

# Double Atlantic

Inspired by tycoon-adventurer Steve Fossett, Tristan Gooley flew a Cessna plane solo across the Atlantic and then sailed a Contessa 32 yacht singlehanded from the Canaries to St Lucia



Tristan makes landfall off St Lucia



*'The voyage taught me many things. Best of all was having confidence in my boat'*

**T**he journey took 26 days. The preparation took seven years. Seven years of courses, exams, passages, conversations, purchases, repairs, refits, and lists. Lots of lists. Lists of lists.

On 7 December, 2007, I slipped out of Marina Rubicon on Lanzarote in *Golden Eye*, my Contessa 32. I felt well prepared, but of course I wasn't. I'd only logged a few hours of singlehanded sailing, none of them at night. Extraordinary, with hindsight, but the main reason was that so much preparation had been shore-based that the time for sailing was limited. Another reason was that for a solo sailor, there is a high risk of an accident in the busy shipping lanes of the English Channel where my solo sailing trials would have begun.

Four years ago I took part in the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC) on a yacht with five fellow crewmembers with the dual purpose of getting the Yachtmaster Ocean qualification and gaining experience of ocean sailing. I got my ocean ticket, but failed to appreciate the differences between sailing a fully-crewed boat and sailing singlehanded. Midway across the Atlantic, my skipper, Anna, decided it was time to hoist the spinnaker. The wind caught us by surprise



Tristan encountered big Atlantic swell...



...waves so big it would have been tiring to walk up them'



Tristan flew the first leg in a Cessna Caravan



If you think marine electronics are complicated...

and in the space of a few seconds a crewmember was lifted 5ft in the air and dumped unceremoniously on the deck – minus the skin from both hands. We patched him up, but he was totally unable to use his hands for the rest of the passage. Like a newborn baby he had to be fed and dressed.

'You're wife's expecting a baby in a few months, isn't she?' Anna said with a rueful smile. 'You're the only person on this boat who can possibly derive any benefit from this! Can you be his hands in the heads?'

Of all the terrors that lay in wait for me on my solo voyage, reaching for the toilet roll for another man would not be one of them.

Some of the challenges of taking on the Atlantic singlehanded cannot be easily prepared for. No amount of checking and re-checking equipment or careful provisioning help you to cope with the unexpected. In mid-ocean, heat, time and solitude wait for the singlehander in such formidable quantities that for long periods nothing else seems to matter. There is no list to cope with these perils.

The real challenges of solo sailing, I discovered, lie mainly in the two 'S's': →



**'The real challenges of solo sailing lie in the two "S's": solitude and self-reliance'**



The Great Circle route took Tristan into the high Arctic



**The ocean delivered a free lunch...**

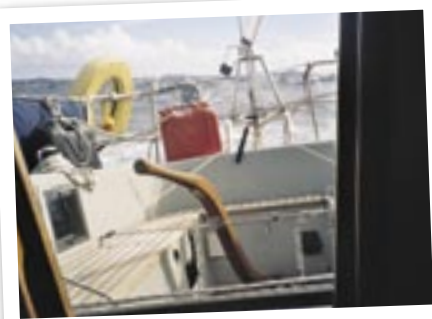
'Water ingress sometimes leads to motor malfunction,' I was told.

They fixed it in a few hours, but I did wonder why anyone would manufacture electronic kit for yachts that isn't waterproof! Time had prevented a proper sea trial of the repaired unit but now, after monkeying about with screwdrivers, lots of effing and blinding and plenty of sweat, I discovered that the engineer in Portsmouth had carelessly reversed the polarity of the motor. A simple fix, maybe, but it was an unnecessary complication at the start of my solo voyage.

This was my first success at solving practical problems and I sometimes wondered if I had accidentally enrolled on a tropical City & Guilds course in marine electronics.

My decision to set off from Lanzarote, the northeasternmost of all the

options available in the Canary Islands, seemed at the time to be a small one. But the wind direction forced me to thread my →



**The windvane was more reliable than the tiller pilot**

solitude and self-reliance. That may be a bit obvious, but it still came as a shock to the system. There are two big challenges that confront the solo sailor, and both stem from the fact that there isn't anyone else to fix things when they go wrong.

If anything breaks you must repair it or manage without it. This was a lesson that was drummed into me in the first 60 minutes of 612 hours at sea. Half a mile out from the marina, the lines were in and the fenders were stowed (it feels very odd stowing fenders for such a long time). I set up the autopilot on the tiller, pressed the button and waited for the tell-tale noise as the little



**The Contessa 32 proved completely dependable**

**Ben checks the quality of his dad's water supply**

motor pushed and pulled, holding the boat on course. Instead, I lost my balance as the tiller pilot rod extended fully and the boat swung wildly off course. This could be shaping up to be a very long passage indeed if I had to hand-steer.

When the tiller pilot malfunctioned a few weeks earlier I'd taken it back to the manufacturer, Raymarine, in Portsmouth.

