OUR MAN IN PANAMA

A 5,000-MILE CROSSING FROM PORTUGAL TO PANAMA TESTED TOR JOHNSON, BUT THE REWARDS WERE WORTH EVERY CHALLENGE

Photos: Tor Johnson

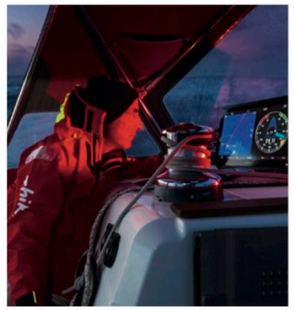
'We made great time until the halyard chafed through'

Bluewater sailing requires patience, persistence and optimism. Buying a boat I'd never set eyes on in Portugal, equipping and sailing her across to Panama, in a pandemic, then shipping her to the US West Coast took more than a little of all of the above.

I began boatless in a US market nearly devoid of inventory. Searching online for months turned up a great boat, which happened to be in Spain: a newish 2012 50ft, roomy, quick-sailing Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 509. Her owners had abandoned their hopes of a round-the-world voyage, and left her lying in a Spanish marina, banging against a dock with black rub rails. She looked a bit bruised, but *Kāholo* was only lightly used.

Then the challenges began. Burdened with high Covid rates, Spain refused entry to our crew. Nearby Gibraltar didn't want us either. Finally Portugal made an exception for us as a professional delivery crew. We had the boat delivered to Vilamoura, a good place to commission with a tidy little boatyard and lift. It was a fortunate choice because, as it turned out, the standing rigging needed replacing, and rigger Pete Keeping has a shop there. Eager to set out across the Atlantic, I became the boatyard's most persistent customer, making daily rounds to cajole Pete and the many local specialists, like stainless fabricator Sergio Rilho and mechanic Mr Conde.

Finally, after a month of polite pestering amid supply chain disruptions, we had new standing rigging and were commissioned, fully provisioned and ready to set sail. As we made a final sea trial off the white sand beaches of the Algarve, I took a look back at the marina I'd been struggling to leave for over a month, and had the completely unexpected thought: "I'm going to miss this place."



Above: Tor and his two crew peeled to white sails at night

PORTUGUESE TRADES

We'd decided not to stop in the Canary Islands because of their strict quarantine requirements. Plus it was already March – time to get moving across the Atlantic to beat the hurricane season. We planned instead to sail directly for the Cabo Verdes, and spend some time cruising those remote islands. This southerly arc turned out to be pretty much the fastest trade wind route across the Atlantic.

We timed our departure between frontal systems as a high pressure filled in north of us. The 'Portuguese Trades', 25-30 knots of reliable north-westerlies flowing down Europe's west coast, greeted us once we got offshore. The Jeanneau 509 was right in her element, and began surfing to over 13 knots on a reach. The furling mainsail worked a charm. Although aerodynamically not perfect, to my mind the furling makes up in convenience and safety for the sacrifice in sail shape. In strong winds it was a joy to be able to shorten and make sail alone from the cockpit, without having to come into the wind or even wake the crew at night.

Reeling off close to 200 miles a day, we soon passed through the Canary Islands where the wind shifted more northerly. Thanks to the forecasting services of PredictWind, we timed our gybes perfectly through the island chain, getting some fantastic views of the volcanic craters of Fuerteventura. However, gybing between there and Gran Canaria means a busy night of avoiding ships in a crowded shipping lane full of vessels travelling between Europe and Africa. AIS helped reduce the stress.

Once clear of the Canaries, we had another 850 miles of broad reaching for the Cabo Verdes. We hoisted the spinnaker and made great time until the halyard chafed through and sent it plunging into the water. Running rigging suffers constant chafe in an actual seaway, as boat and sails saw back and forth. We were able to retrieve the sail, but re-leading the spinnaker halyard would mean a trip up the mast, a job best left for port.

