

Sunday, December 1, 2013

Notes from the Sail Locker - by Rob Antony

My friend and crew mate Rob, who also happens to be a writer in real life, wrote this about our trip. Makes me wish I had taken him aboard on the whole voyage as documentarist. I'm amazed he remembered so much from the trip. With the weather and seasickness etc everything tends to blurr very quickly.

Notes from the Sail Locker (Rob Antony)

Day One

Fiji. Temperatures in the Lava-Hot range as we rush to stow the last few items and get underway in time to make it through the reef during daylight. A last minute sweep of the café and I snap up some banana cake and sausage rolls for the sail out.

On board now and as we steam out of the marina shouts and waving hands, "Good luck! Fair sailing!"... two of the Fijian waitresses leap and shout in Fijian as we pass the Sunset Bar. I'm no linguist but I suspect they are yelling, "Look! Look at the magnificently bearded one!", "How we will miss his noble presence!", "Come and have one more delicious coconut drink!" but their voices fade as we leave the marina in our wake.

An hour or two out and we set the spinnaker and roll along with the island to our left (or port side as we sailors call it). The sun lowers and it is time for refreshments. A platter of sausage roll slices and an anejo rum and coke.

Not the most successful idea. Within ten minutes Axel leaps to the side and pukes them up. I follow suit soon after. And so the theme for the first three days is established.

We edge out of the pass through the reef as the sun sets and orange, purple and black clouds await. Axel retreats for a snooze while I lie on deck wondering what the hell I am doing here. Lightning ripples across the sky.

Axel wakes and we decide to edge past the clouds leaving them to our right (or starboard side as we sailors call it)... the entirety of that half of the sky boils with bruised cloud. Lightning constantly flashes lengthways through them. Occasionally a tongue of energy licks down across the surface of the sea. It looks as though we'll miss them.

But then, up ahead, lies a long thin tail of cloud. We feel like two tiny mice trying to sneak past a sleeping dragon. If we can just sneak under his tail here we'll be away. Axel aims for an arched section of the tail and we edge underneath. And the dragon wakes up.

Great arcs of lightning ripple all around us. The mice retreat below.

My bed is at a 45 degree angle. I wedge myself in by draping my feet across the table with my foot against the mast. I begin to doubt my sanity.

Day Two

We've noticed that being on board a boat basically means falling over a lot. I manage to fall across the cabin and smash into the dividing wall between toilet and chart area. The wall comes off worse. Further tumbles break a bin, tear the shower curtain and bring my knee down on the chiller bin upstairs spilling its contents into the cockpit.

I decide to spend most of the day in one place, on deck watching Fiji recede into the distance. We rig up a sunshade but it affords meagre protection from the scorching sun. I pop downstairs for relief but it is even hotter downstairs and a diesel leak means the atmosphere is even more conducive to puking which we indulge in regularly. I snag a couple of carrots and eat them quickly. Clearly I have no ambition to keep them down but, if I'm going to spend the day throwing up, I may as well ensure my vomit looks traditional.

An hour later Axel appears with a quizzical expression on his face as I cheer loudly. "My puke has carrots in it!" He does not seem impressed.

I notice one of the bolts holding the oven on has sheared off. This now means a huge cube of sharp metal could fly around the boat at any moment taking important equipment like legs with it. Axel appears unphased, "It should be alright". But it's dangerous! If it falls out it could smash a leg! "Oh, I've got a book on amputations, I'll have to find it". I retreat upstairs (or on deck as we sailors call it).

Later I become keenly aware of the need to pee. I spot a convenient bucket and fill it accordingly. Now, how to deposit the pee over the side without taking an involuntary golden shower?

I aim downwind and fling. My grip isn't firm. Half the pee flies over the stern. I look down at the bucket. Half remains. My hat falls off into it.

As evening comes I clamber down and try to sleep. Eventually I pass into some sort of coma. I am woken by Axel yelling, "I need you buddy!"

Rain lashes down outside. I pull a raincoat over my underpants. Axel laughs. It's a tropical squall and a big one. Visibility is down to a disc about 30 meters round. Seemingly in a dream we drop the mainsail. Everything seems bathed in an unearthly purple light until lightning crashes and freeze-frames us in vivid colour.

I inform Axel that I feel he should know that I am absolutely terrified. "What of?" "Er... well Death mainly". He makes the sort of noise a horse makes when it finds a handful of rabbit turds in its oats.

The storm builds in intensity. Down below I notice the lights in the cockpit flickering wildly. "Oh great, now these lights are broken", I think. Then I realise they are actually glass deadlights and the flickering is all the lightning around us.

I wedge myself into position. At this angle the mattress continually slips off the bunk and onto the floor taking me with it. By the judicious arrangement of a host of cushions and ¾ hours wiggling around I manage to make myself relatively comfortable. The lightning builds in intensity. Every 5-10 seconds a burst now. Flash. Flash. I look down at my foot placed against the metal mast. Metal. Gudrun's lightning conductor. I shriek, lift my foot and slide onto the floor.

Day Three

Lethargy envelopes us. Much of the day is spent lying in bed drifting in and out of sleep. At some stage I manage to rouse myself and cut a watermelon into slices but our stomachs are closed and we can only manage a few bits before seeking out slumber again.

Spend any waking moments wondering what on Earth I am doing here. It occurs to me that, had I been able to speak Fijian, then the two wildly waving waitresses were probably shouting, "Where are you going? Are you totally nuts?! Don't do it, oh magnificently bearded one!" Alas this revelation is too late; Fiji has dropped behind and the open ocean surrounds us.

