

Another Way Home

Transatlantic from Lagos, PT to the Chesapeake Bay

During the summer of 2006 I sailed my Pearson 424 Ketch, Sarah, in the Western Mediterranean. Toward the end of that summer I decided to cut short my cruise of the Mediterranean Sea and return Sarah to the Chesapeake Bay.

By early September Sarah was berthed in Lagos, PT and I began planning my re-crossing of the Atlantic. Initially I consulted various cruising guides for appropriate routes and times for crossing. I discovered the guides offered only two routes:

1. The traditional trade wind route via the Canaries to the Windward Islands during the winter months and then island hopping north to the US.
2. An early summer crossing to the Chesapeake via the Azores and Bermuda.

Neither of these routes was very appealing to me. I had no interest in sailing to the Caribbean and spending additional months working my way up the island chains to Florida and eventually the Chesapeake. In 2005 I had crossed to Europe via Bermuda and the Azores. It was a very pleasant trip, but conditions going the other way might not offer an equally pleasant voyage. In late spring and early summer there are still many storm systems moving across the Atlantic near 40° North Latitude bringing westerly winds, sometimes gale force to the rhumb line course from the Azores to Bermuda. The best way to avoid these conditions is to dive south into the Bermuda-Azores high pressure ridge and risk being caught in extensive calms. After reading Nigel Calder's article in the November, 2006 Ocean Navigator on his recent Atlantic crossing where they motored most of the way, I started looking for a route that would not put too many additional hours on my 30 year old engine.

So I spent a very pleasant winter in Lagos in company with many other cruisers, while developing another route back the U.S.A the following summer.

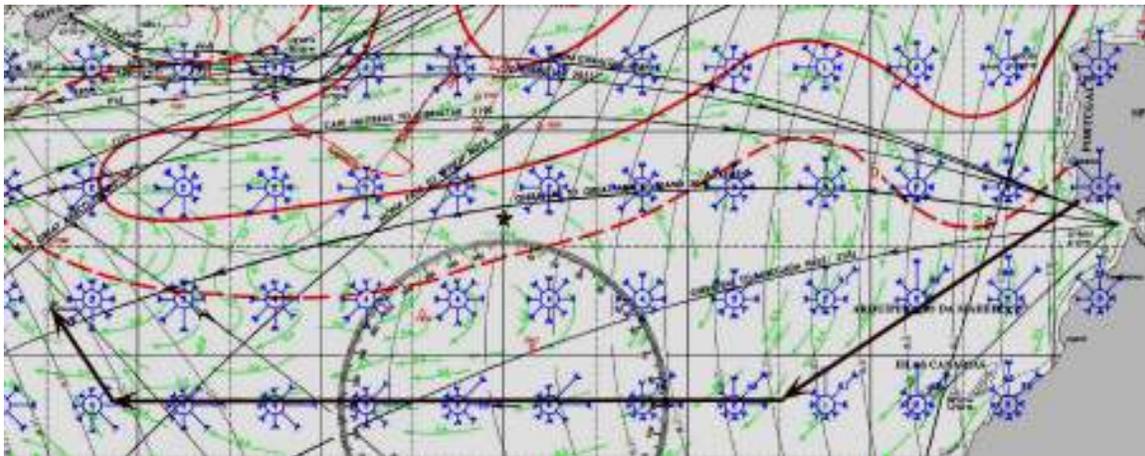


Figure 1, May Pilot Chart Extract (NGA Pub 106)

Figure 1 is an extract from the May Pilot Chart showing the potential route. Once the high pressure ridge has established itself west of the Iberian Peninsula the prevailing wind off the Atlantic Coast of Portugal is from the north. The circulation around the high pressure could provide favorable winds to sail down the eastern end of the ridge to just below 30° North Latitude, then turn west for the crossing until heading north toward Bermuda.

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This route had a lot of appeal in that it promised fresh, favorable winds for a westward passage and the high pressure ridge would provide a buffer from any late spring storm systems in the North Atlantic. There is some risk of encountering the effects of an easterly wave moving from Africa toward the Caribbean, but if I left in early May and stayed north of 25° North Latitude that risk should be minimal.

Another positive aspect was that this route would take me very close to the Portuguese island of Madeira, about 450 nm SSW of Lagos. I would have the opportunity for a lay over early in the passage, something I found in the past to be very advantageous. There always seems to be a few provisioning items that did not make it onto the list and at least one piece of equipment that decides to fail after a couple of days at sea. Madeira would make a good lay over destination to resolve any such issues. Also, I very much wanted to visit this island.

