free of air and moisture to avoid diesel bug. A tricky manoeuvre to avoid a shallow patch and fishing lines. Then chugged on round to Porto Nuovo, so called because it's relatively new, hosts the main authorities like the Guardia Costiera and

even has the occasional cruise ship visit. There was a Romanian Coast Guard ship moored on the quay when we arrived.

Informed the Capitaneria of the boat name and then called Guardia Costiera on Ch19 for permission to enter and a little interrogation: what flag? how many on board? what nationality? last port? where headed? All ok.

Elio, at the controls of his baby crane, was there to meet us with his two helpers. We were the fourth boat they'd dealt with that morning, leaving for their summer cruises, and it was just after 9am! It's a tiny yard in the corner of a large, more or less empty port, so the boats are jammed in. We were slotted skilfully into a narrow space, chocked and immediately given a ladder, water and electricity. Elio communicates exclusively using brief WhatsApp audio messages. Great service.

With *Minx* tucked in and cosy, just time to pack our bags and head for the station and our looong overland trip home – one car, six trains, one coach, one taxi and four metro/tubes... but that's another story.

Cath Bruzzone and David Hopwood started sailing dinghies in their youth. Cath crewed for her dad in a Snipe and David crewed *Coypus* in the Scouts. They raced various dinghies, then after chartering 'big boats' for holidays, they bought *Minx* in December 2018 and sailed from Southampton down and round the Med. Retired now, Cath is co-owner of a children's book publisher (www.bsmall.co.uk) and David is an architect.





Careening into the Rio Dulce

Jerry Norton & Sophie Newman heard about the Shangri-La of hurricane holes, the Rio Dulce in Guatemala. Its main disadvantage is the bar at the entrance with just 1.2m depth; *Khamsin*, their Beneteau Oceanis, draws 2.4m. But there is a way in... if you can contact Mr Hector

It's early 2024, we are in the north-west Caribbean. We have been in the Caribbean for three years now, completing a clockwise circumnavigation. There's one question at this time of year that all cruisers here ask. Do I stay in the Caribbean for the hurricane season and, if so, where? We had already spent two hurricane seasons here, one in Panama and the other in Grenada.

The decision is not helped by insurance companies changing their terms and conditions; at one time they would proscribe a latitude-and-longitude-defined no-sail zone: keep out of that and you were covered. Now it's named storm exclusion: you can go where you like, but if the storm is named you don't have cover. The only safe thing to do, if you're committed to staying in the Caribbean, is to go somewhere where the occurrence of hurricanes is extremely rare.

We didn't fancy sailing back down south, not least because the journey back north the following season wouldn't be much fun. The western Caribbean shore is a long lee passage.

But we had heard whispers of a freshwater El Dorado, a Shangri-la, called the Rio Dulce, in Guatemala. The more one asked about it the more it assumed an almost mythical status. Beautiful scenery, vast lakes, astounding river gorges, the best food, everything cheap, friendly people, plenty of marinas, good

repair yards, expert engineers, sail makers, and riggers. It all sounded too good to be true.

We also heard that once there, it's hold over you would make it difficult to leave. There were boats that had been there for 25 years. There were liveaboards who, apart from visa renewal trips, had never left. Some owners had died of old age on their boats. Others had gradually cannibalised their craft to eke out their lifestyle, making their stay permanent by default. It sounded intriguing and alluring, but how did we get there?

We heard some boats stayed for 25 years, and their owners died of old age on board

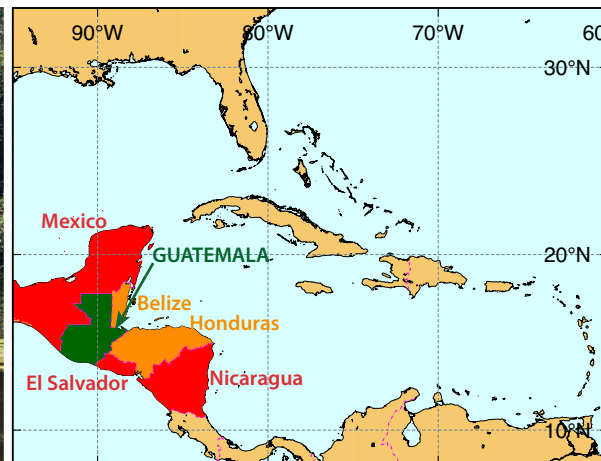
The Rio Dulce is a large river in Guatemala's short Caribbean coastline sandwiched between Belize to the north and Honduras to the east. And, yes of course, there's a catch. The river has a shallow entrance, at a place called Livingston. There is a sandbar, caused by the mass water flow down the river. It is marked as 1.2 metres depth on Navionics, and there's not much tide to help you. A quick look at the timetables just confirms the issue: even when the moon is helping us the most, we might get 2.2 metres water depth, and we draw 2.4m. Does that mean larger boats don't go? Is it just for catamarans?

