



MAIDEN VOYAGE

In an excerpt from his latest book, *Under Wide and Starry Skies*, adventurer Nick Coghlan narrates his first long offshore passage



Like everyone who ventures offshore in their own small boat for the first time, we had no shortage of dreams. But we had plenty of doubts, too. How would we deal with leaving the sight of land for the first time? What about seasickness? Cooking while underway? And, while we'd practised celestial navigation with an artificial horizon in our island-bound home waters, would we really be able to take sun sights from the pitching deck of a small sailboat, with the sun dodging behind clouds?

Before quitting our jobs and telling friends and family, we decided to test the waters. We scrutinised the 'Crew Wanted' pages of San Francisco's freebie sailing magazine, *Latitude 38*, and

quickly came to an arrangement with John, who wanted to take his 32ft Cheoy Lee *Jacaranda* south from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas (Mexico), sometime around the Christmas period.

In navigational terms, things did not start well. We'd agreed by phone to meet John the night before departure at the Valley High restaurant. None of the first three taxi drivers we tried could tell us where the Valley High restaurant might be. One commented that it sounded more like the name of a school than an eatery. The fourth put us right: 'I guess you mean the Bali Hai, right?'

John was what we needed: he dropped us right in the thick of things. Within a few minutes of our leaving the Shelter Island marina the following evening, he'd handed me the wheel, warning me

ABOVE LEFT
Leaving San Diego with Nick at the helm

ABOVE CENTRE
Running wing on wing, down the west coast of Isla Guadalupe

ABOVE RIGHT
Aboard *Jacaranda*, en route from Ensenada to Isla Guadalupe

only to stay well clear of the navy submarine pens. He then beckoned Jenny below. Pointing first to a pile of charts on one of the bunks, then rummaging around to find a pencil, dividers and parallel rule, he said, 'Your job is to plot a course for Ensenada. It should come out as 60 or 70 miles.' And he disappeared into the forepeak for a nap.

First night at sea

In hindsight, our first night of offshore sailing was straightforward. At the time it seemed terrifying. We struggled in turn to steer a course by the dimly illuminated compass, while peering over the side to estimate our speed (for *Jacaranda* had no knot meter) and checking off the many navigational lights inshore against the chart. And then there were the ships: an aircraft carrier →



was a few miles out, practising take-offs and landings. At least, I thought, I would come into my own – as a Spanish speaker – when we reached Mexico in the morning.

Ensenada was not a scenic spot in 1984. We landed on an oil and garbage covered beach where I impressed John by successfully negotiating with an eight-year-old boy terms for watching over our dinghy. More challenging was the hour shuffling papers at the offices of the port captain and immigration, where questions that I had to relay to John concerned the horsepower of *Jacaranda's* diesel, her registered tonnage and the unmarried name of John's mother, all these asked in a lispng version of Mexican Spanish with which I was not familiar.

As we sat over the obligatory Corona at Hussong's Cantina, John suggested we ignore the cruising herd hugging the coast southbound:

A star to steer her by

'You wanted a feel for offshore sailing; and you wanted to test your navigation, right? So let's give Isla Guadalupe a shot.'

We learned how to pole the genoa, how to brace with every roll of the boat, how to compensate with the wheel as we slewed down the front of the waves. And, with the dozen or more sun sights we took, we steadily reduced the time it took to plot a line of position from 90 to 30 minutes. The star sights were more challenging: it would be several days before we were skilful enough to shrink the 'cocked hat' triangle within which *Jacaranda* must lie to a size smaller than Switzerland.

Prior to dawn on our second night out Jenny spent time, under John's tutelage, figuring out at what distance we should see Isla Guadalupe, which rises to over 1,200m. When it showed up in the morning haze there were

ABOVE LEFT
Jenny taking sun sights, en route to Isla Guadalupe

ABOVE RIGHT
Southbound at high noon

further calculations with the sextant to figure out our exact distance off.

With sail area reduced, we spent much of the morning rolling down the western shoreline of this 32-kilometre long island. The coast was high and rugged, with spectacularly coloured red and black cliffs. About two-thirds of the way along, at the foot of a dry alluvial valley, we could make out about a dozen small white dwellings. As we compared what we were looking at with the chart – which indicated the possibility of anchorage just south of the village – an outboard-powered launch pattered out.

A cheerful man in oilskins shouted a greeting, held up a squirming lobster and, as he manoeuvred to keep clear of our rolling topsides, we had a discussion on what we might have to offer in exchange. The skipper of *Pila* wasn't interested in money. "There's no shop





here!” He laughed. A packet of 20 cigarettes sealed the deal and he tossed the lobster up to us.

“What about the village anchorage?” We asked.

He looked away to windward and shrugged. “Malo. We pull our boats up on the beach. And on a day like today, there’ll be a big swell running. You’d be better off at Melpómene,” and he pointed in the direction we were headed, to the southern tip of the island.

Melpómene (pronounced Mel-POMenay) Cove is cliff-bound, with excellent protection from the north and northwest – the direction of the prevailing winds – but it’s completely open to the south. We anchored a long way out, and in what (to us novices) seemed to be deep water. John explained to us that even if the wind stayed in the north, as was likely, we could easily find ourselves in

heavy swell generated by some storm many hundreds of miles to the south, in which case it was advisable to be well clear.

On the west coast of North America, whenever you come across a nautical place name that is from Greek mythology (Melpomene was one of the nine Greek Muses, patron of Tragedy) chances are it was on account of a Royal Navy vessel of the same name. *HMS Melpomene* was in these waters in 1912.

But the island had been frequented by humans long before that. Russian and American sealers found rich pickings on its rocky volcanic beaches starting in the late 1700s, hunting the Guadalupe fur seal and the northern elephant seal almost to extinction. There are the remains of an old sealing station on the eastern shore of the island.

ABOVE LEFT
John trades for lobster

ABOVE RIGHT
Cliffs at Caleta Melpómene, Isla Guadalupe

BELOW LEFT
Guadalupe elephant seals on the beach, Caleta Melpómene

BELOW RIGHT
Nick and Jenny with their own boat (*Tarka the Otter*), prior to setting off on their circumnavigation of the world (1985-9)

ABOUT THE BOOK:
This extract is taken from *Under Wide and Starry Skies - 50 sailing destinations in seas less travelled*, Nick delves into a life of sailing off the beaten track, narrating tales that inspire, inform and entertain. The book is available from Bloomsbury, com priced £19.80

We spent 36 hours at this lonely bay, our first offshore destination. John landed us through breakers – he preferred to stay on board *Jacaranda*, keeping an eye on the weather and the rattling anchor chain – and we explored the black sand beach. Truth be told, there was too much happening here to tempt us far inland. An energetic bull elephant seal, the rolls of blubber around his thick neck scarred by countless fights with rivals, was doing his best to ward off raiders on his harem. Adolescents and other young males lurked offshore or on the margins of the beach, waiting impatiently for the chance to dash in and steal a female.

In the late afternoon, we looked out over the now silver sea and saw John, coming back to pick us up in the dinghy. I thought: “This is it. This is what I want to do.” ✦

