



Sandra Clayton

A thousand miles from anywhere

*'There was never a time
in my life that I envisaged
crossing the Atlantic.
Yet here I am.'*

A thousand
miles from
anywhere

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Dolphins Under My Bed

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At a time when their contemporaries already had one eye focused on their pension, and conscious that age and ill health could prevent them sailing away to warmer climes, Sandra and David Clayton left the world of work behind to grasp their dream. The *Voyager* books are Sandra's charming account of the journey that became their adventure of a lifetime.

‘A “sticky book”. I couldn’t put it down’

Cruising Magazine

‘I can’t emphasise enough how well Clayton writes... her prose is so vivid that the reader is left with indelible images’

Living Aboard

‘A most charming read’

The Lifeboat

Sandra Clayton

A thousand
miles from
anywhere



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Contents

The Journey	viii
The Beaufort Wind Force Scale	x
Acknowledgements	xii
About <i>Voyager</i>	xiii
Prelude	xv

THE MADEIRA ISLANDS

PORTO SANTO

1	A Friendly Little Island	2
---	--------------------------	---

MADEIRA

2	Under the Volcano	9
3	Funchal	15

SELVAGEM GRANDE

4	Salvage on My Mind	21
---	--------------------	----

THE CANARY ISLANDS

TENERIFE

5	Santa Cruz	26
6	The Neighbours	33
7	Los Cristianos	37

LA GOMERA

8	San Sebastian	41
9	The Garden of Eden	48

TENERIFE

10	At Anchor Again	53
11	A Tragedy	55
12	Return to Santa Cruz	56



13	A Magical Mystery Tour	64
14	A Spell of Bad Weather	69

TO THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

15	Dolphin Delight	76
16	A Lack of Stimuli	82
17	Assorted Visitors	88
18	Mindelo	94
19	Preparing for the Crossing	101

THE ATLANTIC

20	A Vast Empty Sea	106
21	Life at Sea	111
22	Peculiar Weather	116
23	The Festive Season	124
24	One of the Locals Stops By	132
25	A New Millennium	135

THE CARIBBEAN

ANTIGUA

26	Getting Acquainted	144
27	Just Another Day in Paradise	150
28	A Different Antigua	153
29	Getting Sorted	158
30	Jolly Harbour	163
31	A Trip around the Island	168
32	Moving On	176

NEVIS

33	Charlestown Harbour	180
34	A Little Local History	185
35	A Bus Called <i>Babylon</i>	189
36	Pinney's Beach	195

ST KITTS

37	Brimstone Hill Fort	199
----	---------------------	-----



SINT EUSTATIUS

38	Such Friendly People	207
----	----------------------	-----

ST MARTIN

39	A Schizophrenic Island	213
40	Philipsburg	217
41	Simpson Bay Lagoon	221
42	Marigot	227
43	Back at Simpson Bay Lagoon	230

THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

44	Paradise to Purgatory	235
45	Tortola	241
46	Paradise Resumed	245
47	Treasure Island	249
48	Prickly Pear Island	252
49	Clearing Out	255

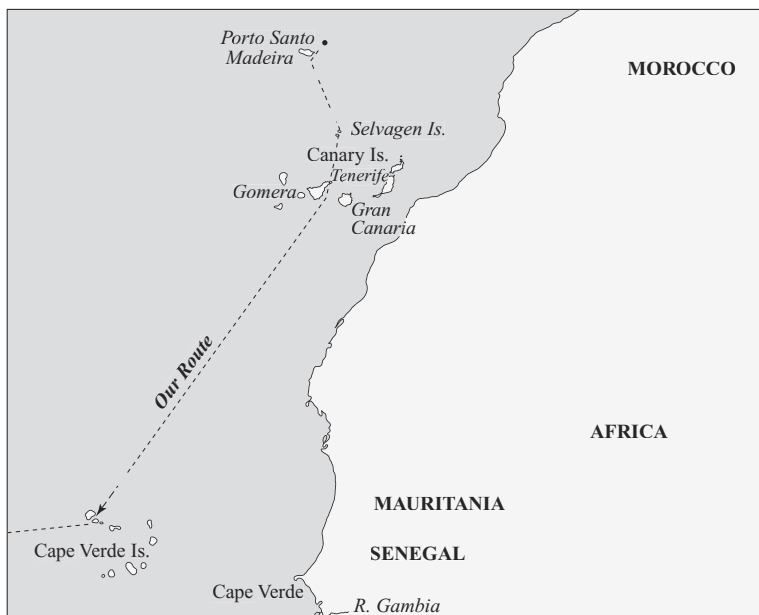
NEXT STOP, AMERICA

50	At Sea Once More	258
51	Ruminations	262
52	Deteriorating Conditions	266
53	A Night to Remember	269
54	Normal Service is Resumed	273
55	The Bermuda Triangle	276
56	Bird on a Wire	279