Searching the web, we see references to

a careening service. I thought that was something that only happened in the days of Nelson, when they tilted wooden ships on their sides to repair the hull after weevil attack. It turns out the service is provided by a Mr Hector, at the mouth of the river. One quick WhatsApp and he would be there early June at 0600 to take us through, and he didn't seem that interested in our keel depth.

Wind forward four months, and there we are, motoring to the mouth, where there is a clear water buoy, and Mr Hector awaits. We anchor overnight at a stunning sheltered peninsula east of the river, where gradually a flotilla of at least ten boats forms. We cross a busy commercial shipping lane, going to Guatemala's only Caribbean port.

There is a lot of flotsam and jetsam coming from the river, including some large tree trunks. Mr Hector is there though, in a fairly old, battered, fishing-style motorboat and there's a second boat, with a woman in charge, whom we take to be Mrs Hector. At the stern of her boat is Hector junior, who can't be more than seven or eight years old but throws a long line to our bow better than I will ever do. Mr Hector comes alongside, takes a spare halyard from us, and connects his line. He is on our starboard side but pointing 45 degrees off. He shouts at me in broken English, engine on, no throttle, steer straight behind Mrs Hector. Suddenly, we are off, being pulled by Mrs Hector at maybe 3-4 knots



Left, heading up the Rio Dulce. Below, Castillo de San Felipe de Lara further upriver

towards the mouth of the river.

Everything is going fine when suddenly we slow down, the keel starts to bite into the sand. Mr Hector sees the line go taut and as Mrs Hector's boat slows too, it's his signal to rev up his boat. We begin to tip, 5°, 10°, 15°, and speed up as the keel flattens, Mrs Hector surges forward which this time is a signal for him to ease off. 15°, 10°, 5° on our display and we are upright again. First ridge completed. A minute or two later the same thing happens again, we slow, Mr Hector pulls and over we go, 5°, 10°, 15°, 20°, we get free of the sand, and he then releases again. This cycle is repeated four or five times until suddenly we seem to be through. The depth alarm is screaming the whole way, negative one, negative two and even three, not sure what's going on. I am bemused by heeling when there is no wind or sail.

Suddenly, Mr Hector is alongside us. He shouts to untie the lines and another son on the back of his boat holds out his hand in which we place \$60, and then he is off. We motor another few minutes until we're off Livingston where we must anchor to get the boat and us checked

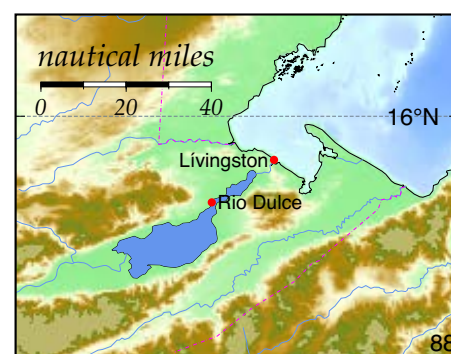
in. Even though it's early in the morning a strong Margarita goes down too fast.

Behind us the rest of the fleet doesn't need careening, most of the boats are catamarans or shallower monohulls. One exception is a US-flagged Nordhaven with a deep draft; the skipper has revved it up really hard to plough through the sand at speed. He is worried that if he gets stuck there won't be anything big enough in Livingston to pull him off.

The depth alarm is screaming the whole way, negative numbers, what's going on?

