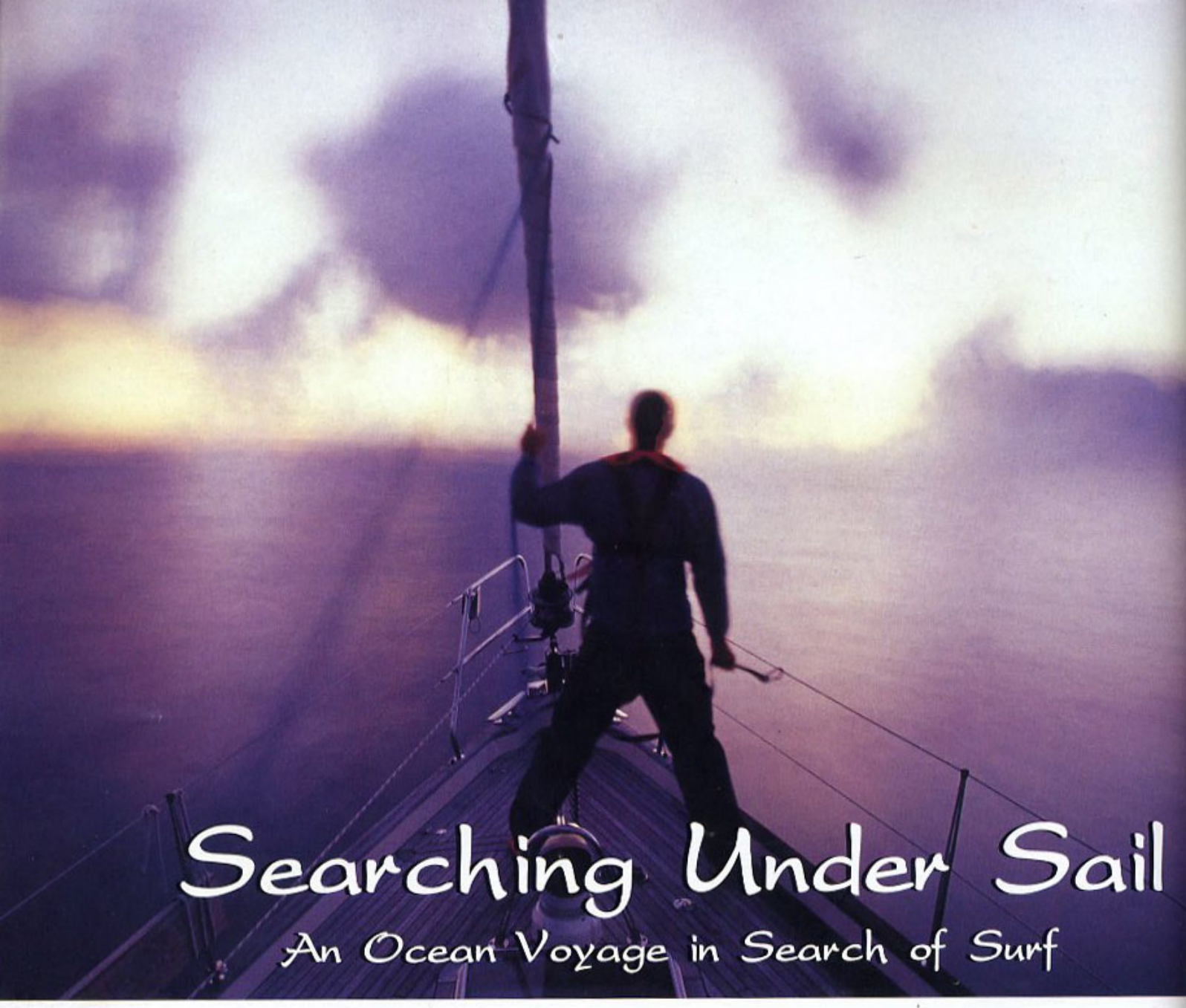


# Searching Under Sail

## An Ocean Voyage in Search of Surf

Words and Photos
By Tor Johnson

A powerful Atlantic gale was raging on the Portuguese coast, and we were pinned aboard our sailboat *Heron* in the southern harbour of Sines. Wild, breaking seas exploded onto, and right over the top, of the jetty. *Heron*, docked just on the land side, was bathed in whitewater every few minutes when set waves broke over the top. Unfortunately the jetty was so short that it barely sheltered us, and each wave, after pummelling the jetty, would then wrap around the end of the tetrapods, right into the harbour. The surge was so heavy that the boat jerked against the dock lines like a mad dog on a chain, and my crew, Yoshi and I could barely stand up in the cabin below.

Unable, and definitely unwilling, to start our Atlantic crossing in this weather, we were prisoners in the boat. Surfing was out of the question – incessant gales had been turning the waves into an onshore mess for weeks – and we were going stir crazy. I finally decided to go outside, just to get off the boat. I suited up in heavy-weather gear, aimed a careful jump between surges, and landed on the dock safely. Then I set out for a walk, or rather a lean against the wind, on the jetty. On the exposed top of the breakwall, the raging sea outside was a truly impressive sight. I peered over a rock and watched the ocean heave furiously against the concrete with a lump in my throat, feeling small and very glad I wasn't out there.