	Glossary for Non-Sailors	284
--	--------------------------	-----

The Journey





The Beaufort Wind Force Scale

In Britain, and much of Europe, wind and vessel speeds are described in knots. One knot equals a nautical mile covered in one hour and is roughly equivalent to 1.15mph.

Also used is the Beaufort Wind Force Scale. This was created in 1805 by Sir Francis Beaufort, a British naval officer and hydrographer, before instruments were available and it was subsequently adapted for non-naval use.

When accurate wind measuring instruments became available it was decided to retain the scale and this accounts for the idiosyncratic speeds, eg Force 5 is 17–21 knots, not 15–20 as one might expect. Under numbered headings representing wind force, this scale also provides the sea conditions typically associated with them, although these can be affected by the direction from which the wind is coming.

The scale is reproduced on the opposite page.

Force	Knots	mph	Sea Condition
1 Light Airs	1–3	1–3	Ripples.
2 Light Breeze	4–6	4–7	Small wavelets.
3 Gentle Breeze	7–10	8–12	Large wavelets with scattered white caps (also known as white horses).
4 Moderate Breeze	11–16	13–18	Small waves with frequent white caps.
5 Fresh Breeze	17–21	19–24	Moderate waves with many white caps.
6 Strong Breeze	22–27	25–31	Large waves with foam crests and some spray.
7 Near Gale	28–33	32–38	Sea heaps up and foam begins to streak.
8 Gale	34–40	39–46	Moderately high waves with breaking crests forming spindrift (spray blown along the sea's surface).
9 Strong Gale	41–47	47–54	High waves with dense foam. Waves start to roll over. Considerable spray.
10 Storm	48–55	55–63	Very high waves with long overhanging crests. The sea surface white with considerable tumbling. Visibility reduced.
11 Violent Storm	56–63	64–72	Exceptionally high waves.
12 Hurricane	64+	73+	Huge waves. Air filled with foam and spray.

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About *Voyager*

Voyager is a heavy cruising catamaran that was built by Solaris Yachts at Southampton. They built strong, comfortable boats but ceased trading after a disastrous fire spread from a neighbouring yard. *Voyager* is their Sunstream model, 40ft long x 16ft wide with twin 27hp diesel engines.

She is a typical British catamaran in that she has a small mainsail and a large genoa which is her main source of power. She is cutter rigged and therefore has a small staysail as well as the other two sails.

Her two hulls are connected by a bridge deck with a cabin on it which provides the main living area, or saloon. It contains a large sofa, a coffee table, a dining table and a chart table. Opposite the chart table, and overlooking the galley, the starboard dining seating quickly converts to a breakfast bar which also makes an ideal dining area for any meal on a bouncy sea as there is less potential for loose objects to move about.

From the saloon, you enter the starboard or right-hand hull down three steps. Immediately in front of you is the galley. Turn right and there is an additional food preparation area, storage for cutlery and crockery and a large chest freezer. In the stern is a double bunk, a wardrobe, dressing table and clothing cupboards. Underneath the bunk is one of *Voyager's* engines. At the bow end of this hull there is a head containing a toilet, wash basin and a bath.

The port hull contains in its stern an identical suite to the one in the starboard hull plus a shower, toilet and vanity. There is a further cabin in the bow of this hull but for the voyage we converted it into a storage space with a small workbench and vice.

Out on deck *Voyager* has a deep, well-protected cockpit and all her sails can be handled from within it.

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Prelude

Looking back on my life, there was never a time when I envisaged crossing the Atlantic two-handed on a forty-foot boat. Yet here I am. Testimony to the sublime unpredictability of human existence and the dangers inherent in uttering those immortal words, ‘Oh, alright then.’

David and I had wanted to make a fundamental change to our lives. Overworked, unfit and living in a cold damp climate, we had already reached that age where you see one of your parents looking back at you when you inadvertently catch sight of yourself in a mirror. We wanted a little warmth and to be physically active before we got too old.

