

Beauty in the Rough

Rugged, windy, and wild, the Cabo Verde islands prove to be an unforgettable stop.

By Tor Johnson

A wind gust whips up the water as a sailboat works through the Cape Verde islands, whose challenging geography and difficult history belie a vibrant and resilient culture.

PHOTO BY TOR JOHNSON



Our arrival in the Cabo Verde, or Cape Verde, islands began with a bang. Actually, a wild jibe to leeward, a loud crack as the main came across, and a violent heel right down to the rail, to be honest.

This was to be our first landfall on our new-to-us Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509. My 21-year-old nephew, Rowan, my old friend and experienced sailor, Jeff, and I took delivery of *Kāholo* in Portugal during a Covid lockdown. The entire Portuguese coast being closed to cruising, a test sail was out of the question.

Having made the Atlantic crossing a number of times, we decided to just set sail for the Cabo Verdes, a group of 10 volcanic islands that lie in a horseshoe shape some 350 miles off the African continent. They also happen to lie on the trade wind route to the Caribbean, which is where we were ultimately headed with the new boat. This would have to be our shakedown cruise.

Columbus was the first known European navigator to discover the benefits of the Cabo Verde route. After a few long passages via the Canary Islands, Columbus changed his route to stop here on his third voyage, thence making great time of 20 days to the Caribbean.

Contemporary sailors are finally catching on; the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC) now provides the option to stop at Cabo Verde with a fleet called the ARC+, and Cornell Sailing recently organized the first cruisers rally with 35 boats through the islands, a huge success judging from their stories. In February, the port of Mindelo on São Vicente in the Barlavento (windward) islands hosted the initial stop-over of The Ocean Race for the first time. That's where we were headed as well.

As *Kāholo* broached and the mainsail

The Terra Lodge rooftop restaurant overlooking Mindelo's harbor, above. The islands' rugged, parched terrain is influenced by their proximity to the African coast, below.



A portrait of cultural treasure and singer Cesária Évora, who came to represent the islands to the world, is literally engraved on this downtown waterfront building's face, above. A pleasant day of sailing to the Cabo Verdes, top.

flew across to leeward, I felt the wheel go loose in my hands, a sure sign that the rudder had cavitated. The boat was spinning into the wind, like it or not. I looked forward to see the rail dig into the water, with Rowan clinging to the tie down straps for our rigid inflatable that was secured on deck. We spun into the wind, and righted.

We rushed to take a deep reef in the mainsail. I was happy with this setup: *Kāholo* carries a smallish 100% working jib, so with a deeply reefed main, she could handle about 35 knots of true wind on a broad reach. We began surfing the waves at up to 10, then 12 knots. We soon had to reef the jib. Half an hour later we reefed the main again.

I was surprised at such a rapid wind increase, and by the steep seas in the channel. I shouldn't have been. The channel runs north-east by southwest, oriented to perfectly funnel northeast trade winds between Mindelo and the high island of Santo Antão. Living in Hawaii as I do, I often see accelerated channel winds and the Venturi effect, but this looked like another level entirely. When we'd sighted



Clockwise from left: Some of the local fishing fleet hang off the Mindelo waterfront; a mother and child on Santo Antão, living as they have for centuries; a pair of best friends are all smiles in Santo Antão.



land that morning, we'd been lazing along in less than 15-knot trade winds, and I'd hoped for a building breeze before we entered the channel. I wasn't hoping for that any longer.

To add to the stress, we were now sailing without instruments. A short in the NMEA wiring backbone had taken out all of our Raymarine electronics, even our Garmin chartplotter. We were using a backup iPad to navigate. Not that there was time to look at instruments anyway—gusts descending from the islands had begun to scrape up water from the waves and heave it across the ocean surface in white clouds.

With the boat under just a scrap of main and a Brazilian bikini-sized jib, at the helm I felt the stern lift to a steep breaking sea. The bow fell into the trough. *Kāholo* accelerated to 13, then 14 knots.

Despite being a displacement cruising boat, *Kāholo*, designed by Philippe Briand, surfs fairly well on her relatively flat bottom, given enough push. The helm felt responsive and easy as we flattened out and planed into the trough at 18 knots. It felt like dinghy sailing in a big cruising boat.

Eventually, we felt our way into the marina sans instruments, and somehow got lines tied to the dock despite the wind. Mindelo, we belatedly learned, is known affectionately to local sailors as “Windelo.”

A Haunting Resilience

The next day we were greeted by a charismatic local named Gilson Maocha. His business card read “Boat Cabo Verde” with the slogan, “If

it's made by man, we can fix it.” We loved his can-do islander attitude and infectious smile. It turned out that that after years of solving various electronics issues on visiting sailboats with limited resources, his boss, Kai Brossmann, at Boat Cabo Verde had sent him to England where he pretty much inhaled Raymarine's training course. Now Kai says, “Gilson is much better than I am with the electronics.”

Life is very difficult in Cabo Verde, and we quickly learned that not everyone has a success story like Gilson's. Originally uninhabited (probably for good reason), the islands were claimed by Portugal in the 1400s and used as a transshipment base for the Portuguese slave trade. Eventually populated by freed slaves, Cabo Verde gained independence from Portugal as recently as 1975.

The islands lie a mere 300 miles to the leeward of the bone-dry

African desert. The parched landscape is prone to deadly droughts and gets rain only when the intertropical convergence zone swings far enough north in summer, causing torrential rain and erosion. Powerful, dry harmattan winds blow off the West African coast in winter, turning everything a fine dusty orange. Deforestation, wind, and soil erosion challenge the few resolute farmers. Add to drought a huge pandemic-driven downturn in tourism, and now food insecurity due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and it makes for a desperate situation. Some resort to begging in the streets.