As I try to relax and assess what has happened, two nagging doubts intrude. What has it done to my rigging? Much later, riggers tell me it bends the spreaders and puts extra strain on the stays. It's true that the tension in the stays did change and we had to get it rechecked and adjusted

My other concern is how the hell are we going to get out of here at the end of the hurricane season? And didn't I tell you? You can't cross at night; it's a prime



fishing site as the fresh waters from the river meet the salty Caribbean. The tide table doesn't show any decent tides at anytime in the next 12 months.

But our reward today is going to be one of the most fabulous journeys you could possibly imagine, up a magnificent Amazon-like gorge for two or three hours, where, apparently, scenes from the first King Kong movie were shot, to the town of Rio Dulce.

But it occurred to me maybe that's why some people never leave. Once you have got in you cannot get out. Were we to become one of those boats never to return, gradually selling parts of our yacht until only an empty hull is left? Well, that's another story.



Jerry & Sophie bought *Khamsin*, a Beneteau Oceanis 51.1, during Covid. They took her to the Caribbean, but found curfews and pandemic bureaucracy. So they embarked on a tour of the western Caribbean and Central America and liked it so much so they did it twice, taking in, among others, Columbia, Panama, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, Jamaica and Cuba. They are now in Trinidad, in sight of Venezuela, the US Southern Command and subject to GPS jamming.



Right, from top: site of the first fire; alternator diode and blackened ceiling; and the two empty powder extinguishers with their powder everywhere. The batteries are underneath where they are lying

Fire on board

In July 2025 **Bruce Carter**, one of the CA's South West Section team, suffered a fire on board his Sadler 29 *Elektra*. Below, RATS comments on lessons we all can learn from Bruce's experience

We were on passage from the Isles of Scilly to our home port of Gillan Harbour, on the Helford River. At 1920 I had written in my log the wind was SW force 3-4, slight sea, we were 3.25nm west of our waypoint off Lizard Point and we had logged 42nm. We were motorsailing to cover as much ground as possible before dark, as I was worried about not seeing pot markers in the dark on the east side of the Lizard Peninsular.

At about 1930 the chart plotter went blank. I leaned forward to see what had happened to it, only to see smoke rising from the cabin. Vicki was in the cabin but hadn't noticed. I quickly went to investigate, I stopped the engine and I opened the engine box and could see burning wires, I shut the box and grabbed the fire stick, which I had bought over the winter – I had read the instructions but couldn't remember

them. Now somehow I couldn't read the instructions and I needed to put the fire out! So, I grabbed the 1kg powder extinguisher in the cabin, pulled the safety clip, opened the engine box and pressed the lever, almost instantly the fire was out. I leaned on the chart table, and found I was trembling.

I noted in my log about discovering a fire, and then called Falmouth Coastguard on Ch16 to report an electrical fire which I had put out. The duty officer asked me if I wanted assistance. I was thinking this through as we talked: we didn't know if we had a working engine, we were still logging 4.5-5kt under sail, but would we have any lights when we needed them later?

It was then I noticed more smoke, and told the officer I was investigating. Pulling items out of the quarterberth which we use for stowage, I could see more fire, and



picked up the extinguisher again. This fire was halfway down the quarterberth and up against the ceiling on the engine side.

RATS' comments on the fire on board *Elektra*

An analysis of the actions a skipper has taken when confronted with a fire on board is easy with hindsight. None of us know how we would react until we are faced with the same situation, but Bruce reacted sensibly and calmly and we can all learn from it. He has already noted his own lessons (opposite page).

Bruce says that when he first saw smoke he stopped the engine and opened the engine box. He shut it again immediately but it's important to remember that if the engine had been on fire **opening the box would admit more oxygen** and potentially make the fire worse. But, **shutting off the engine** was certainly the right thing to do.

He reports that he saw burning wires but does not say if he switched off the batteries. This is the first thing to be done if wires are seen to be burning – **cut off the electricity supply** if you can safely do so. This is another reason for carrying a hand-held VHF (which Bruce did) – some communication is still possible even with no ship's electrical supply.

A very important lesson to learn is to ensure that you and your crew **know how to operate all types of extinguisher** on board. Bruce had forgotten how to use the Fire Stick and a moment of crisis is not the time for revision. Powder extinguishers are quite hazardous in a confined space as

Bruce found out. A good alternative on board a small craft is a **water mist extinguisher**.