As I started back, I noticed that one particular spot seemed to be getting the brunt of the waves. Thick, double-overhead shorepound waves focused against the steep wall of tetrapods, blasting right over the top and across into the marina. Through the blowing mist, I saw a lone figure, bent against the wind, walking straight to that very spot.

'This should be fun,' I thought with a grin.

Then, 'Who is that idiot? He's gonna get himself killed!'.

Concern for the guy wrestled with a twisted desire to see

him get bowled head over heels.

'Shit, I might have to rescue him,' I thought, suddenly nervous. Just then a wave wedged right in front of the guy, heaved itself into a twisted, foamy, double-thick lip, then threw itself onto the jetty as if to shake it loose. He just stood in the path of the white water, seemingly oblivious, and disappeared as the foam engulfed him.

'What's wrong with these Portuguese?' I thought, breaking into a run toward the scene. The spray cleared, and there he was, somehow still standing in nearly the same place.

As I got closer, I realised it was my crew, Yoshi.

Yoshi is a Japanese American buddy of mine with whom I've survived ocean crossings, big wave sessions, and even the occasional dangerous nightclub. Yoshi admitted over hot whiskey later on that he too had gotten a bit stir crazy on the boat and gone out for a bit of thrill seeking.

"No big deal," was how he described it. It was a week or two before he admitted that he hadn't really counted on that wave being quite so big, and another week before he admitted he'd actually been scared shitless.

## THE GENESIS

This whole trip came about when my father, a veteran sailor who has wrung more salt out of his socks than I've ever seen, started talking about sailing his 48' Swedish-built sailboat, currently in England, to the Caribbean.

"I'd really like to sail in Cuba, but that's a long trip. I don't have the time to sail all the way across the Atlantic right now…", he said.

"Hey, I'll sail it across!" I impulsively volunteered, visions of exotic surf in Madeira, the Canaries, and the Cabo Verde Islands reeling in my brain.

Offshore sailing is a bit like riding big surf – you take your life in your hands every time you go out. There's one big difference though: you don't get to paddle in when you get tired, cold, and hungry. With sailing you have to live with the ocean in all its moods, no matter what the conditions. When night falls and the last surfer has left the water for a good dinner and a solid bed, the you are still out there, clinging to a pitching deck, peering at the clouds flying by the moon, worrying about a million things that might go wrong. You keep thinking of the thin skin of fibreglass separating you from thousands of miles of unforgiving ocean. As captain, your life and those of the crew might actually depend on a decision you make in some cold and tired, seasick moment far out at sea.

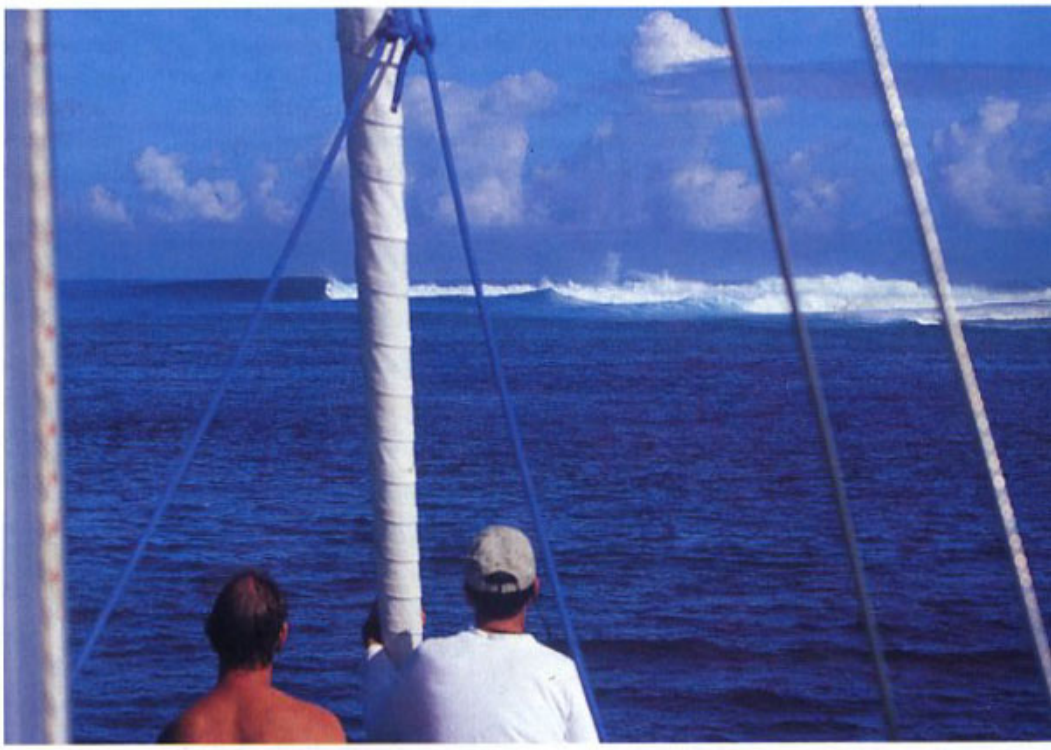
Although I had sailed across the Atlantic and the Pacific several times, and I was in no way new to sailing, this would be my first ocean crossing as captain. It would be a huge responsibility for me. My first job was to round up a crew. Of course, they'd have to be surfers.