Well this certainly looked promising, but if it was so obvious why is there no mention of the route in any of the crossing guides and voyaging publications? I solicited input from others who may have done a similar crossing through emails and postings on several Internet sailing and cruising forums – with a resounding silence in response. The only positive response was from Herb Helgenberg. Herb thought the route was very viable and wondered himself why so many cruisers try to make the passage from the north. So with encouragement from Herb and a few others I locked into this route and began preparations for a May departure from Lagos.

In late April Bob Calt, my crew member for the passage, arrived in Lagos and we completed the final preparations for departure. Bob had never sailed on Sarah so while we waited for the high pressure ridge to settle into a favorable position, we used the time for day sails along the Algarve Coast of Portugal.

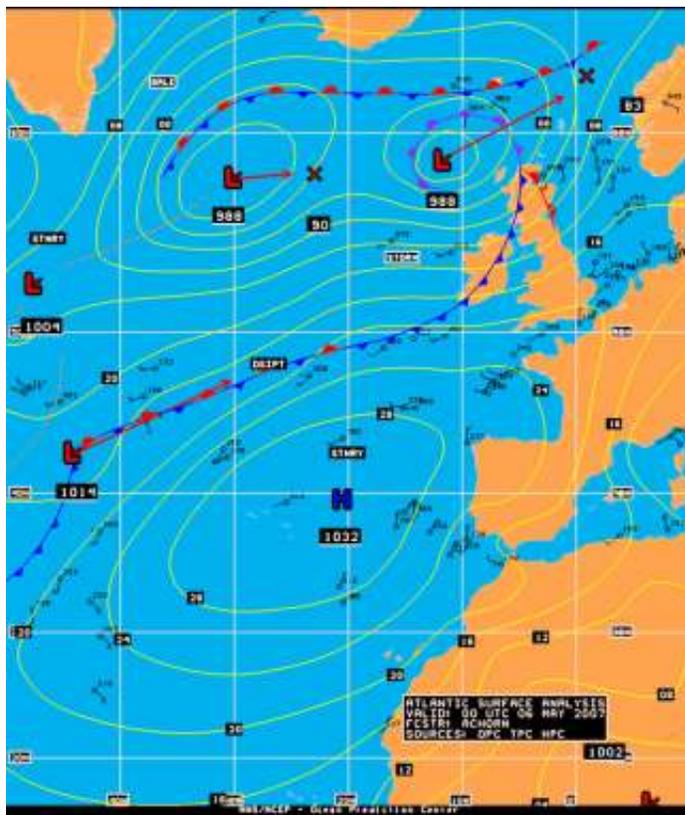


Figure 2, NOAA Surface Analysis, 00Z, May 6, 2007

By the first of May the ridge was nearly in place, but still not quite far enough north. We had northerly winds off the Portuguese Coast, but they were more north westerly. We waited a few more days until the winds veered to almost due north. By May 6 the conditions, as shown in Figure 2, were right and we departed Lagos in the mid-afternoon. Initially we were in the lee of Cabo Sao Vicente, the southwest corner of Portugal, and we slowly motor sailed in the light winds. As we moved out of the lee the winds backed to north and increased in force. By the time we started to cross the shipping lanes off Sao Vicente the winds had increased to about 25 kts. Figure 3 shows a screen capture from my PC of the AIS reporting shipping in these very busy traffic lanes.

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We continued on a west-southwesterly course for the first 24 hours as the winds veered through the north to northeast. Then we tacked to the south and headed almost directly toward the island of Madeira. For the first two days the wind was consistently between 20 and 25 kts and the seas around 6'. As long as we kept the wind

