

Leg 3: The Azores to Gibraltar

The H

By Jim Leishman

A VICTORY LAP — After motoring through about 3,800 occasionally treacherous nautical miles, participants in the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally arrived ceremoniously in Gibraltar.

On May 16, a fleet of 18 trawler yachts set out on a record-breaking cruise: an Atlantic crossing. The Nordhavn Atlantic Rally — the ultimate boat owner's rendezvous cruise — would take these trawler crews on the buddy-boating adventure of a lifetime. In the third and final part of our series on this incredible odyssey, rally organizer Jim Leishman of Pacific Asian Enterprises in Dana Point, California shares his Leg 3 cruise experiences aboard the Nordhavn trawler Atlantic Escort.

ome Stretch



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After 11 days at sea, the lush, green landscape of Faial, one of the Azores Islands, was a welcome sight. At almost 1,900 miles, the leg between Bermuda and the Azores was the longest passage of our Atlantic crossing. It was a great relief to arrive safely — all 18 participants of our Nordhavn Atlantic Rally were tied securely to the new floating docks in Horta.



The modern marina was overflowing with sailing yachts of every description, mostly bound for Europe, as were we. The brightly painted old world architecture was a clear indicator that we had left familiar North America long behind and our European adventure truly had begun.

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The Portuguese-controlled Azores Island group consists of nine rugged and volcanic islands laid out from northwest to southeast. At about 39 degrees north latitude, the climate is temperate and maritime. The mountain peaks (some more than 8,000 feet

tall) often are shrouded in rain-bearing clouds.

The islands are known for their fine cheeses and wine; thus, thriving dairy and grape industries abound. In contrast to Bermuda, the Azores Islands offer excellent value to American travelers, with reasonable costs for dockage and provisioning.

ISLAND FEVER

Despite a lengthy work list among our boats following the long journey to the Azores, our escort teams and participants found time to explore Faial by taking scuba trips and numerous tours of Horta and the island's interior. We also took tours

to the neighboring island of Pico by taking a ferry across the 14-mile channel and exploring the island by bus.

The usual shoreside festivities were enjoyed, including a wonderful expedition of Azorean folksingers and dancers, brightly dressed in their traditional attire. I anticipated this would be a corny affair, but afterward we all felt it was a highlight of our stay.

BACK TO BUSINESS

Fueling was arranged and the larger boats were bunkered first by a tanker truck, which rolled onto the fixed pier, and using long hoses, was able to reach the boats moored on

their floating fingers.

Boats capable of taking more than 1,500 gallons were able to buy at duty-free rates (about \$1.80 per gallon); however, all of our vessels 50 feet or less were unable to take the minimum amount and were charged an additional \$1.00 per gallon.

We plotted numerous schemes to take on fuel aboard *Atlantic Escort* and then transfer it to the smaller boats, but the truck and fueling process both were under constant police surveillance, squelching our plans to circumvent the tax.

As the dockside fueling neared completion, we noticed black debris within sight gauges and filter bowls

crossings.

In keeping with an Azores tradition, the crew of *Atlantic Escort* left a colorful mural — complete with the names of all 18 participating yachts — along the seawall commemorating the rally's stay in Horta.

WEATHERING QUESTIONS

As our departure date of June 19 approached, my focus turned again to the weather.

We had anticipated fair weather along the Bermuda to Azores leg thanks to the prevalent high pressure that generally dominates the region. The “Azores high,” as it's commonly known, formed later than anticipat-

challenging from a weather standpoint. The high pressure that normally gives stability to the central North Atlantic usually extends east of the Azores, but gives way to lower pressure well before the coast of Spain. Lows that develop far to the north can push their way down quickly along the Bay of Biscay and southward to the Mediterranean, making summer gales common.

Additionally, the narrow entrance to the Mediterranean can be difficult if strong easterly winds are present against the inflow of surface water, making for a steep and treacherous sea.

STRETCH YOUR SEA LEGS

taminate was and how it might affect our filter systems.

Our final conclusion was that it was volcanic dust — prevalent everywhere on the island — that must have blown into the shoreside storage tanks. It proved to be heavier than the fuel and fell out of suspension into the water separators, never making it to the filter element. We determined it would not be a problem — a conclusion I tentatively had reached.

ATLANTIC RALLY WAS HERE

The quays and docks in Horta are covered with the artwork of thousands of yacht crews stopping in for rest and provisions on their long Atlantic



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HIGH SEAS — *Gray Pearl* cuts through choppy surf. Trawlers experienced fair weather and relatively calm seas on the leg between the Azores and Gibraltar, despite a less optimistic forecast from the outset, which predicted force 10 conditions at the entrance to the English Channel about the time they would arrive. The weather held until the final night of the journey.