## HERON'S CREW

Yoshi (the "thrillseeker"), my roommate in Hawaii, and longtime surfing buddy, was the obvious first choice. Yoshi always dreamt of crossing an ocean by sail, but he was absolutely terrified of being run over a big ship. This was mainly because he'd recently read the tragic true story by a woman who had lost her whole family when their yacht was run down by a Korean ship in a storm off New Zealand. The crew of the ship that ran them down had turned back, peered down at the family clinging to the wreckage, then just left them there to die. The woman eventually washed ashore, the only survivor. Yoshi was so scared by the story that he kept a flawless watch. I knew I could sleep well with Yoshi on deck and as it happened, Yoshi was first to sight nearly every ship we encountered.

Opposite -
A good way to go...

Below -
A good place to find...



I still needed two more crew, but it was surprisingly difficult to find them. Surfers constantly tell me that they've "always wanted" to make a trip like this one, but when given the chance, they change their tune to: "Maybe someday I will..."

I asked everyone I could think of, but none were able to just drop everything and leave for an indefinite length of time. That is, I asked everyone I thought I could trust with my life, and get along with in the confined space of a narrow cabin for months, which wasn't really that many people.

Finally, another one of my Japanese friends agreed to go. I met Taku many years back while sailing in Japan. A great cook, fisherman, competent mechanic, and generally a good guy, Taku was excellent crew. The only negative thing you could say about Taku is that he is a goofyfoot.

Taku wanted to bring a friend, Yasu Kujirai along. In

Japan, Yasu is a 'lifesaver'. He competes in lifesaving competitions, the paddling, running, swimming and beach games so popular in Australia, which have caught on in Japan. Despite his occupation, Yasu has never felt at ease in the ocean. On a recent surf trip, Yasu told Taku that he wanted to become "real waterman". Yasu explained that in Japan, lifesavers don't actually go in the water when conditions get challenging. When the beaches are closed due to big swell from a typhoon, lifesavers will actually *wait on the beach* for surfers to bring a victim in. This of course gets them very little respect from surfers. As a veteran surfer, Taku told Yasu that if he really wanted to become a true watermen, he should learn to sail. As the great Hawaiian waterman Duke Kahanamoku said, the true surfer must swim, paddle, and practise all ocean sports in order to learn all he can about the sea. So it was really for Yasu's own sake that Taku suggested he go with us. "What better way to become a waterman?" Taku said. Yasu immediately agreed to go, although he had no idea what he was getting into.

By the time the entire crew finally came together, Yoshi and I had managed to escape the dangerous harbour at Sines between gales, and had sailed the boat down to Lagos, further south on Portugal's Atlantic coast. This was to be our jumping-off point out into the Atlantic, for the four or five-day shakedown sail across to Madeira. By this time it was late December, late in one of the stormiest winters any of the local surfers could remember, and unfortunately we were far enough north to be in the path of the huge low pressure systems that had been pelting the coast all winter. We waited for our chance to make a dash across to Madeira.

**Below** - The pleasures are the days that sparkle and the treasures you find when you get there.

**Right** - Getting there isn't always that easy, or comfortable, or warm, or dry, or safe, or quick, etc.etc. etc.

**Top Right** - Point to point navigation.

During one vain attempt to catch a few waves in the cold Portuguese water, we ran into Flavio and Carlos from the Escola de Surf at São Torpes. As usual, when the locals heard that we live in Hawaii, they eagerly began asking questions:

"Johnnie Boy Gomes is Portuguese, no?"

"Yeah, sure, there are lots of Portuguese in Hawaii."

I stopped myself from telling any of the 'Portagee' jokes so common in Hawaii.

João the bodyboarder turned to me with a deep, piercing, serious Latino look, "So," he said, "What about Femme Nu?"

Femme Nu is a famous strip club in Honolulu. I hadn't realised it was famous in Sines.

Carlos took us to a spot called Portinho do Canal, where we struggled with a gutless right point wave called Barques, which Carlos assured us was really an incredible wave. For us, the best part of the session was the restaurant on the cliff overlooking the line-up. We feasted on a Paella-like seafood dish washed down with local *vino verde*, then stumbled, surfed out and contented, into Carlos's Mitsubishi Pajero for the off-road ride home. I asked Carlos why Portugal is statistically the most dangerous country in Europe to drive in. Carlos said defensively, "We have *good* drivers. It is dangerous because we have *bad roads*, that is why." He then proceeded to blaze back to town at alarming speeds on the rough dirt track, cruelly jostling the paella and wine in our protesting bellies.

## AT SEA

Knowing I'd be responsible for the boat and the lives of everyone in it, I was fairly nervous. A salty old sailor named Ed, who had been around the world several times, told us his horror story of how the wind had died while he was crossing from Europe to the Caribbean. He spent *fifty seven* days at sea, about *three times* what he'd planned for. The food ran out, the crew was ready to mutiny, and they barely made it to land.

Determined that this would never happen to us, we loaded the boat with enough supplies for several months. We beat a new Silk Road with caravans of shopping carts to and from the supermarket. We waited for a weather window, catching a few surfs when it wasn't blown to shreds, biding our time and fixing everything that needed it. We were ready to leave. Eventually, we saw what appeared to be the gap in the storms, so we set out for Madeira on a solid high pressure system.