The answer – although not without some initial resistance on my part – was to exchange our house in the north of England for a catamaran called *Voyager* and set sail for the Mediterranean. It was not only a time for putting our seamanship to the test but also for revelling in small coastal towns and villages and the joy of dolphins swimming with our boat. This was how *Dolphins Under My Bed*, the first of the *Voyager* books, came into being.

The second stage of our odyssey was a summer spent dawdling around the Mediterranean as we finally shed our house and possessions, not to mention quite a few pounds in weight. We were getting fitter from the daily exercise required by sailing, and healthier from outdoor living and a simpler diet. And it would become something of a personal journey as well as a physical one, with a developing sense of what was really important in our lives.

My second book, *Turtles in Our Wake*, reflects a growing confidence in our abilities as yachtsmen. We had come late to sailing and felt we lacked experience. We’d had our sights on the Caribbean, but only if we felt up to it. After a summer around Spain’s Balearic Islands and the Italian island of Sardinia, we decided we were. Accordingly, we left our comfort zone of coastal waters and headed out into the Atlantic.

As this third book begins, David and I have just completed the first leg of a voyage to the Caribbean – that Northern European’s daydream of coral sand, warm sea, waving palm trees and friendly, happy people.



We are currently anchored at Porto Santo, a very small island 500 miles off the north-west coast of Africa. Only seven miles by four, it is one of the Madeira Group of Atlantic islands and a convenient stopping off place for yachtsmen on their way from Europe to the Caribbean.

What lies between us and that mecca of laid-back living and coral sand – apart from several thousand miles of open sea – is the North Atlantic hurricane season. So while we wait for that to blow over we plan to spend the time exploring some captivating Atlantic islands which, along with Madeira, include the Canary and Cape Verde Islands.

After four months soaking up the charms of the Caribbean there will come the crucial question: where do we go from here to escape the Hurricane Zone? There are a number of options, the most alluring being the United States of America and an entirely different kind of sailing from anything we have done so far. As a result, *A Thousand Miles from Anywhere* ends with us bobbing on the Gulf Stream and gazing through the darkness at the flickering lights of the Florida shore.

For now, however, we are about to embark on the delights of the Madeiras.

THE MADEIRA ISLANDS



PORTO SANTO

I

A Friendly Little Island

Graffiti, as everybody knows, is the domain of adolescent males in hoodies. It is usually perpetrated under cover of darkness and it is a prosecutable offence. So as we disembark from our dinghy on this bright afternoon, it comes as a surprise to see a middle-aged couple hard at work on the harbour wall under the noses of the authorities.

This is the first place we have ever visited that welcomes, or at least tolerates, graffiti. As a result the long quay wall, which protects Porto Santo's harbour from the sea, is bright with tributes from visiting yachts. Not the casually-scrawled *Joe Bloggs was here* sort of thing that has traditionally sidled onto walls. Nor the enormous tagging in spray paint that nowadays defaces so many public buildings, trains and bridges.

Restricted to the sea wall, these take the form of a modestly-sized circle, square or triangle and range from the simple to the elaborate. Anything from just the name of the boat and crew and the year they came here, to composed pictures of the boat itself complete with sunset and seagull, to abstracts, variations on a national flag or caricatures of the crew. They are as varied as the people who paint them.

Some are faded survivors of the Atlantic weather. Some have lost corners thanks to the over-zealous efforts of later arrivals. But all have been done with care and pride, because each picture is a celebration of a challenge accepted, a voyage undertaken and a safe arrival. Especially the safe arrival. And, subconsciously at least, they represent an offering for the much greater journey still to come. Just as ancient Greek mariners poured libations of wine from the decks of their ships before sailing into the unknown.

And so it is that halfway along the sea wall a middle-aged couple from Dublin, newly arrived, are hard at work with an artist's brush and a small pot of paint apiece; one spouse to the left of their picture, the other spouse to the right.

David and I arrived at this little island this afternoon, on our catamaran *Voyager*, following a six-day passage from Gibraltar. And after setting our anchor we had hoisted a courtesy flag. This, as anyone who sails to a foreign



country knows, is a miniature version of the national flag of the country currently being visited. It says that the crew of this vessel recognises that they are in that country's waters and subject to its laws. Despite being hundreds of miles out into the Atlantic and off the coast of Africa, the Madeira Islands are an autonomous region of Portugal. Accordingly the little courtesy flag now fluttering in our rigging is Portuguese.

Our next task is to register our presence with the local authorities here, or *clear in* as it is universally known. So we have unstrapped our dinghy from the foredeck, attached the outboard, and chugged into the harbour to present ourselves, our passports and our ship's papers to the scrutiny of Porto Santo's Customs & Excise, Immigration and the Maritime Police.