'It's barely a month old and it's knackered,' I explained to the technician.

**'A good book helped me escape my loneliness'**



**Journey's end: Tristan motors towards his destination, Marigot Bay, St Lucia**



**Tristan hadn't expected such a large welcoming party!**

way through the entire island chain and I didn't turn south until west of the whole archipelago. This added a full 24 hours to my passage. It was intense sailing, fast and with busy shipping lanes, lots of fishing boats and yachts, wind acceleration zones and shifting wind directions. If boredom was an issue later in the voyage, it wasn't now. I was more tired at the end of Day 2 than I was at the end of Day 22.

The second challenge for the solo sailor is getting to grips with the psychology. Alone on the ocean, you are suddenly stripped of the day-to-day external stimuli we take for granted. Mundane things like traffic jams, office banter and junk emails punctuate the landlubber's day, but the solo sailor has few nudges to change his or her mindset or moods. I discovered that having a book that makes you laugh out loud can be just as important as having vital tools or engine spares. A good read helped me escape my loneliness.

Other highlights are encounters with dolphins or passing ships, but if for no apparent reason you sink into a bad mood or get bored, it can linger for hours or even days until you learn how to snap out of it.

Days 12, 13 and 14 were so painfully hot and boring that they seemed to last almost as long as the rest of the trip put together. I hauled myself from the saloon, as hot as an oven, to roast myself in the exposed cockpit – there was no bimini or awning

for shade. I counted the minutes until the sun went down.

I knew about the size of ocean waves and the sudden onset of a heavy squalls, from my previous ARC passage. Now, alone, the worst weather I encountered was a Force 8 squall that lasted less than an hour, plus a storm off Madeira, when the swell was comfortably over 20ft. You do get used to looking up at big waves, but only just.

The only way I can describe the size of the big waves is to say it would have been tiring to walk up them.

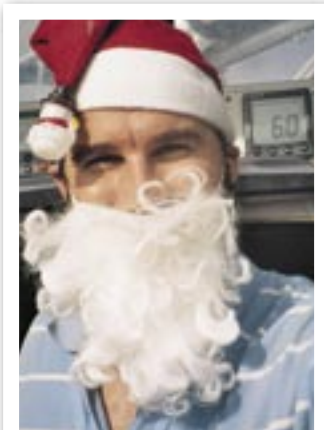
The frequency of squalls was more of a problem. For several days near the end of the passage I was hit by them with exhausting regularity. For a time there was one every couple of hours, each of them requiring sail changes.

Sleep deprivation is the other big challenge for solo sailors. But the problem only really becomes serious at the beginning of a passage and at the end. Mid-ocean, a well equipped solo sailor, with help from radar and AIS, can string together as many

catnaps as needed to stay alert.

On Christmas Day I treated myself to chocolate. I also had a small Christmas pudding, but the weather didn't allow me to use the stove, so I ate it on Boxing Day instead! I called home on the satellite phone. It was odd speaking to people who were half asleep, full of turkey, when I felt I was being roasted like a turkey in the sun!

My decision to make landfall in St Lucia



**'On Christmas Day I couldn't cook my pudding on the stove'**



**Reunited with wife Sophie and their two sons**

rather than Barbados added more time to the journey, but by now morale was so high it didn't matter. I was lucky in choosing Marigot Bay as my destination because Bob Hathaway, the marina manager, is a man of legendary 'can-do' attitude, who promised he'd keep a berth empty for my arrival.

The real luck, however, came in the welcome on my arrival. During the last week of the crossing I wondered if I'd be able to contain my emotions and excitement on being reunited with my wife, Sophie, and two young boys Ben (4) and Vincent (1) at the water's edge. I hadn't expected a welcoming party that included a launch chock-full of family, a bay full of tooting horns, crowds, dignitaries, flares, TV cameras, champagne, garlands of flowers and a steel band.

The voyage taught me many things. The best of all was having confidence in my boat: the number of times my trust among the big waves relied on the bond between me and my boat cannot be overestimated. Electronics problems can be overcome, but if I had for one second doubted the integrity of the boat, the whole voyage would have been unbearable torture. ▲

#### TRISTAN GOOLEY...

Tristan Gooley, 34, is vice-chairman of Trailfinders, the travel company founded by his father, Mike, and is a prolific adventurer. He crossed the Atlantic to achieve his dream of becoming the second man to have both flown solo and sailed solo across the Atlantic. He completed the first part of the challenge flying a single-engined Cessna Caravan from Goose Bay, Canada, to Oxford, England, via Greenland, Iceland and Scotland in May 2007. He used the challenge to raise awareness of prostate cancer, a disease that kills one man every hour, and pay tribute to Steve Fossett, the only other person known to have achieved both solo feats. Steve is missing, presumed dead in Nevada, America, following a routine flight in September 2007.

See Tristan's website:  
[www.atlanticchallenge.co.uk](http://www.atlanticchallenge.co.uk)