We had surfed small waves at Europe's westernmost point, Cabo São Vicente and now we yelled goodbye as it slid past the rail. But as soon as we left the shelter of the point, the wind began coming on strong. Squalls threw the boat hard on her side and turned the water white around us. Apparently stormy Portugal wasn't letting us go easily. Since this was the first ocean crossing for everyone except me, the boys

miserably accepted the rough conditions, thinking 'I guess this must be sailing…' We blasted violently through the seas, the boat jolting as we hit the waves. The wind continued to increase, and one by one the boys began losing it over the rail. I went below to plot a course on the chart. Suddenly I realised I was seasick beyond hope, and bolted for the rail, barely making it in time. It was the first time I'd been so sick in thirty years of sailing. I decided to blame it on the stress of being in charge.

The high pressure was followed in a few days by a storm front. The seas got even rougher. Waves threw *Heron* down hard on her side, burying the rail and the boards lashed to them. I knew that if the lashings broke, there would be no way we could turn around and get the boards. We rolled our sails down until they were handkerchiefs, and even then had too much sail up.

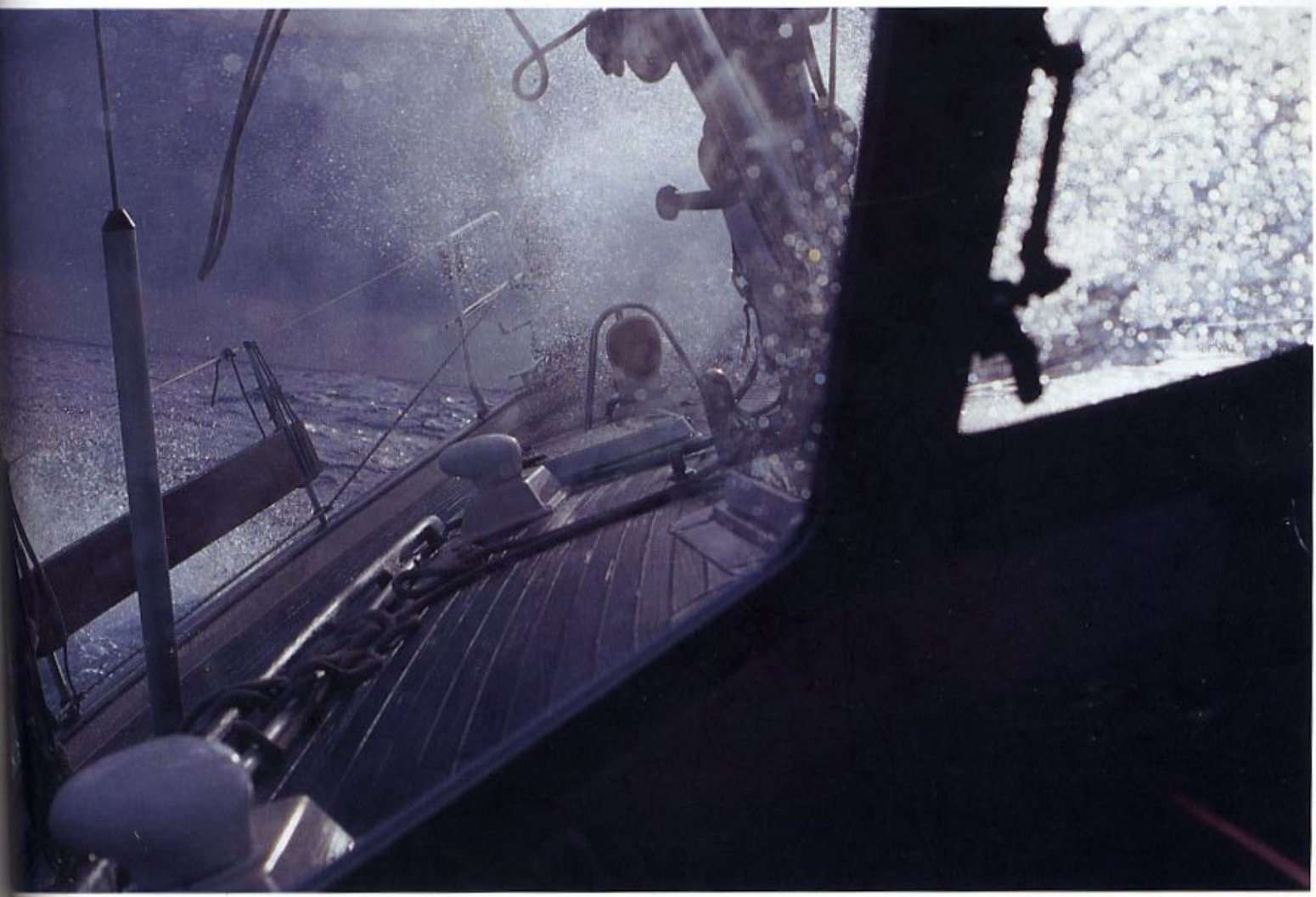
It got so rough that it was difficult to do anything at all. To get an idea of what it's like to live in these conditions, consider the barest necessity – the simple act of urinating. Several times a day, you are faced with a difficult choice: risk your life at the rail, or go below. On deck, the clear air keeps the ever-present nausea at bay. But there is the risk of getting washed overboard as you hold on with one hand, dangling and swaying precariously over the abyss, as the boat bucks like a thing possessed. More sailors have been lost urinating than in any other way. The wind tends to blow the stream all over you as you pee, wetting you down the front.

