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Accelerated learning

Singlehanded is not for the faint hearted as *Tim Good* discovered after getting caught in the notorious acceleration zone off Madeira



or those of you who haven't followed our progress in *Sailing Today* over the last few years, back in 2017 we started in the UK and sailed up through Norway. We gave our good friend and renowned adventurer, Bob Shepton a lift to Norway since he was going that way to do some adventurous ski touring anyway; (see *Sailing Today* October 2017 for his account of that trip).

After dropping off Bob we continued up through Norway to Lofoten to ski ice caps, climb mountains and explore (ST October 2018). Heading south in we took time to see Brittany, Asturias and Galicia (ST March 2019) and then headed over to the Canaries (ST September 2019).

The aim was to get to Senegal & Gambia, which would have been the fifth instalment, and then on to Patagonia. But what went wrong? No, it wasn't Covid. The overall plan remains but has been put on hold because my partner Emmie and I plan to start a family and then continue the journey with the additional crew in tow. So, until that time we thought we'd head somewhere closer to home but somewhere still adventurous. The rugged Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard seemed perfect.

A simple plan

The plan to head north again was hatched in early 2020 and we'd head up to Svalbard in 2021. However, we were still in the Canary Islands and the route back to the UK would be via the Azores. We'd spend two or three months in the Azores and head back to Plymouth for a minor winter refit to make the boat comfortable for conditions we'll face in Svalbard. Then came Covid! Fast forward to the end of the lockdown in July and the boat had sat in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, for six months unattended. Following lockdown Emmie had many commitments with her work as an artist. The galleries were extremely keen to get more work from her. She had to return to the UK and I had to get the boat 700 miles from Gran Canaria to the Azores.

This was my opportunity for a



solid singlehanded passage. I've always enjoyed singlehanded. In doing something alone my decisions affect only me. The reward of making a good decisions is more exhilarating, and the price of making a bad one, is easier to forgive.

Going back a year, I remember being in Tenerife in 2019 when a chap sailed onto the pontoon opposite. "Where have come from?" I asked. "Plymouth," Murray exclaimed.

"No where have you come from just today?" I repeated.

"Plymouth," Murray insisted.

Later, over a nice meal aboard his boat *Irish Eyes*, he explained how he once, a few years ago, had a friend to help him sail back from the Canaries to the Azores and then on to the UK. His friend hated it so much that he jumped ship at Madeira, leaving Murray no option but to singlehand the rest of the way to the Azores. Which he did. A whale appeared on the first day of the passage and stayed with him the entire way. He was so elated sailing alone that he continued on to the UK and has since continued to sail long singlehanded passages ever since.

ABOVE
Everything under control in the early hours of the passage

BELOW
Some welcome down time with a musical twist

Taking the plunge

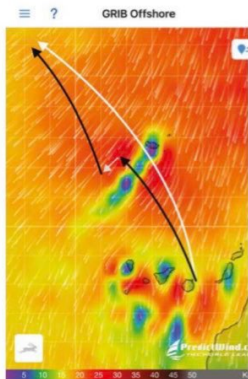
It was perhaps this encounter that encouraged me to take the plunge and do my first offshore singlehanded passage. I've sailed singlehanded plenty of times and I know *Shadowfax*, our Seastream 43, like the back of my hand. However, singlehanded offshore is a mindset, not a technical challenge. I was ready for this. The boat was ready for this. But perhaps I wasn't quite ready for what was in store!

I spent four days preparing the boat and provisioning for singlehanded. Food was cooked in advance for seven days, fuel and water tanks filled and sails set for a good deal of upwind sailing. The forecast was fairly strong for the first three days and saw me sailing at 55 True into around 25 knots of wind. The forecast of the third day however showed things stepping up to Force 6-7 by the evening. I felt perhaps it was best to claw my way up to Madeira and shelter there for 24 hours before pressing on.

Shadowfax however, isn't rigged for pointing. She's heavy and has foresails cut for sailing off the wind. I struggled to point higher than 55 True without losing speed whilst slamming into waves.

By the morning of day three I'd made good progress, averaging 130nm a day upwind, but I figured I'd have to make an 8-10 hour tack back east in order to get in the lee of Madeira for shelter. I decided to continue on towards the Azores and into Force 6-7. This is not unseamanlike as my boat is very well found, displacing 17T, cutter rigged →





and built to a Lloyds standard. I'd experienced Force 7s before and I could handle it, even if it was singlehanded and upwind.

Accelerated learning off Madeira

What I had underestimated however is the acceleration zones around Madeira. I knew they existed and I was well used to the power of these zones in the Canary Islands.

They can often add 25-50 per cent on top of the forecasted wind speed. However, I had an entire day to sail through them and be clear by nightfall and the stronger forecast.

