

2015 YCC Cruise to the Azores – The Spirito story

For the majority of Spirito's crew, the story of this cruise started long before we met in Horta airport, in the island of Faial. Sailing in the Azores, in the middle of the Atlantic, had been on the minds of some of us for quite some time. Probably from the 2013 YCC cruise in Mallorca, with Manfred, Dennis, Dan, Manuel and Ricardo. Instead of the one boat we sailed in Mallorca, the following year there were 2 boats in the YCC flotilla sailing the Aegean. But Dennis and Manfred kept the idea alive and even initiated contacts with a company in the Azores about renting a boat. In the meantime, Manuel had moved to Scotland, Ricardo to Lisbon, Dennis couldn't make it and it became too late to get cheap flights. So the Azores cruise got postponed. But the will was there and in early 2015 we started again to plan for this adventure. Pedro joined the crew instead of Manuel.

The interest started to grow. Sailazores gave us a good deal for one boat, then two, and then three boats were suddenly in the plan! But all was not plain sailing! Manfred had a serious health problem, which made us all very anxious. Not knowing if he would be well enough to come, we were forced to change our plans and Dennis took the burden of replacing Manfred as skipper. We continued to get the cruise organized, hoping that he would be able to come, but not always confidently. We should have known better! With his usual steadfastness, Manfred did a wonderful recovery and got the all clear from his doctor one week before the cruise. Some may hazard a guess that Manfred somehow decided to recover in time to join us!..

September 5th:

So, after much planning, worrying and and dealing with countless details, we were finally in the Horta airport in Faial, literally the island of Faiais, or Beech trees. It was a warm morning in early September, with Pico mountain piercing the mantle of clouds in the distance, and the adventure was about to begin.



Immediately the Fates decided to test us by making Helen's luggage go amiss! It had been sent to the wrong island, and would take a couple of days to get back to us. We travelled to Horta where, after some waiting, we got to our boats: three Dufour Grand'Large of different sizes (Spirito a 40-footer, Primo a 45'er). Trevi was on its way to Horta after a week of sailing from S.Miguel. And we were a happy bunch! Well, with the possible exception of

Helen, who was slightly worried about what to wear on the morrow but keeping her wonderful Irish optimism. Next thing we got through the boat checks, got our food from the supermarket (in a truck!), Trevi arrived, and we all got together and went out to a restaurant for a YCC dinner of fish grilled on hot lava stones and local wine.

September 6th:

Next morning we woke up and got Spirito in ship shape for our first sail. We left Horta harbour with a few knots of wind filling a happy main sail and Genoa. Someone spotted a plane carrying Helen's luggage to Horta! Five minutes into the trip there was a sudden bang. The halyard knot had slipped and the main sail was down in the lazy jack. Since we were still close to the harbour and the halyard was inside the mast, we got back and asked the company to fix the problem (well, it was their knot...) which took a few hours. We left again after lunch and sailed towards Velas, in the beautiful island of S.Jorge. The Horta channel, just outside the harbour is the only place where tidal current makes a difference (2 or 3 knots) and we still caught the end of it to give us a push half the way to Velas. Unfortunately the wind had almost died and we motor-sailed all the way. This was a nice passage to get us our sea legs: just over 20 miles, sailing between the islands of Faial, S.Jorge, and Pico – Portuguese for Peak, and in fact the highest point in all of Portugal.



Mooring in Velas was not simple. The marina is very nice and well equipped, and – essential in the middle of the Atlantic – well protected from the sea and wind, but it is small and full of tight spots around the better-protected end. After exploring a bit we resigned ourselves to stay closer to the entrance. The swell wasn't uncomfortable and we had more space. In fact, since a storm was expected for the following day, we ended up taking up two berths with our lines and springs. But the boat was not going to move for anything short of a

hurricane. Being the first in Velas, we could warn Primo (even longer than Spirito and with a broken bow thruster) to also stay close to the harbour entrance. Despite our carefully planned supplies, we couldn't resist going out for a fish meal again. Velas town is small and pretty, and it has a very nice fish restaurant in the main square. Another nice surprise were the sounds that greeted us in the marina as night fell. Like a B-series science fiction movie in the middle of a Martian invasion, even if not as loud and without the little green men. It was in fact the Cagarras, the local name for the Cory Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*, for the biologically fussy) a bird which looks a bit like a seagull and hunts at night. In the Azores you can find night-hunting seagulls and night-hunting bats...

September 7th:

Next day the storm arrived as expected. No question of going to sea with 50-knot winds and intense rain, so we hired two cars and visited the island under the furious rain. Pedro excelled as master of ceremony and organized a visit to a local cheese factory – S.Jorge's has excellent cheese! – and had lunch in a Fajã – a shelf of ground accumulated over the millennia, fallen from the steep cliffs which make up the whole island. We next drove along the top of the 40km long and narrow (5km) island to the Ponta do Topo lighthouse, which we would see again from the sea on the following day.