The safer option is to go below, where in closed quarters the smell of the toilet and the diesel makes one feel even more seasick and disoriented. There you attempt to aim a snaking stream somewhere near the toilet while getting thrown from one side of the head to the other. Chances are you will pee on yourself anyway.

Cooking and sleeping are just as hard. Anything you set down will slide away on the next roll of the boat. Sleeping isn't easy when you are rolling from one side of the bunk to the other, but if you've been up half the night standing watch, you're so tired that you manage to sleep anyway.

So much for the glamorous sailing life.

Suddenly the front passed and the wind died, leaving us in a large, steep, and confused sea with only scraps up for



Above - The author, the skipper, in another skewed reality.

sails. Without the steadying force of the wind, we rolled like a pig on drugs. Cabin lockers flew open as we pitched in the sea. Our entire CD collection ejected from the lockers. Great Composers lay in scandalous positions with Mixed Female and Male Vocalists. Bob Marley lay heaped with Sade and Tina Turner (the Legend would probably have loved it).

Yasu spewed over the rail for the tenth time, then turned to me and said, "I'm hungry!" Yasu was the only person I have known who could keep his appetite when violently seasick. Actually, there was nothing that could make Yasu lose his appetite. Yasu was something like a great white shark: a mindless eating machine. The thing that saved us from Yasu's appetite was that Taku was an excellent cook and fisherman. Every day Taku would cook enough food for two crews, and Yasu would mow his way right through half of it. Yoshi and I did our part, but in the end could only sit and watch in awe as Yasu ate double, triple, even quadruple our portions.

With the Taku/Yasu combo, our food supplies were already low by the time we reached Madeira. So there we filled the boat with even greater amounts of food. One night, after a few beers, I announced my decision that, if the boat were to sink and we ended up in the life raft, the first thing we'd do would be to eat Yasu.

In the end it was irrelevant, since we caught so much fish that even Yasu was permanently stuffed.

## MADEIRA

A huge rainsquall obscured the sea cliffs of Madeira's wild windward side as we finally approached, tired and very happy to see land. There was a mystical quality to the scene as blue-black clouds slowly cleared to reveal impossibly vertical, jagged green cliffs that rise miles straight out of the sea floor and up into the clouds. We tucked the boat into a perfect little pocket harbour, beneath hills that looked exactly like a colder version of leeward Oahu.

We rented a car and sped off in search of Madeira's fabled

surf. No one ever forgets their first view of the northwest coast of Madeira. It seems terrifyingly steep, and you cling tightly to the wheel, afraid that one slip might plunge you off the cliff into the shining sea far below. It's so vertical that waterfalls plunge from the cliffs overhead, clearing the road and cascading off the far side into oblivion. Swell lines march in from the far horizon, and you can see them bend and focus on the boulder-rock reefs below. The place has a wild feel, and the waves have the power of deep-water surf. It's like Hawaii without the beaches.

Something seems to attract a different breed of surfer to Madeira. Most of the surfers we ran into were travellers who had come to charge big waves. As you'd expect, they were mostly mellow, low profile guys from less populated places like Northern California and New Zealand, ready to deal with the kind of power you find in Madeira. Everyone we met was willing to share what local knowledge they'd gained of the challenging conditions. In Madeira, you never know who might be the one to pull you in half-drowned on a huge day.

One of the most talented surfers we met was a Portuguese guy named Billy, an absolute charger who busted such vertical moves on shallow waves that we were almost afraid to watch him. Billy turned out to be the best of guys, leading us to other spots on the windward side that we'd have had no idea how to find.

We never got to ride the huge surf that Madeira is famous for, but the smaller right points were in perfect form. We fell into a pattern: drive to the north shore, load our backpacks, make the long hike to Ponta Pequeña over rounded, ankle-busting rocks, surf our brains out, drag our exhausted asses back across the rocks, then up the steep slope to town, and drive back to the boat. Two swells of this and we were knackered, so finally we decided to set sail for the Canaries.

It was a cultural challenge to sail with an all Japanese crew. When Yasu came aboard, he called me "Mr. Captain, sir", and although I tried several times to get him to call me "Tor", Yasu kept calling me "Mr. Captain, sir", right until the time he left the boat in the Caribbean. I speak Japanese, having sailed to Japan and studied the language, so naturally we spoke Japanese. Yasu was the 'new guy', while Taku and Yoshi had sailed with me in the past. As the crew member with the least experience, and also the youngest by a few months, Yasu was at the bottom of the ladder in the Japanese system, where hierarchy is very important.

Being Taku's junior, or 'Kohai', Yasu deferred to Taku in nearly everything. I began to wonder if he was taking it too far when he asked how big to cut the cucumbers for the salad for the fifth time.

## CANARIAS

It turned out that we timed our departure from Madeira about as badly as possible. The trade winds had just gone away, replaced by headwinds, and we were missing a huge new swell on its way to Madeira from the North Atlantic. But we were already behind our schedule, and Taku was ready to head home and get back to work. He'd been fairly stressed out by hours on the internet, where insurmountable business problems from home were transmitted instantly to him like magic. It wasn't until we got to the Cabo Verde Islands, where we were unable to get email, that Taku mellowed out and really began to enjoy himself.