The Customs officer and the policeman ask almost identical questions and you wonder why they don't pool information. They are the same questions that their counterparts in their mother country asked, and you wonder all over again why the Portuguese want to record your engine number and the colour of your sails when nobody else is interested. But it is the price of entry to their country, so you dutifully fill in the forms.

The Immigration Officer, by contrast, observes our wine-red passports, says, 'Oh, EU! Great!' and simply shoves them, and our ship's papers, through his photocopier. We are asked how long we'd like to stay, but it is 'only a formality, you are welcome to stay as long as you like.' Porto Santo is developing its tourist industry and is pleased to have you there.

It rains before dinner. We are rather disappointed. If we had wanted rain we could have stayed in Manchester. But at least it washes the boat free of salt after our passage here. Every cloud, as my mother used to say, has a silver lining.

After six nights of sleep broken up into three-hour watches we have little energy for anything beyond dinner and observing the variety of nationalities at anchor around us: German, American, French, Swedish, Dutch and a little British boat called *Antares* that I recognise from somewhere, but can't remember where.

We are semi-comatose by early evening and asleep in our bunk by 8.30.

Next morning we get up feeling surprisingly energetic and buoyant. It is as if there are positive ions in the air – or whatever those things are that make you feel lively – and we set off for a trip into Vila Baleira, Porto Santo's little



capital. We dinghy into the harbour again, through surprisingly choppy water for such an otherwise gentle day, tie up and begin the two-mile walk into town.

In this kind of life you quickly learn to expect the unexpected. Indeed, almost to take it for granted. Even so a surprise awaits us, because one of the last places we might have expected to find a rally of classic English cars would be a tiny island out in the Atlantic Ocean with very little in the way of roads. Yet here we are, walking down the beach road, along the edge of which is parked a selection of English motoring history, most of them dating from the 1950s but a few from the '30s and '40s. A Triumph Herald, Morris Minor, MGB, Sunbeam Talbot, an Austin A55 and A90, an Austin 10 and a Triumph TR4. Also being celebrated are classic American Chevrolets, Pontiacs and Fords and several French Citroëns.

This is a brown, barren island. It was once covered in giant spiky dragon trees, but they were cut down long ago. Some sources say to grow food, others to build boats. Reforestation is now underway at its centre, while down here on the margins it is lush with palm trees and oleander. We have gone some way towards the town when we see a man beside a garden wall preparing a small cart. Before he has finished, there is a commotion among the palms and oleanders and something resembling a large dog jumps over the wall to join him. It is in fact a very small donkey, which positions itself in front of the cart and waits patiently to be put into the shafts.

The only other traffic on the road illustrates the contrast between a gentler past and the economic imperatives of the present. The drive to bring tourism to the island means that a large inter-island ferry berths regularly in Porto Santo harbour. Its latest batch of passengers now sweeps past us, down the road towards the town, sealed inside large tourist buses complete with tinted windows and doors that hiss compressed air.

Following some distance behind is a rather disconsolate middle-aged man in the driving seat of a small white trap pulled by a brown and white horse. We had noticed him at the harbour, waiting for customers, dwarfed by the fleet of luxury buses. Now his horse is clip-clopping along pulling an empty trap. All the ferry passengers have boarded the coaches and the little white trap has no takers. It has blue and white curtains and seat covers under a blue awning. As we approach the town we see it parked on the cobblestones beside the road. The brown and white horse is standing on



two wooden duckboards; only small ones, but so much kinder to the feet than cobblestones.

At Vila Baleira we have coffee at a street café with a favourite from our time in Portugal, *pasties de nata*, little egg-custard tarts with a thick, soft pastry case and a scattering of nutmeg on the top. After that we do a little sightseeing: Christopher Columbus's house, the 15th century church opposite and possibly the world's smallest town hall.

Porto Santo was discovered by accident in 1418 by two explorers called Zarco and Teixeira, heading for Africa but blown off course by a gale. They had been sent out by Portugal's Prince Henry, better known as Henry the Navigator from the expeditions he sponsored.

These were initially down the African coast and for the purpose of exploration, but later their aim was to discover the world's riches and bring them back to Portugal. To this end, the caravel was developed – a light, manoeuvrable ship able to carry cargo – in which many of Henry's navigators sailed, although he never went on any of their voyages himself.