The weather looked favorable along our route, but a very large, east-moving low was developing less than 1,000 miles to the north, with force 10 conditions predicted at the entrance to the English Channel about the time our fleet would arrive in Gibraltar. Fortunately, by now, the Azores high was well developed, extending all the way to Spain, and we hoped it would keep that storm from turning to the south.

FULL-STEAM AHEAD

Some of our larger, Division 1 vessels, eager to see more of the island chain, requested departure a couple of days before Division 2 to make a run for the most populated and easternmost island of Sao Miguel.

The plan was presented to the fleet and considerable controversy among the Division 2 boats followed. I didn't like the idea and worried about the potential for a problem to develop, but I did not want to forbid it and risk creating hard feelings with any Division 1 crewmembers.

Rather than cast a cloud over the rally with an order that I would not enforce, I decided to go along with it. With only 1,100 miles to go, my goal was to get everyone to Gibraltar safely and happy as one fleet. We'd just have to deal with whatever issues

came up as a result of the Sao Miguel expedition.

GETTING UNDER WAY

With a revised communication schedule, we helped our Division 1 fleet get under way on Thursday, June 17, at 4 p.m. We would depart Horta on Saturday, June 19, at noon and pass the harbor entrance at Sao Miguel the following day. Division 1 then would depart Sao Miguel 24 hours later, catching up with us in the Straits of Gibraltar on Saturday morning, June 26.

The southwesterly swell and mod-

erate breeze continued to dominate the area, and we left port on schedule, deciding to turn slightly to the north or east and pass downwind of the island of Pico, hoping for a smooth ride while in the island's lee. The day was spent enjoying beautiful views of Pico from the smooth water, catching occasional glimpses of the island's 7,000-foot peak as the clouds would permit.

Clearing the lee of the island to the east we were pleased to find a diminishing sea on our starboard quarter and enjoyed a pleasant night under way. By noon the following day, we had the harbor of Ponta Delgado in sight and were raised on VHF by the Division 1 fleet. We soon were greeted by a number of the fleet's tenders, filled with waving crewmembers who photographed us as we passed.

We proceeded on, experiencing comfortable conditions and easy, relaxed watches. The routine of our morning and evening roll calls was well established after weeks of cruising and we all began to discuss the great success the rally had enjoyed, and that the conclusion was so close at hand.

By midweek, our very conservative weather forecaster Walt Hack predicted fair weather with a light west and southwest wind and sea all the way to Gibraltar, and the mood among the crews was exuberant. It appeared we would enjoy ideal conditions as we approached the coast of Spain and the Straits of Gibraltar.



But by our final evening, we began to notice a wind shift to the east, and by midnight we were registering 30 knots on the nose and the sea began to get rough — a short, steep sea that made for a very uncomfortable ride and required us to reduce power and speed.

Wind speed increased to 40 knots, and with an incoming tide, the sea became even rougher, reducing visibility and disrupting radars, which created returns from the wave tops and made it harder to spot other vessels on our screens. Our Division 1 boats caught us before daylight and with the rising sun, I was amazed to see how small the seas actually were that were making for such a miserable ride.

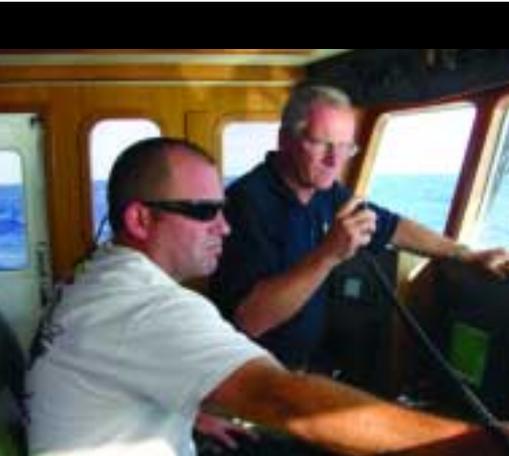
The outgoing tide that was forcing these wind-whipped waves nearly vertical was expected to change around 9 a.m., and as we passed the historic Tarifa lighthouse and entered the narrowest part of the Straits, conditions dramatically improved. By mid-morning, the sea had gone flat.

WE MADE IT

Soon, the unmistakable Rock of Gibraltar came into view. The fleet, whose crewmembers had motored approximately 3,800 nautical miles, organized into a tight formation. The resulting photo opportunity provided the perfect conclusion to this historic voyage of motorboats and amateur crews crossing the North Atlantic. 🍷



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CAN'T MISS IT — The Nordhavn Atlantic Rally trawlers were greeted by the famous Rock of Gibraltar. The port city, as seen from the deck of Atlantic Escort, was a sight to behold. Above, Justin Zumwalt (left) and Jim Leishman worked hard during the trip, but all the crewmembers managed to relax a little and take in some scenery, as Justin did with Kevin Ware (left).

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