After a few days of headwinds, we reached the trade wind belt. From there, south to the Canaries and beyond, we had steady northeast winds pushing us across the Atlantic, with perfect sailing conditions nearly every day.

Several days later, the Canary Islands emerged out of a red dawn. The windward slopes of the mountains were covered in fluffy, white trade wind clouds, with strong volcanic plains reaching down to the sea. Our only stop in the Canaries was in a small fishing harbour called Tazacorte, on the high, westernmost island of La Palma.

The long-term swell forecast we'd gotten off the internet in Madeira had a large northwest swell arriving soon, and on the charts, Tazacorte looked perfectly situated to catch it. What looked like a tantalizing series of right pointbreaks lay near the harbour. As it turned out, we found waves nearby, but not where I'd expected them. Exploring by dinghy, we "discovered" a fun little peak wave, which I named 'Banana's', after my girlfriend Annabel's daughter Savannah and because banana trees hung over the surrounding cliffs. While we surfed, a beat up old car jogged up to the beach with a surfboard on the roof. The car belonged to a Basque surfer named Juan Carlos. He told us the spot was his home break, and was actually named 'Los Girres', after a type of white

**Opposite -**
Yoshi going fast, at last. Cabo Verde interlude.

**Below -**
Desert islands, the Canaries offered a few rare holes for a boat to hide in, or not, depending on the swell.

vulture that once frequented the cliffs here. Apparently there are locals everywhere in the Canaries, but at least for a little while, we'd thought we'd discovered a new spot.

It's nearly impossible to find a good harbour close to the surf, and Tazacorte was no exception. The swell found its way into the harbor in the form of a pervasive surge. Our anchor lines snapped one after another. Finally we dove down to the rocks and found them covered in razor sharp mussel shells, which were sawing right through our lines. With the swell 10ft and still building, waves began washing over the seawall with every set. We decided to pull up what was left of our anchor gear and make an escape.

It turned out we were leaving none too soon. The middle of the bay turned into a big peak, nearly closing out the entrance as we motored away, driving up over the tops of the swells and down into the troughs.

The next four days were a downwind blast to the Cabo Verde islands, surfing down waves at record speeds for our boat, and holding on with both hands when we weren't steering.

Surfing an ocean cruising boat is a strange thing. It's not just a board, but *your entire house* you are dropping in with – all your stuff, the refrigerator, your beds, the toilets. Standing at the wheel, you glance behind you and pick your wave. Instead of paddling, you use the sails for speed, set the stern square against the face as the wave approaches, and drop in. At the back of the boat you are suddenly lifted up as the bow falls into the trough. For a second it looks like you are going to pearl. Then the boat picks up speed. The wheel comes alive in your hands as the rudder, grabbing water like a fin, becomes so sensitive that just a flick of your wrist will whip the boat one way or the other. The whole boat begins to hum, and you can hear the water rushing along the planing hull. Spray flies off as the bow throws water aside, the boat levels out, and the sails go loose as you begin to outrun the wind.

Finally the wave slopes out, and you slow down. You steer up a bit into the wind, find the angle that gives you the most power and speed, and look over your shoulder for the next steep set to drop into.

**Below** - Cabo Verde. Good timing had the *'Heron'* arriving at another desert island with more pleasurable points on it. But not much fresh veg.

## CABO VERDE ISLANDS

We were sailing almost straight south for the Cabo Verde Islands, which lie only a few hundred miles off the Senegalese coast of Africa. The plan was to follow the trade winds south to the Cabo Verdes, and from there make a straight shot across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. So close to Africa, the strong easterlies were thick with the red dust of the Sahara desert. Because of the haze, we were almost upon the island of Sal ("salt" in Portuguese) by the time we saw it late on our fourth day at sea. In the murky light we picked out a few landmarks before night fell, leaving us with only a few twinkling lights to follow. We inched carefully up to the entrance with an eye on the depth-sounder and the riding lights of a few boats at anchor in the open bay, and dropped anchor on the sandy bottom.

Morning revealed a landscape straight out of Africa. There were virtually no trees, and the landscape was almost completely barren, almost as though a great chunk of desert had been cut out and set in the ocean. The buildings in the ramshackle port town were run down, and the dusty streets were unpaved, but the local black people wore huge, welcoming smiles.

British photographer Alex Williams had told us about a "perfect right point" in the Cabo Verdes, so Taku, Yoshi, Yasu, and I set off to rent a car and check the surf. With only scanty directions from Alex ("The island has a short name... starts with an 's' I think..."), we searched most of the points. A few Italian surfers had set up camp on one point in the howling wind, waiting for swell. They told us that this was best wave around, so we resolved to wait. The next day produced 6ft walls. The swell lasted for the next four days, with a few Europeans, a few wave sailors, and a motley crew of travellers the only takers. For Yoshi and I, coming from Hawaii, where competition for waves is probably the fiercest in the world, it was paradise. The break is a perfect performance wave – steep, long, and fast, with barrel sections on better waves. You drop into an A-frame bowl, followed by a long tapering right wall, then three or four hollow bowls. When it's all connecting just right, it's just one reeling, perfect tube. The incessant Easterly trades were the only problem,

creating a touch of side-chop on some days. Not that we were complaining.