September 8th:

Primo and us left Velas together, very early in the morning as we had a 50-mile journey to Angra do Heroísmo. After a couple of hours we watched the sun rising behind S.Jorge. That day we watched huge waterfalls from the island's cliffs, carrying the rainwater from the previous day, and later a family of dolphins playing merrily with our boat. It was a nice, relaxing sail, together with Primo, with the swell gently pushing us towards Terceira (the Third island; the discoverers of the Azores were very literally minded). There was a bit of excitement when our attempt at fishing (we were aiming for tuna) managed to catch a seagull, which luckily got away screaming at us in angry and rude tones. Our reasoning is that the boat was going too fast for fish to catch us, but there is no established consensus on this point. We finally rounded Mount Brazil and entered the bay of Angra do Heroísmo. It's name means "the Bay of Heroes", and comes from a famous battle in the Portuguese civil Liberal War, or War of the Two Brothers, which eventually led

to the independence of Brazil. It is a beautiful city of colourful houses and one of the oldest in the Azores. The day finished with a trip to a fish restaurant (yes, again!).

September 9th:

The next day, Primo's crew went around the island to visit the volcanic caves. We opted for a bit of cultural tourism in Angra (in other words, we felt lazy). As our attempt at fishing had not been as successful as we had planned, we decided to visit the local market. By a stroke of luck, the owner of the fish shop was just arriving with a load of freshly caught fish. We bought a small tuna, incredibly fresh, whose destiny was to end up in steaks and a wonderful curry which we had on the boat at dinner. Lunch was another highlight of the day. We had limpets (tough as rubber) and barnacles (delicious) in a small restaurant above the market. Dennis was amazed to see that one can eat the things that stick on the underside of boats!



We left at sunset with the plan of sailing to Lajes, on the south shore of Pico island and meet there with Trevi. But not before leaving the YCC mark on the wall of the Angra harbour. It was a 55 mile passage against the SW wind and we decided to sail it at night, to leave a good margin before we had to be back in Horta. Not much wind was expected, but as we neared the point of S.Jorge, it went up from 15-20 knots to almost 40 knots and about 3m waves. This was made more uncomfortable by the amount of sail we had, even with one reef. The problem is that the Genoa roller was essentially stuck. So at around 3am, after the autopilot gave up trying to steer against such force, Dan went to the bow and rolled the Genoa by hand. In the process, the Genoa sheets got

tangled with the topping lift halyard, which was left dangling from the mast by the constant shaking of the boat. This led to a joyous half hour of Dan and Ricardo untangling a 1-metre long knot on the foredeck, but the boat was much more manageable after that. On the other hand, rounding the point of Pico with a wind which was likely stronger than this might be the wrong thing to do. So our plan changed and we aimed our bow to S.Roque instead, on the north side of Pico.

September 10th:

The morning came with a beautiful sunrise and a lot less wind, as we were protected in the channel between Pico and S.Jorge. Suddenly we got a VHF call from Jens sailing in Trevi. They were coming south from Velas (S.Jorge) and going to Lajes, so we crossed on the way, going in opposite directions. We sailed together for a few minutes to chat before heading again to S.Roque.

We got to S.Roque in the morning. There's a small museum dedicated to the whaling industry which existed in the Azores until it was banished in 1972. The museum is installed in the old factory at the port where sperm whales' blubber, meat and bones were transformed into oil, fertilizer, vitamins, etc. S.Roque is a fishing and commercial port, well protected from the S and SW by the bulk of Pico, but open to the swell from the North. We had an interesting night that felt a bit like being inside a washing machine but was fine once we got used to the movement. We were tired enough to sleep anyway.





September 11th:

The next morning Dennis, Manfred, Pedro and Ricardo got a car to visit the island while Dan stayed in the boat. We went up to Pico mountain (a paradise of cows!) and visited Trevi in Lajes marina before coming back to the boat and getting ready to cast off. This was our last sailing day and we were some 20 miles from Horta, to be back in the afternoon before the gas pump closed. The wind was weak as it had generally been, but there was a gentle breeze and we had a nice sail on a sunny afternoon. We got to Horta marina and soon moved to Peter's café for a well deserved Gin & tonic, and were soon joined by the others for more beverages. And we had a great surprise: there was a nice red flag hanging with the others in Peter's café bearing the YCC logo! Our friends Martin and Anna, sailing Ojala on their way home from across the world, had left it!

And that was it. The end of another great YCC cruise!