After the discovery of this small island, Henry quickly colonised it. Its first governor was a Genoese nobleman whose daughter Filipa would become the wife of Christopher Columbus.

Vila Baleira is a neat and tidy little town with clean streets, flowers everywhere and friendly people. After sight-seeing, and a wander through a pretty little park, we seek out our evening meal. We are late for the fish market. It has no refrigeration, only concrete slabs. The day's main business was concluded long ago and the only fish remaining on sale lie curling in the heat before a single, resigned vendor with a cloud of large black flies buzzing overhead.

We leave the fish market and go in search of a supermarket. Outside *Pingo Doce* our 100-escudo coin gets jammed in the shopping trolley's mechanism, but not far enough in to free it from its fellows. A nice young manager I lure out from inside the store prises our coin free with a pair of scissors. By this time it is a little the worse for wear, so he substitutes it for a new one from inside the store and then has to prise that one out with his scissors as well. But he perseveres cheerfully until he is finally able to release a trolley from its chains and present it to us.

We buy bread, fruit, vegetables, fresh sardines and a speciality of Madeira, honey cake. Also, for a paltry sum, a bottle of five-year-old



Madeira wine. A small white label on the back says helpfully in English, 'It is likely to throw a deposit. Serve gently without shake the bottle.' We wedge it into one of our rucksacks along with everything else and then begin the two-mile journey home, but along the beach this time.

It is golden, deserted and beautiful with its backdrop of dunes and occasional clusters of large rocks. The tide is coming in. We take off our shoes, tie them to our rucksacks and roll our trousers up to mid-calf. The waves rush in with surprising speed, scattering sandpipers in all directions, heads bobbing, little legs pounding like pistons, tripping into sand holes.

There are a few ramshackle wooden beach houses in the dunes, with a barbecue made from an old oil drum wedged into the sand beside them. Pausing to gaze at one of these huts, more picturesque than the rest with its roof shingles and tiny porch, a particularly large wave overtakes us and our trousers are soaked to the knees.

When we reach the quay we find that two of our German neighbours from the anchorage, tired of their yachts' rolling, are now anchored in the harbour. At the sea wall, the Irish couple are busy stencilling a frame of shamrocks in emerald green around the painting of their boat.

The strength of the wind is increasing and the growing turbulence in the anchorage means the harbour is becoming more crowded with boats. Its berthing capacity is limited. On the dock a group of yachtsmen grumble about the anti-social behaviour of an Australian yacht-owner who is taking up a large stretch of it but who refuses to allow any other yachts to raft up to him. To reinforce his message he has fastened a couple of large NO RAFTING UP! signs to his side rails which are attracting particular resentment.

We dinghy back to *Voyager*. It is an even bumpier ride than the one going ashore this morning and at one stage the backpack with the bottle of Madeira wine in it topples off the seat. It has already bumped along for a couple of miles during our wave-dodging progress along the beach, and been roughly handled when we rescued it from the surf while hopping about trying to get damp, gritty feet into our shoes. Now it is heaved unceremoniously aboard during our scramble up out of the dinghy, currently tied to *Voyager*'s stern, and which thanks to the pounding of the sea swell is snatching violently at her transom.

Despite its rough treatment, and notwithstanding the warning notice on the back of the bottle, after a period of quiet in a cool place the wine is delightful and not at all lumpy until we reach the very bottom some days later. It is something you never think about, when you buy imported, quality-controlled, factory-bottled wines from a supermarket or wine store. But where wines are produced and bottled locally, in small family vineyards, there is often a deposit of grape skins; and with fortified wines such as sherry, port and madeira, as well as some of the heavier reds, it is automatically assumed that you will decant them before serving.

We dine on fresh sardines cooked in olive oil with garlic, a little coarse mustard and a dash of brandy, served with steamed leek and carrot and Gibraltar's delicious yellow potatoes topped with a little butter and black pepper. The sea swell continues. We rock gently, as in a cradle, our mouths filled with the warm sweetness of coffee and honey cake.

The wind changes direction during the night. It has been coming from the north since our arrival and we have been sheltered by the island, but by morning it is from the south and the anchorage is now untenable in the resulting heavy swell. So we lift our anchor, motor into the harbour and drop it there.

We are the last but one boat to leave the anchorage and with all our former neighbours already ensconced, plus some newly-arrived boats, it is difficult to find a large enough space. Not least because, with our arrival, there are now ten catamarans and three trimarans forming something of a multi-hull ghetto in the midst of all the monohulls. One of the latter is a little single-handed yacht called *Antares*.