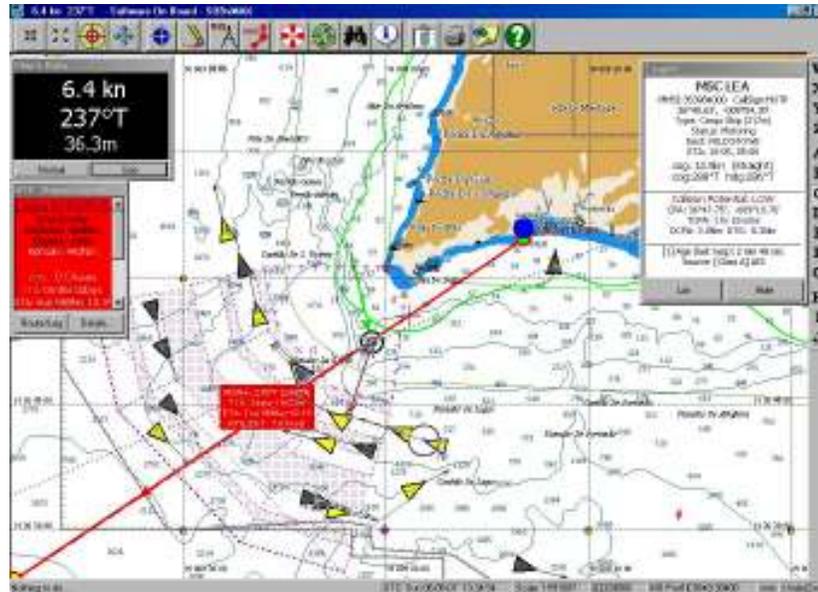


Figure 3, Crossing the Shipping Lanes

and seas on the quarter rather than dead astern we had a fast and reasonably comfortable sail.

Toward the end of the second day I discovered that one of the control lines on my Monitor Windvane Steerer had nearly chafed through. One of the self-aligning fairlead blocks on the windvane was stuck in a poor position. I decided not to hand over the transom in 6' seas to replace the control line and lubricate the stuck block. So we switched to the autopilot for the rest of the way to Madeira. Now at least our stop in Madeira had a passage-related purpose and would not just be a tourist stop.

On the third day the winds began to die and we motored the final 100 nm to Madeira.

Before departing Lagos I had reserved a berth at the Porto de Recreio da Calheta, one of three new marinas on the island. I chose Calheta purely by the chance that they were the only marina to respond to my email inquiries. As it turned out this was a good chance. Of the other new marinas on the island, one is closed (apparently for excessive surge and silting), and the other is very remote on the far eastern end of the island. Calheta is on the far western end, but it is well served by a large local supermarket and restaurants. Figure 4 shows Sarah in her berth in Calheta.

The best known marina on Madeira is in the capital city and principal port of Funchal. Until the newer marinas were constructed a few years ago, the Funchal marina was the only option on the island. Other cruisers who have stopped in Madeira recommended that I not stay in Funchal because of the surge and the general griminess of a commercial port. Most recommended I stay on the smaller island of Porto Santo and take the ferry to Madeira for touring. I really wanted to see as much of the island as possible during our

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stopover and I guessed the ferry service would take a lot of time away from touring and add to the cost. So I opted for the marina at Calheta.

Bob and I thoroughly enjoyed our brief stay on Madeira at Calheta. Although the marina is remote from Funchal, there is a large Pingo Doce Supermercado right next to the



Figure 4, Sarah berthed at Calheta, Madeira (Photo by the Author)

they first started coming to Calheta it took six hours to drive the 40 km from Calheta to the airport on the other side of Funchal. Today the trip takes less than 30 minutes.

marina. We were also able to rent a car through the local travel agent and spent several days touring Funchal and the rest of the island. Touring by car is possible because of the massive investment Portugal and the EU have made in developing the highway infrastructure on the island. It is an amazing network of tunnels and bridges that must have cost billions of Euros to construct. The island is made up of a series of rib-like mountain ridges (Lombos in Portuguese) with deep valleys between the ridges. Until 10 or 15 years ago most of the roads followed the walls of the ridges zigzagging between the coast and the inland head of the valleys. A British couple we met at the marina told us when

After 6 days of touring and the fixing the windvane we were ready to depart Madeira for the longest leg of the voyage. We arrived on Madeira in calm winds and fog. Those conditions prevailed for most of our stay, but finally the high pressure ridge was re-positioned (Figure 5) to provide the strong north easterly winds we needed for a fast passage and we departed Madeira on May 15.

Upon departure from the marina we were in the lee of the island and started sailing in very light winds. Within a few hours we moved out of the lee of the island and the winds filled in from the northeast at 25 – 30 kts., with a few gusts over 35 kts.