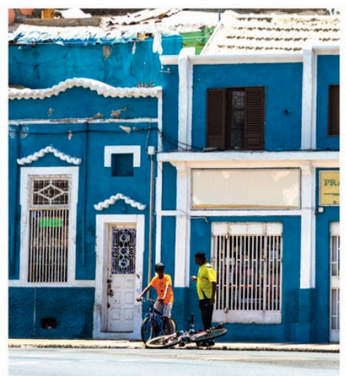
Making miles by day under asymmetric

The next problem was a near total electronics failure. Luckily we were within a few days' sail of the Cabo Verdes, so we started one of our backup iPad chart plotters and changed course directly for the only marina, in the capital, Mindelo. Going back to hand steering was difficult but rewarding. With my eyes once again focused on the ocean, I saw more seabirds, fish, and dolphins, and I often used the moon and stars to hold a course. We rely on the autopilot so much these days that we give up the feel of the helm. We focus on other things, and to an extent lose the simple act of being present.

Approaching Mindelo in less than 15 knots of wind we sighted the rugged 2,000m peaks of Santo Antão. After all we'd gone through to get to Europe, to buy, repair, and equip this vessel, and to sail her carefully in all conditions through long night watches, we'd made our first landfall. It was an emotional moment for me, but there wasn't time to ponder our success.

As we entered the narrow eight mile channel between Santo Antão and San Vicente, the wind steadily increased from 15 to 20 knots, then 25 to 30 knots. I'd read about wind acceleration between these islands, and living ▶

Left: waterfront of Mindelo, Cabo Verde
Below: colonial architecture in Mindelo



in Hawaii I'm familiar with the effects, but this was a completely new level. We reefed the jib, then the main. The wind continued to increase. A breaking sea grabbed our stern and broached us up into the wind. We reefed again. By the time we approached Mindelo we carried a third of our sail area. We surfed a steep wave, topping 17 knots. Without a depth sounder or instruments we had to pick our way into port amid gusts that hurled the water up off the surface in sheets of white spray.

As luck would have it, Mindelo is home to a group of can-do boat workers named Boat CV. Local mechanic Gilson eventually repaired our electronics (a hidden corroded terminal was to blame). While waiting for the repairs we took a ferry across to Santo Antão, where Gilson's friend Eric showed us the parts of his spectacularly rugged island only a local could know. We learned of the tenacity of a people descended from slaves. Enduring drought in a harsh and unforgiving land, the islanders had terraced many of the nearly vertical cliff sides to grow just enough food to survive.

NEXT STOP THE CARIBBEAN

My crew Rowan, Jeff and I were ready to start the next leg: 2,000 miles to the Caribbean. Knowing the relative scarcity of non-perishable provisions in the Cabo Verdes, we'd already laid in plenty of Portuguese staples. In Mindelo we bought as much fresh food as we thought we could possibly eat, including things like cabbage, which lasts forever. A local restaurant supplied several trays of conch stew.

We planned St Vincent as our next landfall, which we chose for their acceptance of sailors during the pandemic, with a short quarantine in a pleasant anchorage. Later, at sea, we learned of the devastating eruption of St Vincent's La Souffrière volcano. Rather than burden the Vincentians with demands for border clearance and supplies, we decided to ask next door Martinique to allow us entry. Although officially closed, the French authorities said they'd permit us entry, just to reprovision the boat. Here was a new goal: a wonderful island, fantastic supermarchés, French cheese and croissants.

We were fortunate to have following winds nearly the entire crossing to the Caribbean, but the wind was generally light, and easterly or directly astern. Keeping enough apparent wind moving across the sails to stabilise the boat meant sailing at fairly shallow angles, zigzagging across the ocean. Our course began to resemble the work of a very bad seamstress. Sailing directly downwind wasn't really an alternative. Aside from being slow, our sails slat continually in a seaway, which would eventually destroy them, while the stainless steel jib sheet blocks, led directly above the forward cabin, turned it into a kettle drum whenever the jib slatted.

We used our asymmetric spinnaker during the day, but took it down at night because of its tendency to wrap around the forestay. In light winds, a small course or wind shift could send it into a hopeless tangle that would require all hands. I began to envy the whisker poles and dual genoas of some cruising boats, with their 'set and forget' ease and their ability to reef at will.