Antares is the name of an enormous red star in the constellation of Scorpio, which astronomers call a supergiant because it has a diameter more than 700 times that of the Sun. It takes audacity to call a 27-foot boat after a star that big. But then, it takes nerve to cross the Atlantic Ocean single-handed on a boat that small.

After a lot of mental struggle, I finally remember where we saw her last. It was off the island of Alderney, in the Channel Islands, shortly after we first set out from England. We were still rather green at anchoring then, and ended up a bit too close for politeness although her young skipper hadn't seemed to notice. Or if he had, he hadn't seemed to mind.



We shall be a bit close again, when we turn, but our anchor is well dug in and there is not enough room to mess about trying to get a few feet further away. We shall simply have to be alert to anchor-chain lengths when the wind or the tide begins to turn us all.

As well as intrepid solo sailors, yachting also produces a breed of mariner that eschews engines, electrics and all modern instrumentation, using only wind power, a compass, a sextant and sheer muscle. Two such people are the last to seek the protection of the harbour for the night and they have only a small space in which to anchor without nudging either the sea wall or other boats.

Firstly, in lieu of an echo sounder, they establish the water's depth by using a lead line – a lead weight on the end of a length of thin rope with depths marked on it. Then with consummate and shaming skill they proceed to position themselves in their confined space, and set their anchor, using a long oar off their stern as their only means of propulsion.

During our second night in the harbour the wind returns to the north. By the following morning it has lost most of its power and the sea swell has diminished. So we dinghy to the quay, pay for our two nights' stay in the harbour and then set off on the 42-mile journey to Madeira's capital, Funchal. After such a rough forty-eight hours the Atlantic is now unexpectedly flat. It is also surprisingly blue.

Five islands make up this part of the Madeira archipelago. The one from which it takes its name, and to which we are now heading, is the largest at 286 square miles compared with Porto Santo's sixteen. There are also three tiny uninhabited islands called Ilhas Desertas (one little more than a large rock) off the shores of which, it is said, you may spot sea lions cavorting. This sounds very appealing until you discover that the three islands offer only one anchorage between them; that it is approached through scattered rocks and is recommended for daylight hours only, in ideal weather conditions and with a crew member left aboard during any shore leave because of the unstable holding. We decide to give Ilhas Desertas a miss.

Much further south there are also the Salvage Islands, about which more later.

MADEIRA

2

Under the Volcano

It is a sparkling, blue-and-silver, soft-aired motor-sail to Madeira. Its coastline is striking as you approach because the island is a volcano and its sides are very steep. Even Fora, the large rock at its eastern corner, with St Laurence's lighthouse perched on it, rises steeply to a point. This white lighthouse gives every appearance of having been iced onto the top, like a bride on a wedding cake, with the white icing running downhill to cover every last walled inch of the tiny summit.

Although only 31 miles apart, the two islands could not be more different. Brown and treeless, Porto Santo's low hills are flat at the bottom, providing the island with its spectacular beach. Madeira in contrast has virtually no beaches, rises steeply up from the sea, and its mountainous peaks and deep ravines are covered in lush green forests. From out at sea the lower slopes appear bright green thanks to the terraces of vines, while large tracts of the coast road give the impression of being suspended over rocky gullies.

Off Caniçal, the first town we pass, we are met by a pod of orcas, visually striking in their black and white. There are seven of them, moving very slowly, sending spray languidly from their blow holes and watching us with as much concentrated interest as we are watching them. When we get closer we can see there are actually nine of them. Two small calves are swimming close to their mothers' sides.

Orcas have a roundness to them that other whale species do not. It makes them look almost cuddly and, combined with their distinctive colouring, is why they are often a model for soft toys. Add moist-eyed memories of the movie *Free Willy*, and it is easy to forget that their common name is *killer whale*. They do, in fact, kill and eat other whales. They also snack on seals and penguins and like to play with their food, the way that cats do, before killing and eating it. The pod waits for us to get level with it and then sinks effortlessly, only to reappear moments later in our wake, watching us go.

The coastline between Machico and Santa Cruz is dominated by the long runway of Madeira Airport and over our starboard rail we can see planes landing and taking off. A glance to port, meanwhile, causes us to



stop and stare at what appears to be one of Henry the Navigator's three-masted caravels floating in the shimmering blue haze of the far horizon. It is like being in a time warp: on one side of us the world's fastest and most convenient form of transport, making Madeira only a ninety-minute flight from Lisbon; on the other, the wraiths of 15th century Portuguese navigators like Zarco and Teixeira who spent months on their wooden ships, in uncharted waters, seeking new and exotic lands.