We had the good luck to meet Max, the captain of a huge catamaran called the Itome, who was doing windsurfing charters all over the islands. He had command of a perfectly outfitted steel cat with dedicated space for their fifteen fully-rigged widsurf sails in a specially designed rack on deck. The clients could just grab any size sail they wanted. After sailing, they would eat fish speared that day in the incredibly rich waters by their gourmet chef/windsurfing pro. Their charters came complete with video of the clients sailing, which they edited onboard in the evenings by computer.

Max let us in on a few extremely valuable secrets there in the desolate and dry Cabo Verdes. These were important secrets, like where to find clean spring water and diesel for our crossing. According to Max, on an island called São Nicolau, there was a dock where locals would bring trucks full of spring water and diesel. Even more tantalizing was what the German captain called "a...how you say....Mafweeks type wave?" on the northwest coast.

We made an overnight crossing to São Nicolau and loaded water and diesel, but the "Mafweeks" wave eluded us. We anchored in a fairly exposed cove and searched the northwest coast, but couldn't find the wave. Suddenly, the next swell began to rise, and our anchor chain began to jerk taught straight down, pulling the bow down violently each time Heron tried to rise to the swell. The anchor was snagged, and we couldn't raise it. The strain on the gear and boat was tremendous. Something was bound to break, and the swell was still building. I dove to the bottom to find out what was going on. About forty feet down, the chain was wrapped around a tree of coral heads. From there it led under a rock ledge, then back again in the opposite direction to more massive heads, where the anchor, bent out of shape, was wedged under yet another jagged coral head. Underwater the chain was light, so I was just able to cautiously unwrap it from the coral as it went slack between swells. We hauled up the anchor and beat a retreat to a more sheltered bay.

Water on the boat was far too valuable to waste on anything but drinking, so we went several weeks without a fresh water shower. A tall, friendly black guy in a "Lakers" jersey named Antonio overheard us asking around for a

**Below -**
Madeira worked out too. Nothing epic, but plenty of rights. The steepness and power of the waves and the island itself, made the Hawaii contingent feel almost at home.

Above -
Flying fish, about to land in the frying pan.

shower, and insisted we go to his house. On the way he shouted propositions at several girls, most of whom ignored him. One statuesque beauty shut him down with flashing eyes and a sharp retort. Antonio, immensely pleased, winked at me.

"Ahh", said the dark Don Juan, "you see, those are the good ones. I have a chance! The ones that say nothing, they too hard!"

We followed Antonio through a series of alleys, to a crude stone shack with no windows and an ill-fitting tin roof. There were three bedrooms just big enough for the beds, where his extended family lived, apparently three or four to a bed. The rooms opened onto a tiny dirt yard where a miserable chicken, goat, and a dog were tied closely to posts. There was a cross in one corner of the yard

"Our good mother", Antonio said sadly.

Brightening suddenly, Antonio motioned for us to shower with the water in a rusted fifty-gallon barrel. The barrel was half full of yellowish water, topped by some floating bits. We took turns with small dippers, carrying them over to a small bathroom in the corner of the yard. The bathroom was filthy, with no running water and no ventilation. The stench was overpowering. But we had come this far, so it was either shower in there, or out in the dirt yard in plain view of the entire family. We took turns in the bathroom with our meagre water dippers. None of us were sure if we'd actually gotten any cleaner. On the way back to the pier, Antonio asked us if the shower was good. We all made a big show of feeling clean and thanked him.

Antonio started drinking that evening. He was an annoying drunk. "Buy me a beer, my friend!" he slurred, hanging all over me. He snapped at Yoshi when he refused to take him out to the boat. The whole experience left me very sad. Sad for Antonio, who tried so hard to be happy, and his family, scratching out a living with so little hope.

It was time to leave for Antigua in the Caribbean. Fresh vegetables were scarce in desolate São Nicolau, and we barely managed to buy enough to keep us from getting scurvy on the Atlantic crossing from the street vendors by cleaning out their stalls of any produce that looked fresh enough to last part of the voyage. Then, food stores complete, water and diesel safely aboard, and the boys showered (sort of), we set out.

## OPEN OCEAN

Taku had already salted several fish away, and we kept fishing until we had more than we could possibly eat. In fact, we caught so many fish that we landed in the Caribbean with most of the food we'd purchased still aboard. Taku continuously served up Japanese delicacies like fresh yellow fin tuna sashimi on rice, keeping us fat and happy. We even tried a new delicacy: flying fish.

Flying fish are considerably easier to catch than you'd think. You simply collect them off the deck. At night they fly aboard, sometimes hitting the cockpit windows with a loud thud, sometimes even smacking you in the face while you are at the wheel, bringing your mind back from whatever late night daydreams you might have been having. The fish seemed to come aboard most often on moonlit nights when the sky was clear, perhaps mistaking the white hull for the sky. Some days I gathered enough winged fish off of the deck to feed the whole crew. The white flesh was particularly delicious sautéed in olive oil.

It's a long way across the Atlantic. On the third day out, the guys had started staring at the GPS (Global Positioning System), an instrument that has a read-out with "distance to destination".