Cabo Verdeans, however, are undaunted. Hearing music streaming from a terrace bar one evening, Rowan, Jeff, and I walked up to find a young woman vocalist accompanied by young man on acoustic guitar. We quickly realized that this was no ordinary act.

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hurled the sand against our legs so hard we felt sand blasted, and Rowan was literally forced to turn back because he didn't have sunglasses to protect his eyes from the driving sand.

Having sailed through a number of the Cabo Verde islands on previous transatlantic trips, I was keen to visit more of the remote islands in this group. But we were facing a 4,000-mile trip to Panama, so repairs to the electronics in Mindelo had to take priority. I found myself in the uneasy position of pestering Gilson every day, gently nudging him to put us at the top of his considerable list of boats needing major repairs.

He took my daily gentle prodding in stride, assuring me they would get on *Kāholo* as soon as they possibly could. Meanwhile, he told us to visit his friend Eric, who ran a taxi on the neighboring high island of Santo Antão, 10 miles across the notorious Mindelo channel.

He and Eric had grown up together, and Gilson contended that if anything would make us fall in love with the Cabo Verdes, it would be Eric's version of Santo Antão.

The thought that Gilson might be trying to get rid of me never even crossed my mind. So we took an early morning ferry across the channel, which Gilson calls the “washing machine.” Sure enough, it was already kicking up again at over 30 knots. As we rolled across the channel on the ferry, we watched a fishing boat laboring to windward, shouldering the steep seas, disappearing at the crests in clouds of white spray.

Eric turned out to be a friendly young guy with a gentle and generous manner who knew and appeared to like the many locals we encountered. We immediately trusted him, which was good because navigating the rugged, vertigo-inducing mountain roads in his minivan was a tense business. He took us to a volcanic crater

World class tone, pitch, and the intricate phrasing of her original songs almost made us forget the masterful guitar of her partner.

It turns out the islanders' love of music and the arts has spawned many acclaimed performers, such as Cesária Évora, an orphan who grew up singing in a sailors' tavern and who became a beloved national hero. She went on to international fame, winning a Grammy for her mastery of the plaintive melodic laments so characteristic of the islands, and even collaborating with the likes of American pop star Madonna. Affectionately known as Cize, Cesária passed away in 2011, but her image now graces a bank note and a huge mosaic on the wall of a waterfront building, and the airport at Mindelo is named for her.

We spent time exploring Mindelo, which is full of old colonial buildings settling slowly into picturesque decrepitude. A walk on the town beach turned into a battle against harmattan winds that



The transatlantic trio has some fun exploring, left. *Kāholo* rests comfortably in a marina in Mindelo after her rambunctious arrival to the islands, above.

filled with farms, to the few places where streams rolled down the hillsides, where locals welcomed us into their villages. We saw first-hand how almost vertical cliff sides had been painstakingly terraced. Some of the terraces were barely ledges, trapping just enough water and soil to support a single plant. “This is what it takes,” I thought, “to survive.”

(Later, wanting to visit Santo Antão from the water, we stopped there after checking out of the country. But the anchorage was so tenuous that we didn't stay long—especially after a local youngster paddled out to warn us of the danger of dragging if we didn't have two heavy anchors down.)

I did manage to learn more about some of the other islands by talking with some of the sailors who'd participated in the Cornell Sailing rally stopover here. Many were struck by the local music in the ports they visited and impressed by the active 9,281-foot-tall volcano on Fogo Island (“fire” in Portuguese). In São Nicolau, they anchored in water clear enough to check the hook from on deck, hiked up from a perfect anchorage to sweeping views in Brava, and visited remote villages throughout the islands.

Most were glad they had stocked up on hard-to-find packaged provisions in Europe, but they did find produce available. Some noted that GPS charts of the islands are notoriously inaccurate, even miles off in some places, making careful visual navigation essential. Saharan dust during the winter harmattan sometimes diminishes visibility. Yet the austere landscapes and gin-clear waters have a beauty of their own. Many crews found the Cabo Verdeans to be some of the most handsome and hospitable people they'd ever met.

Back to the Blue

Gilson and his team of locals at Boat Cabo Verde managed to repair our electronics after a week. Hours of tracing wires uncovered a simple corroded terminal, which unfortunately was not available on the island. Gilson of course came up with a workaround, retrofitting a new component that they did have and integrating it into the old system. It worked flawlessly. They proved so capable we even had them install a new Furuno radar with a Wi-Fi connection.

Finally, all systems repaired, some upgraded, it was time to leave. We set out again into the notorious Mindelo channel, this time bound for the Caribbean. Still wary of this channel—and dreading another surprise jibe—I reefed the sails early. In fact, I reefed too deeply. We wallowed in the seas without enough power in the sails until I grudgingly rolled out a few more feet of sail to balance the boat.

We watched the Cabo Verde islands rapidly disappear astern, leaving the hardscrabble life of this unforgiving, arid land and its tenacious people. I thought of that deep, mournful emotion in their music that you could feel in the land and in the streets. The Cabo Verde islands are certainly a challenging place to sail, and a deeply moving destination I'll never forget. *A*

Tor Johnson first sailed throughout the world at age 6 with his family aboard their 50-foot cruising boat. A photographer and writer who crewed with the family gave Johnson a hand-me-down camera, and he started documenting their travels. Today he and his wife, Kyoto, live in Hawaii. He delivers boats when he isn't surfing or sailing on *Kāholo*.

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