We fell into our rhythm, standing watch, napping, fishing, cooking, cleaning, and making boat repairs. I was up probably more than most in the light winds. I find light airs harder than strong winds because they require so much sail tuning. It was a challenge to get enough sleep.

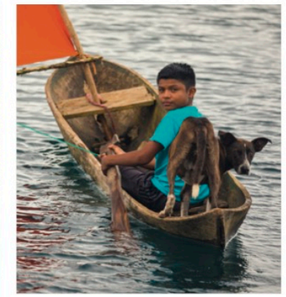
One day I looked up at the masthead and noticed the VHF antenna was loose, flopping back and forth as we rolled. Our AIS, a crucial safety tool for avoiding collision, also uses this antenna. This was serious enough to warrant taking the risk of climbing the mast at sea. It was a dangerous job I wouldn't ask anyone else to do, but

'We fell into our rhythm, standing watch, napping, fishing, cooking...'

honestly I actually relished the challenge. Sea conditions weren't too rough but, as anyone who has done this knows, even a seemingly flat sea produces a violent motion 70ft above the water. Working over my head while clinging on for dear life, I somehow secured the antenna. But then I noticed that the Facnor forestay had split apart near the head. The screws holding its sections together had backed off, probably due to the slatting, and the forestay had separated, leaving a section of the luff of the jib completely unsupported and free. It would probably be impossible to reef, furl or even drop the sail in this condition. I went up the mast several more times. Holding on was made more difficult: now I had to cling to the narrow forestay. Finally I descended to the deck, exhausted, but claiming victory over the roller fuller.

Another challenge was the masses of sargasso weed that fouled the propeller and the fishing lines. The sargasso became so thick it looked like huge carpets of brown across the sea. Heavy rain and river nutrients, as well as Saharan dust clouds that extend for thousands of miles across the Atlantic, had contributed to this explosion of sargasso. The dust contains iron, nitrogen and phosphorus that fertilises the seaweed. The propeller and our sail drive, with its nearly vertical shaft, fouled constantly, forcing us to take the engine out of gear, ▶

Kāholo off Sainte-Anne's Beach, Martinique



Above: Ngobe boy, David, became Johnson's guide on the Kusapin Peninsula. Left: Laguna de Bluefield, Bocas Del Toro, Panama

slow the boat, then reverse. I often gave up motoring, in favour of simply ghosting along under sail in light airs.

Then the engine stalled, and refused to come up above 1,200rpm, yielding only a few knots of boat speed (the issue turned out to be diesel bug, despite the fact I'd treated the fuel with biocide before leaving Portugal, and checked our Racor filters). We eventually limped into Martinique at 2 knots under power. Martinique was a godsend. It has every boat service, including diesel fuel techs to help remove the last of our fuel and clean out the tanks, and we were lucky to be the only foreign sailors admitted.

Heavy ash from the violent eruption in St Vincent blanketed neighbouring St Lucia and Grenada, and rose into the upper atmosphere, even smothering Barbados 80 miles to windward. But somehow Martinique, 70 miles north, was spared. My Martiniquais boatbuilder friend, Manu, and his companions took a large catamaran full of water and supplies across to St Vincent, standing off the devastated coast and assisting rescue efforts.

Once we'd arrived in Martinique (Covid pre-tested, as well as fully quarantined during the crossing), we were mostly free to travel about, as long as we had legitimate reason to do so. The kind staff of Marina Le Marin sent us off with a form stating our intent to provision the boat, a slight ruse that enabled us to see quite a lot of this magnificent volcanic island.

Later, with clean fuel tanks and well stocked with French wine and cheese, we set off for our next leg: 1,200 miles direct to Panama's Bocas del Toro Islands. We planned to avoid Venezuela because of its desperate economic situation. I'd read about an Antarctic expedition cruise ship that was approached by a Venezuelan gunboat and ordered into port. When the captain refused, the gunboat rammed their bow to force them to change course. The expedition ship, being reinforced for Antarctic sailing with a bulbous ice-breaking bow, fared better than the gunboat, which was holed and sank. Venezuela got a wide berth.