"One thousand eight hundred and eleven miles to go," Yoshi said dejectedly.

An hour later: "One thousand eight hundred and three miles to go," Taku droned.

Sailing is slow (ten miles an hour is considered fast), and two weeks are long enough without looking at the GPS every few minutes.

"Would you guys stop reading that thing!" I barked in only slightly pretended anger.

The next morning Yoshi woke up and read out loud: "One thousand seven hundred and eight miles to go..."

Yasu's near legendary ability to eat anything and everything continued to boggle our minds, though we had so much fish that it didn't matter how much he ate. The real test of my patience came when one of the notoriously fickle marine toilets backed up.

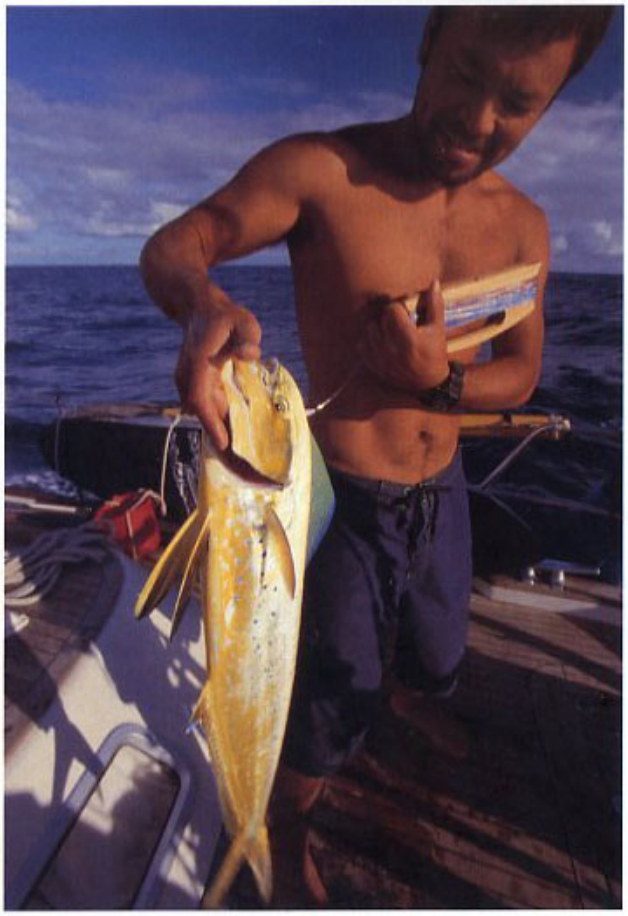
"Yasu, did you flush something down the toilet?"

"Ummmm....no?"

Yasu had flushed a huge wad of heavy-duty kitchen towel down the head, despite my warnings never to flush anything down the toilets that hadn't first been eaten. Clearing the toilet was, literally, the shittiest job ever, and I was justifiably proud that I never snapped on Yasu.

Things like this were annoying, but not life threatening. My biggest worry was that someone might fall over the side. It's nearly impossible to retrieve anyone who falls into the sea. In rough seas, a swimmer's head is tiny, and there is nearly always a wave blocking your view. Factor in the difficulty of getting all sails down, turning around, and finding an unmarked spot in rough conditions, and the chances of rescue are slim. At night they are almost nil. Everyone was to wear safety harnesses at night. I told the crew that if they fell overboard, they would die. Period. My father always told me that. It seems to make people hold on a bit tighter.

The route we were taking across the Atlantic is nearly always an easy one because of the strong, consistent northeast trade winds. Following winds are a wonderful thing. It's like riding a bike down an endless hill. But it's easy to forget that if something goes wrong, even after only a few days out, it's nearly impossible to turn back. Beating back upwind through strong trades and big seas would be a horrendous task.



The daily pattern of life at sea is actually quite busy. Our time was taken up with trimming sails, cooking, cleaning, and basic chores to keep the boat running. Watches alternated every four hours, so we never slept more than four hours at a time, and took every chance to catch up. Being at sea is difficult to adjust to. Simply hanging on and staying balanced takes so much energy that most people get off a boat ten pounds lighter. Except Yasu, of course.

Halfway through the crossing Taku made a feast of some chicken we'd been saving and baked a desert to celebrate the halfway point. The last week at sea seemed to go more quickly. Finally, the once interminable trip was only a few more days' sailing, a few more long night watches. Amazing how if you just keep the bow pointed in the right direction, you will eventually get to where you want to go. There must be a life lesson there somewhere. When we sighted the low hills of the island of Antigua, cheers went up all around. But the trip wasn't over yet. Making landfall is the most dangerous part of any passage, and it was getting late. We spent the night rolling at sea, watching the twinkling lights of Antigua and waiting for dawn so we could make it into the tricky harbour safely.

My father, the old seafarer, strode down the dock and swung aboard *Heron*. Taking a critical glance around to see if the lines were all stowed correctly, he clapped me on the shoulder and said with a proud smile, "Well done, guys. Congratulations on a safe passage, Tor." Later that evening he mentioned casually: "I've been thinking of sailing around the South Pacific, maybe Tahiti..."

**Top Right -**
Yoshi with a dorado dolphin, mahi mahi, gift from the Gods, dinner.

**Below -**
There are many ways to spend your days drifting across the sea.