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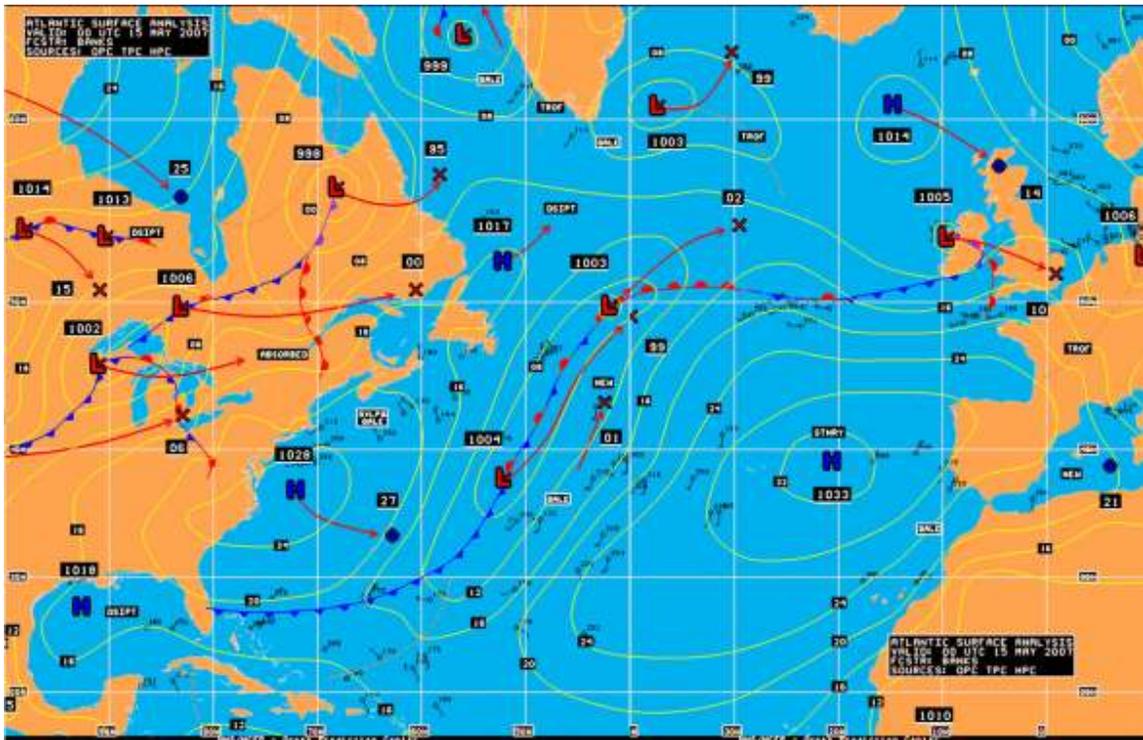


Figure 5, NOAA Surface Analysis, 00Z, May 15, 2007

With north east winds we were able to head almost due west for the first 6 days. During the first 4 days the winds stayed at 30 kts or more, and we made great time logging 24 hour runs of 162, 140, 154, and 161 nm. Gradually the winds diminished to around 20 kts or less, but we continued to log more than 140 nm each day.

Finally on May 20 we altered course to head south of 30° North Latitude. We did this to stay in the fresh easterly winds and also to avoid the potential of headwinds forming above that latitude.

When we departed Madeira there was a deep low pressure trough lying off the U.S. Coast in the vicinity of Bermuda (see Figure 5). Now nearly a week later as we passed 30° West Longitude that trough was still in place and it continued to spawn a series of small storm systems in the vicinity of the Bahamas that then raced off to the northeast (see Figure 6). By this time we were in daily contact with Herb Helgenberg on the Southbound II net and were able to use his input in maneuvering toward Bermuda without sailing directly into one of these storms.

On Herb's advice we sailed down to nearly 26° North Latitude to stay out of the effects of these storms, one of which was the short-lived Tropical Storm Barry.