Rewind to the beginning of day three and I was still about 60 miles south of Madeira and the lee effect was noticeable as the wind dropped to 15 knots. Coming out into the western acceleration zone the wind increased to around 37 knots. By sundown I should have cleared effects of the island and be in a clean Force 6 or maybe 7.

By the evening it was blowing 45kt consistently and, although waves were breaking, it was manageable as I hand steered and rounded up into anything I thought was a little nasty. As the sun went down I decided it was best to heave-to for the night. In order to do this I felt another reef in the main would be prudent but in trying to reef singlehanded, I allowed the outhaul to come slack and the sail

flogged. Within 10 seconds it ripped down the middle! I hastily rolled it away (thankful for in-mast furling) before it could tear into two pieces.

I quickly turned the engine on and motored at 45 degrees to the sea with the staysail for balance, taking breaking seas on the bow safely. "What now?" I thought. "I can't heave-to without a main!" After a short while I figured that it was safe enough to continue under engine and staysail at 2-3 knots. With a breaking sea banging against the hull, at a frequency just far enough apart to wake you as you fell asleep, it was pretty miserable and I was questioning what on earth I was doing out here. Was this singlehanded lark just a boyish fancy, shattered upon the hard stones of reality?

ABOVE LEFT
Shadowfax's projected route in white and actual route in black. Note the drift off Madeira following the streaming of the drogue. The effect of the acceleration zones is also clear

ABOVE RIGHT
Fast sailing as the wind builds

BELOW
Unexpectedly strong winds brought more challenges than expected



Out of the frying pan...

Then the salt came into the wound. I went from the frying pan into the fire. Around 2am, after a few hours of sleeplessness, the engine tone changed. Just for a second. A slight drop in revs like you get when an air bubble goes through the injectors. Normally not an issue but I know the tone of my engine and it's as smooth as the day it was installed. I shot out of my bunk and stood in the dark, listening intently. Another stutter. And another. Then it died, and wouldn't restart.

Within seconds the boat was beam on to the seas; I knew all too well that they were breaking fairly regularly.

My only options seemed to be:

1. Run off before the wind and sea
Safe enough, but by the time this gale





subsidied I'd have lost at least 70 miles in the wrong direction to the Azores. Without a mainsail how was I going to claw that back to windward? Also I couldn't hand steer downwind, the entire night... Could I trust my Hydovane to steer the boat safely in breaking seas?

2. Deploy the Jordan Series Drogue
If I did this then I could crawl back into my bunk, sleep this nightmare off and awake with fresh eyes on the situation. The speed under the drogue would be minimal so I wouldn't lose much ground. But what about retrieving it? That would surely be a nightmare singlehanded.

The thought of sleep and safety got the better of me and within five minutes I was on deck. I swung the boat downwind and deployed the drogue. I flung the chain off the stern, which acted as a weight on the bitter end of the drogue. The remaining 150m flew out of the deployment bag like a crazed snake. Finally, it was all out safely and the bridle, which attached to two dedicated large chainplates on the stern, went bar tight. I expected a jolt but it didn't come. The boat quickly but gently went from 8 knots to 2 knots, held perfectly astern to the sea. I remained there for perhaps a minute just to observe that nothing was going to chafe and then retreated below, securing my wash boards

tightly. Below it felt like I was running under a gentle breeze with a pleasant motion. I checked my AIS and radar alarms then collapsed on the bed and began wondering if I'd done the right thing. "This strong wind is forecast to continue for another day and a night," I thought. "I probably won't be able to retrieve this drogue for over 30 hours."

...Into the fire

At that point a wave pooped *Shadowfax*. I shot out of my bunk and peered through the window of the aft cabin, which looks into the base of the cockpit. It was blurry and bubbles streamed around. It was under water! I popped my head out

ABOVE
The Jordan series drogue in action; the V-shaped bridle tightens on one side as the other goes slack, keeping the stern to the sea.

BELOW
Nothing a roll of tape can't fix - fortunately!

of the hatch for a second and the cockpit was full, like a huge jacuzzi. At that point I released that if the waves were large enough to break over the stern of a 43ft boat with an enclosed and well protected cockpit, then I had made the right decision in deploying the drogue.

That night I slept well, confident in the drogue and the custom-made chainplates I installed back in 2016.

The following morning I awoke to huge swell which had settled into a long 10 second period. However, they were still breaking and I was happy to remain on the drogue for a further 24 hours. In that time I fixed the engine, made a good meal and watched films. The engine fault turned out to be a leaking fuel uplift pump which was sucking in air - some handy self-amalgamating tape did the job. I was confident the fuel itself was clean as I had sampled the bottom of the tank for gunk and replaced the filter before leaving.