Day Four

The wind has shifted slightly and, for a brief moment, we feel tolerably human. Axel, having not found his amputation book, has lashed the oven in place and painstakingly creates a chunky vegetable broth. The first proper meal in days, it is delicious.

We retreat to our bunks. Axel gets out one of his many navigational devices. I watch him study the tablet intently, no doubt working out tricky computations of degrees of latitude and longitude. It makes various encouraging bing bong noises. After about an hour, and a particularly encouraging bing-a-ling noise, I venture over to see if he has any news on our position. It turns out he has been playing a driving game and the noises are made by his car driving over coins. "Any news?" "I've got a new high score" "About our position?" "Oh yes, we're over half way". I celebrate the news by falling over.

German humour " Example One

Water drips from the ceiling. Axel wakes me and points to it. "We're sinking" "Huh?" "Yes, we're sinking."

Weâ€™ll have to abandon ship". "WHAT!!" He doubles over laughing, hooting away like an asthmatic camel.

Day Five

I force myself into the kitchen to try and actually make something to eat. I retrieve a pumpkin from its lair and cube it. Axel stands next to me chatting when a sudden lurch sends me reeling with a large knife in my hand. I have time to think "Donâ€™t stab Axel! Donâ€™t stab yourself!" before clattering into the navigation table and crushing a couple of ribs. Axel pisses himself.

I retreat to my bunk. Axel completes the pumpkin soup - which one has to hold at a ludicrous 45 degree angle and almost spoon horizontally into oneâ€™s mouth to avoid spilling it.

Later Axel cajoles me onto deck. He has a disturbing gleam in his eye that usually ends in frantic activity. Today is no exception. We clear the decks and set the parasailor. It fills and pulls but the wind builds. Axel goes to get ready to drop it and an astonishing flock of seabirds boil into the sky behind him like a cloud of bats.

A portent of doom however: Moments later the parasailor explodes into shattered rags of fabric. Axel laughs and shakes his head. Itâ€™s impossible not to be caught up in Axelâ€™s irrepressible good humour and energy. Itâ€™s hard to find fault in him as a skipper and shipmate (other than the ship itself is still in the middle of nowhere and there is a storm coming).

The storm builds. This is the toughest night yet. The sheer amount of noise as we smash through the waves is astonishing. Barely any sleep and during the night what seems to be a small van crashes into the side of the boat. Gudrun shivers and surges on.

Axel peers out into the night sky. "Wow! Look at all the stars, itâ€™s amazing!" I eye the distance between me and the view. About nine feet. A journey to and from, with re-wedging into bed, of about 45 minutes. "I'll have a look later".

Much later and my full bladder forces me from bed past the sleeping Axel. I peer out to see the stars. Clouds have swept in and covered the sky. I fall over.

Day Six

The day is spent in ferocious winds and seas. Axel pronounces he has a new high score. He also says we have missed the dreaded calms and might now have this wind right to the finish which should make for a super fast crossing but an extremely uncomfortable finish. I pin myself in my bunk.

Water streams in from every nook and cranny. Peering up from the cabin the seas are mountainous. I retreat to my bunk where I spend the night listening to trolls smash the side of the boat with large hammers.

German Humour â€“ Example Two

Axel wakes me with an urgent expression on his face. "Thereâ€™s a halyard stuck up the mast, Iâ€™m going to have to hoist you up" "Youâ€™re joking right?" "No, itâ€™s urgent mate, youâ€™re going to have to go up the mast". I sigh and reach for my shorts. Axel almost chokes to death laughing.

Day Seven

The prospect of sighting land spurs me on deck where I tie myself in and cling on. The sea is still huge and the swell pretty confused. The waves are short and sharp but then, every ten minutes or so, an absolute monster swell rises up from the South. It rolls in, a steely grey-blue and then, just as it reaches the boat, the very peak of the wave lifts and is pierced by the rising sun behind it. Startling aquamarine, icy blue topped with a perfectly transparent crest. "I am water", it says, "I am beautiful" and SMASH it hurls itself against us and tries to crush us to pieces. Looking downwind from the vantage point of the windward rail, the waves appear to roll downhill forever. If they were solid you could simply fall from the boat and tumble, tumble until you fell off the edge of the world.

Axel rests as I stay fixed on deck desperate for my first glimpse of land. A shadow on the horizon. Hard to be sure. Wait, there it is again, "Land Ho! Land Ahoy!"

Relief sweeps over me; we might just make it after all.

But the sea steepens, the battering continues and a watched headland is much like a watched pot and never boils. Or something. It takes forever but finally, finally we are inside the shelter of the Bay of Islands and the swell dies and the dread feeling of impending doom is finally lifted.

A last minute panic when Customs at Opuia appear to be about to knock off for the day before weâ€™ arrive is averted and I clumsily moor the boat as they sort the paperwork with Axel and clear us.

Finally. Time to moor and, hark, who are these likely looking strumpets racing down the marina pier ready to welcome us?

We stumble ashore and, much to Axelâ€™s satisfaction, have made it in less than seven days. Not a week one would want to ever repeat but, now that we have survived, one that we will relish forever. Food, beverages await. Our stomachs lead us from the boat. Towards anything but sausage rolls.

Posted by Axel Busch in Gudrun V at 16:04