These are completely non-toxic, cause minimal damage and are effective on Class A, Class F, and electrical fires. Also, it's a good idea to fit an automatic, clean-agent **extinguisher in the engine bay** such as one from the Fireblitz range. These use an ozone-friendly clean gas, again causing minimal damage.

It seems that Bruce and Vicki sensibly wear **lifejackets** when on deck and have them close by when below. Their experience demonstrates why this is so important.

It's not clear why Bruce did not carry a liferaft on board, but it was fortunate that the dinghy was inflated and on davits. If the dinghy had been deflated and stowed, the situation might have been much worse. Certainly no-one can blame Bruce for deciding to **abandon ship**. If he believed the fire was out of control and near a gas bottle, the risk was severe.

Bruce has written more about his experience in his article *Fire aboard* posted on his web log, sailingelektra.com.



Rick Ballard



Left, Elektra empty and adrift when the Lizard Lifeboat returned after taking Bruce and Vicki ashore. Photo: RNLI. Above, happier times in August – anchored off St Michael's Mount

I gave it a blast of powder, and again it was out! But it started burning again, so another blast and it was out... and that was the extinguisher empty. Vicki by this time had put on a jumper and a lifejacket and was sitting in the cockpit. I always wear a lifejacket while sailing, having found out that in an emergency you don't have time to put one on.

I said to Vicki, "There is a 2kg extinguisher in the cockpit locker." She pulled it out for me, and as I inspected again, I realised the fire was alight again. I can't remember how many times I tried to put out the fire, but it was a lot!

All this time I could hear on Ch16 the CG officer tasking the Lizard lifeboat, and knew help was coming. Finally, the 2kg extinguisher was empty. The air in the cabin was full of powder, and through this I could still see an orange glow. The CG officer asked if we had a liferaft. I said no, but we had a dinghy, and he suggested we abandon. The centre of the fire was only 18-24 inches from the gas locker and I didn't think I had put the fire out... I didn't need telling twice!

In the cabin, I was coughing from the powder and needed to get out, so I grabbed the handheld VHF, took it out in the cockpit and switched it on.

My next tasks were to lower the dinghy from its davits into the water, climb in to release the tackle, and hold the dinghy as still as possible for Vicki to get in. By this time the tide must have pushed us into the unsettled water of the Lizard Point. One second I was standing up, arms outstretched, hanging on to the rail, the next second I was sitting down with

the rail at eye level. Somehow we both got aboard without getting wet. I was expecting an explosion, so I untied the dinghy, and let Elektra go!

About five minutes after we abandoned, the Lizard lifeboat contacted me on Ch16 to confirm we were in the dinghy and how many were aboard. Only two or three minutes after their call Vicki saw the lifeboat. We were in our 2.7m inflatable RIB, lying low on the floor, Vicki on the starboard side with her head at the stern and me the opposite with my head at the bow. It was very snug!

When the lifeboat arrived, there was a lot of slop and it was difficult for them to get close. A rebound wave dumped on to Vicki, but they managed to get the dinghy alongside and tied on. I stood up and climbed aboard the lifeboat and one of the crew got in the dinghy to help Vicki from below as I and another crew helped her from above.

Both now aboard, we were taken into the lifeboat cabin and given medical checks. By this time, knowing Vicki was safe, I was worried about Elektra, but I was told by one of the crew that we were the important ones! So I put Elektra out of my mind and went with the flow. The lifeboat crew dropped us off at their station at about 2130 so that the station crew could look after us, and then went back to Elektra. We are hugely grateful to the Falmouth Coastguard Duty Officer and RNLI Lizard station crew for their help that evening.

After more checks at the RNLI station an ambulance crew were called to check us out just in case. We had

abandoned Elektra with just the clothes we were wearing. We both were wearing lifejackets, and I had my wallet, mobile in my pockets and I had the handheld VHF; what we didn't have were keys to get in at home. The ambulance crew offered to run us home and when we got there, I broke a window to get in.

Aftermath

Once the electrics were renewed, I found the chart plotter had recorded her passage right into the Helford River. Elektra was found without a fire, it seemed I had done enough to put out the fire but didn't know it. As she was floating without lights, she was considered a hazard to shipping, so she was taken under tow to Helford River and placed on a mooring.