A few miles further down the coast, Gaula's white-walled houses and terracotta roofs soar almost vertically up a precipice and over a mountain ridge. Craning your neck to look up at them, the thought occurs that should a householder trip over his doorstep *up there*, within seconds he could be swimming for his life with orcas *down here*.

Porta do Garajau, the last headland before Funchal, is dominated by an enormous statue of Christ with arms outstretched, like the ones at Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. In 1927, when it was built, Madeira's visitors arrived by boat, and the statue was located here in welcome.

By the time we begin the approach to Funchal, the gap between ourselves and the ghostly vessel to our left has narrowed and we still might have bought into the time warp theory were it not for the large, bright blue, late-20th century RIB it is towing. This 15th century sailing ship's impressive turn of speed, on this virtually windless day, also betrays the existence of a powerful, non-standard diesel engine beneath its otherwise authentic wooden decks. It overtakes us at the entrance to the harbour and, as we follow it in, we can read its name. It is the *Santa Maria*, a replica of Christopher Columbus's flagship, its decks lined with tourists.

While the ship ties up to the sea wall, and its passengers disembark for their hotel and cruise ship dining rooms, we go in as close as possible to shore looking for a suitable place to drop our anchor. The harbour at Funchal is protected by a substantial sea wall, which along with the *Santa Maria* provides berths for visiting cruise ships and the Porto Santo ferry. But this is a roly poly anchorage when the wind is from anywhere other than the north, that is to say from the other side of the island, and it becomes untenable in strong southerly winds.

The holding at Funchal is poor, too, but we do finally get the anchor to bite at our fourth attempt, after a lot of shunting and shouting. It is now a little after 6pm. So, with our accommodation taken care of, we put out the



cockpit cushions, fill two glasses with Madeira wine, settle back in the evening sunshine and gaze about us.

On our landward side we can see a rocky shore, a bit of the Old Town walls, part of an ancient fort and trees in pink blossom; while rising steeply above them are the densely-wooded, mountainous sides of Madeira's dormant volcano. On the ocean side of us, the cruise ships against the sea wall are bathed in the mellow tones of a sun due to set within the next hour or so. There are shearwaters and terns here, too. Birds have been noticeably absent lately.

Next morning we dinghy into the crowded little marina and complete the entry formalities. When we have officially registered our engine number and the colour of our sails again we stop off at the nearby tourist office for a town map and then catch a Number 31 bus.

In the cruising guide David has read about another little piece of Portuguese territory he thinks we might enjoy, the Ilhas Selvagens or Salvage Islands. They lie one hundred and fifty-five miles south of Madeira and ninety-five miles north of the Canary Islands – our next port of call – and being almost on our course anyway, will make a welcome and enjoyable break in our journey.

The particular Salvage Island which interests us is Selvagem Grande. Although less than two square miles in extent, it is the largest in the group and has for some years now been a nature reserve and bird sanctuary, especially for breeding colonies of Madeira petrels and Cory's shearwaters. It has recently been declared a marine reserve as well, which means that along with other human predators it also keeps fishermen away, who used to take birds' eggs as well as fish. This isolated scrap of land has a human population of four: two wildlife wardens and two lighthouse keepers.

To visit this tiny island, yachtsmen must obtain a visitor's permit before leaving Madeira. These are issued without charge by the National Parks Department from their office at the Botanical Gardens, north of Funchal. Having already experienced Portuguese bureaucracy, we suspect getting one may take a while. Which is why, after clearing in with the authorities, we are on a Number 31 bus on our way to the Jardim Botânico.

The road up to it is very steep and the view across the harbour on this glorious sunny day is breathtaking. So is the two-mile drive, but for different reasons. The road skirts the edge of the mountain and the bus seems to be



in the hands of a homicidal maniac. Or perhaps breakneck speed is the only way to keep an engine going up such a steep incline. Perhaps reducing speed for blind corners or stomach-churning chicanes would cause the vehicle to stall, roll backwards and tumble down the almost vertical mountainside. Mostly we avert our eyes and observe that this would not be a place to cycle, or even walk unnecessarily unless you were exceptionally fleet of foot.

We stumble off the bus at a sign saying *Jardim Botânico*, in that confused state which is a mixture of euphoria at having survived a challenging experience and shock at having been involved in it in the first place. We enter the gates, pay our entrance fee and set off in pursuit of a permit to visit Selvagem Grande.

