Gibraltar

IN A HISTORIC FIRST, NORDHAVN LEADS 18 BOATS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

By Peter A. Janssen, September 2004

It was four in the morning, and I had just come on watch. Bang, a huge wave slammed into the boat. Pow, another. Our boat, *Atlantic Escort*, a Nordhavn 57, was pitching up and down like a rocking horse on steroids. Another bang and then a doubleheader—two consecutive waves swept over the top of the boat. The 100,000-pound boat fought her way forward, but BANG, SLAM, BANG, the hits just kept coming. The wind, gusting to 43 knots, was right on our nose, and the seas, as one captain described them later, were "vicious." Jim Leishman, the captain of our boat and the leader of this 18-boat fleet, had given up trying to sleep and was wedged into the settee behind the helm station. "We're getting clobbered," he said.

On the VHF, the captain of one of the other boats in our fleet radioed *Autumn Wind*, a Nordhavn 62 whose autopilot had broken, to ask who was on watch. "Everybody!" came back the immediate and forceful reply.

This was the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally, a 3,800-mile voyage from Ft. Lauderdale to Gibraltar, with stops in Bermuda and the Azores. I had climbed aboard in the Azores for the final seven-day, 1,100-mile leg to Gibraltar. For most of our trip, the weather was beautiful; at one point it was so calm that we launched our RIB to carry beer, DVDs and a tin of pepper to other boats. But then, in the last night, it went to hell in a handbasket. And it wasn't pretty.

In all the pounding, our speed over the ground had dropped to 3.5 knots. I nudged our throttle forward; that was a mistake—more pounding. A glance at our radar gave me a start; we were in a sea of red dots. Earlier we had turned on our spotlight so we could serve as a guide to the other boats. This worked too well. Now, a lot of boats were around us in the one-quarter-mile ring, gathered together, it seemed, out of a sense of collective security. Meanwhile, large radar targets, freighters and commercial traffic, were appearing on the outer rings, all converging on the Strait.

It was an enormous relief when the sun came up, a glorious orange/yellow ball slowly rising out of the ocean ahead of us, and the conditions settled down a bit as we entered the Strait, certainly one of the most history-laden spots on the planet. ❑