You can read the full details of the aftermath of the fire in the blog at sailingelektra.com. The lessons drawn from the experience so far are:

- Call the Coastguard at the first sign of trouble.
- Have plenty of fire extinguishers and ensure you and your crew know how to use them.
- If using powder extinguishers, consider having dust masks handy to reduce breathing the powder.
- Have a grab bag – with the right contents, including a house door key, and remember to take it with you.
- Check that electronics fitters are also electricians.
- Generously and consistently support the RNLI.



The cinema-style poster celebrating Sodebo's achievement, from sodebo-ultim3.sodebo.com

Yes, it's sailing...



... but not as we know it. **Cathy Brown** considers the record-busting achievement of foiling yacht *Sodebo*, and asks what relevance the achievement has to cruising boating

When CA Patron Sir Robin Knox-Johnston set off in *Suhaili* in the Sunday Times Golden Globe race in 1968, it was widely feared that the objective of sailing non-stop round the world was unachievable.

Sir Robin was the only finisher in the race, completing the challenge not only non-stop but also single-handed, in 312 days. Joshua Slocum, believed to be the first yachtsman to circumnavigate the planet, had taken more than three years when he closed the circle (with a few stops) with *Spray* in 1898.

On January 25 this year French sailor Thomas Coville took the Jules Verne Trophy, completing the fastest ever non-stop round the world voyage in the foiling Ultim 3 trimaran *Sodebo*. He and six crew brought the record down to 40 days, 10 hours and 45 minutes.

They had been on course to smash the 40-day barrier, but were forced to slow down in the final stages with 40-50 knot winds in Storm Ingrid kicking up a potentially boat-breaking sea state.

They had sailed 28,315 miles at a jaw-dropping average speed of 27.17 knots – sailing, but not as we know it!

Even when Dame Ellen MacArthur set her record of just under 72 days for a solo circumnavigation in 2005 in the trimaran *B&Q/Castorama*, with an average speed of 15.9 knots, many amateur sailors (myself included) questioned what relevance such exploits had to our own enjoyment of the water.

Yes, we could admire the skill, determination, endurance and sheer

guts needed – and the technical skills involved in designing and building a racing thoroughbred strong enough to withstand the relentless pounding of the extraordinary feat. But most of us had little interest in attempting to follow in her inspiring wake.

The same is even truer of *Sodebo*'s latest adventure. I'm in awe of the team who must have suffered mightily in the course of their remarkable achievement – imagine trying to grab off-watch sleep in that beast of a boat screaming along at more than 30 knots (they reached Australia's Cape Leeuwin, halfway round, in just 17 days and one hour, having averaged 32.1 knots from the start).

They had sailed 28,315 miles at a jaw-dropping average speed of 27.17 knots

Think how difficult it must have been to cook and eat (fortunately sponsor Sodebo is a food company, renowned for long-life sandwiches). And how much concentration was needed to keep the flying tri safely pointing the right way – not to mention the split-second decisions about sail-plan, navigation, collision avoidance, and all the other demands that must be faced in any offshore adventure, no matter what the speed or distance.

Is such a record-breaking performance really relevant to "ordinary" cruising sailors? The answer, of course, is yes. Just

as all the technical progress made in Formula One motor racing eventually filters down to the cars we use every day, so too do the lessons learned in extreme sailing, which eventually benefit all yachtsmen.

The one-design monohulls developed for the Volvo Ocean race went so fast that the water flying around the cockpit drowned all the electronics – and today's super-reliable bonded-glass fronted instruments were the result. Similarly, the three-layer system and really waterproof clothing developed to face those extreme conditions have been gleefully embraced by leisure sailors.

High-tech sails are now the norm for many cruising folk, who not long ago would not have looked beyond Dacron. They even set cruising chutes on furling gear developed for racing.

The obvious question is whether foils too will migrate from racing to cruising. It's tempting to think not – a foiler can surely never be relaxing to sail. On the other hand, the prospect of crossing oceans in a sailing vessel in days rather than weeks, has an undeniable attraction.

Cathy, a former editor of *Cruising*, is enjoying cruising with her husband Richard on their motor boat, *Attitude*. In her four sailing predecessors they raced and cruised from Spain to Sweden and sailed around the UK and Ireland. 