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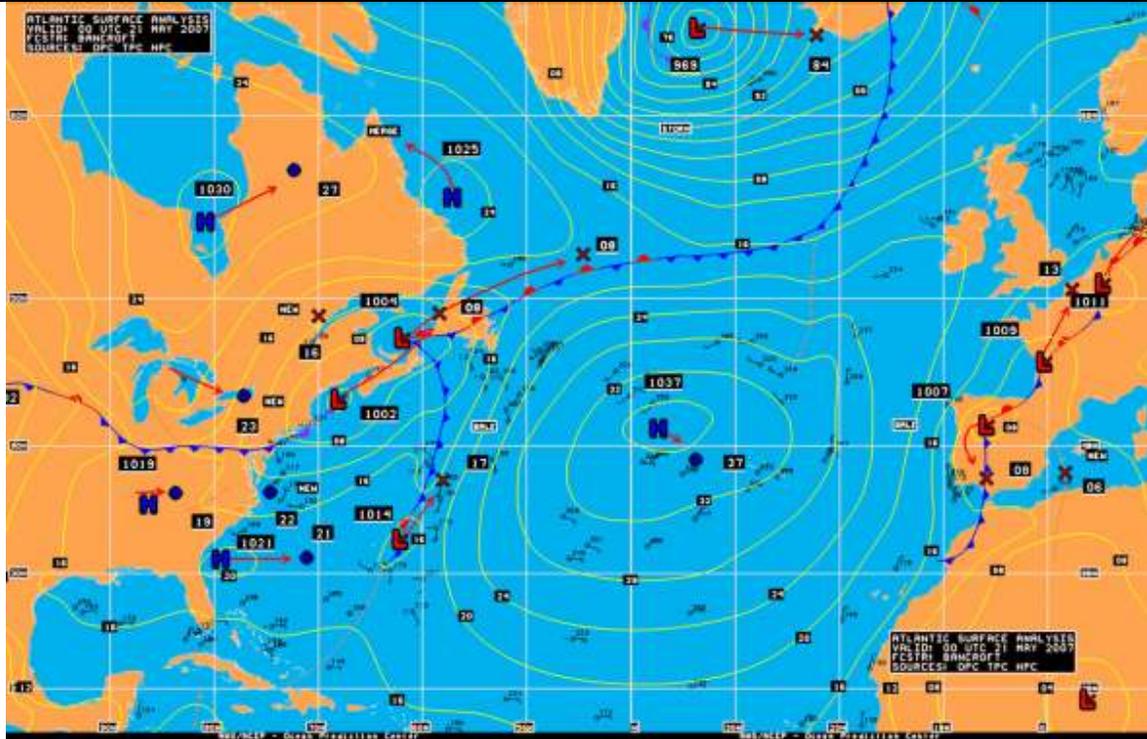


Figure 6, NOAA Surface Analysis, 00z, May 21, 2007

Finally on May 31 as we reached 55° West Longitude and TS Barry was moving up the southeast coast, we turned north directly for Bermuda. We arrived in St. Georges harbor on June 3. The total distance sailed by log from Madeira to Bermuda was 2,771 nm in just under 20 days during which time we averaged 138 nm/day. We also accomplished one of my major goals – to minimize engine hours. We used the main engine for only 40 hours on the passage. Most of those hours were on the final run to Bermuda when we used the engine to keep our speed up so we could beat a frontal passage into Bermuda. We did not use the engine at all for the first two weeks of the passage.

We spend a pleasant week in Bermuda where we were joined by Bob's wife Christie McGue for the final leg to the Chesapeake Bay. We had to delay our departure for several days while a semi-stationary low north of Bermuda continuously fed strong northwesterly winds into the area. At last on June 11 the low moved far enough to the northeast to allow us to depart.

Unfortunately when that low pressure system moved off so did all of the wind and we had calm to light air conditions for the entire trip to the Chesapeake. At this point I was less concerned about engine hours than when we departed Lagos and we motored all but 26 hours of the 6 day trip to the Chesapeake. After stopping in Little Creek, VA to check in with Homeland Security and to take on fuel, we continued to motor up the Chesapeake to Sarah's old berth in Town Creek off the Patuxent River, near the yachting center of Solomons, MD.

For me, this was a very successful route. It accomplished all of my goals for the trip and (except for the leg from Bermuda to the Chesapeake) provided days of really great sailing in excellent weather. Although I wasn't monitoring the weather on the Azores route I

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expect conditions there were not nearly as pleasant with a continuous stream of low pressure systems moving just north of the rhumb line between Bermuda and the Azores. This certainly would not be the preferred route for all crossings from Europe to the U.S. East Coast. Those departing from north of the Iberian Peninsula or those destined for the Northeast U.S. would probably opt for the much shorter route from the Azores. However I do recommend that anyone departing from Spain, Portugal or the Mediterranean for the U.S. Coast south of Cape May, NJ consider this route in your planning.



Figure 7, Plotted Log, Lagos to Chesapeake Bay

Figure 7 shows a plot of our log for the entire Atlantic crossing. Below are pictures of myself (with a stowaway who joined us on the way to Madeira), and Bob (with two of the only three fish we caught on the trip).

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Figure 8, The Author and Stowaway (Photo by Bob Calt)

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Figure 9, Bob Calt and Two Scabbard Fish (Photo by the Author)