We begin our search in the main building but the first person we ask denies any knowledge of the island's existence. After a few more attempts, someone admits that it exists but says you can't go there. We persist and are gradually directed from one office to another until the outstretched fingers point us away from the main building altogether and into the gardens' interior. Ultimately we find ourselves edging between delicate plants lining tiny paths leading to small offices, half-hidden by foliage, where the public clearly is not intended to go. Then, just when we think we may be getting somewhere, someone suggests we try the marina down in Funchal Harbour. We smile politely, nod and head back towards the main buildings. We are beginning to flag.

More by accident than design we wander into the museum, with its antique maps of exotic places, exhibits of the paraphernalia of specimen-gathering, giant seed pods and exquisite drawings of plants. There are also some atmospheric sepia photographs of the intrepid explorers responsible for some of the wonders now gracing the verdant hillsides of Madeira in general and the *Jardim Botânico* in particular. Inspired by their endurance we renew our pursuit of the secret office from which the rare and exotic permit to visit Selvagem Grande flowers unseen by all but the most persistent of foreign travellers until suddenly and unexpectedly we stumble upon the right person at the right moment.

We follow his careful directions and enter a long gallery of large free-standing panels of plant illustrations. Then we make a sharp, unmarked turn taking us behind them and arrive at a staircase of polished wood and marble bearing a large sign saying 'Private'. As instructed, we ignore this



sign and mount the stairs. There is a man at the top sitting at a large desk with nothing on it. His expression changes from bored to startled at our sudden appearance. We are equally surprised to see him. We nod in his direction but do not falter in our progress. In all probability he will not speak English and if he stops us it will get complicated and time-consuming and most likely he will order us downstairs again. So we stride purposefully past him, down a corridor smelling strongly of camphor, and enter a large office containing two women.

They also look startled at our unannounced arrival. We explain what we desire. They deny any knowledge of the island. We persist. The senior of the two, very small and with a persistent cough, looks at us intently: wondering perhaps how we managed to penetrate her inner sanctum; or, perhaps, if it *might* be necessary for us to be accommodated after all.

Portugal's political and social structures have undergone seismic changes within less than half an average life span. The long dictatorship of General Salazar was followed by a military coup in the 1970s, but even this allowed only limited and gradual democratic reforms. In essence the country has had little more than a decade in which to adapt to the political dictates of the European Union and the market forces of mass tourism. It is therefore not surprising that, faced with officialdom, you can sometimes see a flicker behind the eyes as the traditional response to an inconvenient request – a dismissive wave of a uniformed arm – reluctantly gives way to a present where it is no longer an option to simply say, 'No!' With a final long look at us, the woman with the cough applies herself to her computer.

Even her computer programme which produces the permits appears to consider our intrusion unwarranted, however. It is, she explains, refusing to allow her access. Nevertheless, she gives every indication of trying to key required data from our passports and ship's papers into its apparently resistant boxes. While we wait it occurs to me that of all the offices in all the world that I've ever been in, this one, in a botanical wonderland, is the only one that doesn't have a single pot plant in it.

Finally, after what seems a very long time, a printer across the room rumbles into life and, with much smiling and thanks, we take possession of our permit. It is not until we get back to the boat and actually read it that we discover it is valid for one week only.

In the meantime, still light-headed with success, we lunch al fresco at a shady table overlooking the gardens' sunny terraces. Two peacocks, one



the more familiar variety of luminous blues and greens, the other pure white, wander gracefully among the tables. I have never been so close to a peacock before and to have two of them – especially the rare and almost-mythical white – undulating past one's elbow in such glorious surroundings is truly magical.

A middle-aged man settles at the table opposite, putting down a cup of coffee with one hand and a plate with a large slice of Madeira cake on it with the other. As he reaches for his slice of cake, however, the white peacock, with a swiftness obviously honed by much practice, darts a long elegant neck forward and snatches it from the plate.

The man, with an equally surprising turn of speed, slaps the bird hard across the side of its head. The cake falls to the ground. I gasp in shock. The crest of delicate white feathers crowning the peacock's regal little head has been bent sideways by the blow. Other people look up from their plates and stare. Man and bird are frozen, eyeing each other.

The spell is broken when the man turns away and reaches sullenly for his coffee cup. The peacock continues to glare at him a moment longer. Then it raises its head, turns and stalks slowly out of the restaurant with all the dignity of a dowager duchess, albeit slightly the worse for wear and with her tiara askew.