PANAMA TROPIC

As we approached Panama the tradewinds piled up against the coast, rising into thunderheads, persistent lightning and thunder. Panama gets massive rainfall from this atmosphere and we were soon deluged with rain squalls that felt like solid water dropped from above. Our welcome to Panama's Bocas del Toro Islands came in the form of a huge barracuda which we hooked a distance offshore, and brought aboard, carefully removing the hook from a prehistoric-looking row of jagged teeth. Locals told us these offshore barracuda are absolutely free of ciguatera toxin. The fish tasted incredible.

Having finally arrived in one of the best cruising grounds in the world, my crew promptly left. They had other commitments. I was left to single-hand my new, and now trouble-free, 50ft boat through Panama. I couldn't have been happier. It's an easily single-handed boat, and... well, I was in Panama.

The spectacular and deeply indented islands of Bocas del Toro are home to the indigenous Ngobe people, who often visit yachts bearing crab, lobster, or other items to trade or sell. They can be persistent, but they're also a link to the local culture. These are people who live very close to nature, and make do with whatever they have. I sailed alongside fishing canoes trolling offshore under home-made sails. Entire families travelled in dugout canoes under paddle power. Several miles out, I found one of the original stand-up paddleboarders: a fisherman standing in his beautiful wooden canoe, making fine pace with a long wooden paddle.

On the Kusapin Peninsula I met a local kid named David, who visited the boat with a canoe full of produce. The next day David guided me to a fantastic surf spot across the peninsula, with a pristine jungle beach complete with monkeys and sloths. By chance, we recovered David's lost dog, which was roaming the beach. After returning his dog to his family farm, David made several drawings for me, including one of me surfing. I left their farm with a hand made vine basket full of home-grown produce. Touched, I left a donation with his mother for the kids' schooling.

The small isolated island of Escudo de Veraguas was one of the best finds in the entire region. Dropping anchor over a perfect sand bottom in the exposed open roadstead, I headed out by dinghy to explore an incredibly varied landscape, home to several land mammals found nowhere else in the world. After threading through elaborate reef systems, brilliant sand beaches, and a verdant maze of mangrove islands, I made a complete circumnavigation of the island, and arrived back at the boat completely in awe of this truly unique place.

Another huge highlight of Panama was the primordial Rio Chagres. Once an important strategic route to the interior and the Pacific coast, the river mouth was protected by a Spanish fort that dates back to the 1500s. It was often plundered by English pirates like Henry Morgan. Rio Chagres is now the primary source of water for the Panama Canal. After negotiating the reefs fouling a tricky entrance, I found myself sailing inland for miles, utterly alone, through an untouched old growth rainforest jungle teaming with howler monkeys and seemingly every species of bird, butterfly and insect. The midday heat was oppressive, so I took a quick swim in the river. I later learned this is not recommended... due to the crocodiles.

I was able to take the dinghy several more miles up river, from whence I hiked up to the top of Gatun Dam, to see massive container ships travelling through the Gatun Locks of the Panama Canal. It felt surreal to emerge from an untouched environment into a world of heavy industry.

From nearby Shelter Bay Marina, my plan was to ship *Kāholo* up the coast from Panama to Vancouver Island, Canada. After several ships cancelled, I finally booked with United. The amazing crew at Shelter Bay Marina loaded the boat and, like magic, she arrived in the Pacific Northwest, ready for new adventures.

We'd traversed 5,000 miles across the Atlantic and the Caribbean. We'd faced restrictions, challenges, breakdowns, even a volcanic eruption. It took persistence, patience and optimism. But then, bluewater sailing always does. ■

A renowned marine photographer and bluewater sailor, Tor Johnson and his wife, Kyoko, run their photography business out of a beach house in Waialua, Hawaii. Tor grew up sailing the oceans with his family and is also a passionate surfer.