The wind continued to blow in the upper 30's and was due to abate quickly through the second night on the drogue, along with the sea state, so I enjoyed a freshly cooked dinner of Spanish omelette.

I awoke the next morning, just before dawn, to assess the likelihood of being able to retrieve the drogue. The wind was down to about 15kts but significant swell remained. I'd lost only about 40nm over the 32 hours but I didn't want to loose any more given I'd have to make that up over the coming days, potentially





Was deploying a drogue the right decision?

I appreciate every scenario is different, but it's always good to look back on a situation with fresh eyes and the benefit of hindsight, and assess the key decisions...

Q: Did I really need to deploy the JSD?

A: The seas were bigger and breaking more than I've experienced in a Force 8 before, but the wind had a huge fetch for the sea to build, originating from Galicia as the Portuguese trades often do.

My windex showed a steady 45kts and this alone shouldn't have made for a dangerous sea. Perhaps the effect of Madeira changed the wave period or steepness.

I could have run off before the wind and waves and been most likely safe with the ripped main, no engine and the thought of losing a lot of ground. I decided to use the JSD and I stand by that decision in hindsight.

Q: Would I use it again?

A: I felt very safe riding under the drogue and I was able to recuperate, eat and sleep.

It took me 1.5 hours to retrieve but if I have to ever use it again then I think I could get that down too under an hour.

Knowing this, I wouldn't hesitate to use it in the future, and I'm really glad I've got something that I know will work.

Q: What is the specification of the drogue and chainplates?

A: The chainplates are made from solid 10mm stainless 316. I had them made especially as I wasn't happy with using my cleats or winches. I didn't want these crucial fixing points to be the weakest link in the system. They overhang the stern by about 20cm and are fixed into the hull using 8 x M12 stainless bolts arranged at 45 degrees, and no one bolt is closer than 120cm apart. A marine engineer advised me that they needed to be this distance apart to maximise shear strength on the hull. I also reinforced the hull behind the chain plates with additional GRP and a stainless backing plate. You can download the plans I made for a 6 and 8 bolt chain plate here: chasing-contours.com/jsd-chainplates

The drogue was purchased from OceanBrake for the displacement of my boat. I requested specifically hard eyes for the ends of bridle as I was concerned that standard stainless eyes could cause chafe.

The shackles are Crosby and rated to half the displacement of the boat, as per the specifications from Donald Jordan. I couldn't find other shackles with the strength I required. The weight on the end was 8m of 10mm chain attached by a stainless shackle onto a stainless spiced eye.

ABOVE
The slow and arduous task of winching in the drogue by hand

BELOW
Launching the drone just off the Azores was tricky to manage alone but worth the effort

under headsails alone. With luck I'd chance to hoist the spare main. Yes you read it right... I have a spare main but I'm going to need near to no wind to get the old one down without damaging it further - not to mention that a torn sail could be a nightmare to actually unfurl from in-mast furling gear.

So I set to work. I'd heard it can take two hours to retrieve a big JSD and singlehanded it could be a while longer. The wind was due to drop further so I really wanted to get





underway and make some ground. I leaned over the stern and attached a prusik knot to one of the bridles. I then attached a short length of rope to the prusik via carabiner using an easily undone clove hitch.

It is important to use knots which will undo easily; the forces involved in winching a drogue are huge!

I'd then winch in about 3M of the bridle before adding a second prusik in the same way and using my second winch to repeat until I reached the main drogue leader and got around the winch. I'm fortunate enough that my larger winch is large enough to accommodate the huge diameter of the first drogue leader. I began by using my electric Winchrite which I carry for singlehanded

sailing. I love it but for hauling in 150m of drogue it quickly ran out of battery and I was on to the tough job of winching by hand.

Inch by inch

My apprehension quickly dissolved as I realised that with each wave the drogue went slack and for a second or two I could get a few turns of the winch without any effort. An hour later I had the entire thing in the boat. I turned to around 60 off the wind, set the staysail and the yankee and I was off again, making 5 knots.

I was surprised at how well she sailed - just under headsails - upwind, and relatively well balanced.

However, this would be too good to be true and by nightfall the wind



ABOVE
Making steady progress

LEFT
Perfect conditions finally arrived on the last day

dropped completely. The plus side is that I was able to drop the old main and hoist the spare one... Only that for the next two days I flopped around on a mill pond with nothing to fill it. But becalmed for two days... What a welcome break!

I refused to be demoralised though as the forecast was due to fill in and no bad weather was on the horizon. I took time to rebuild my affection for singlehanded, enjoying the light dancing off the still water, playing my guitar, eating well and even taking a very brief swim. In order to quarantine and take a Covid test I sadly had to sail past the lovely island of Santa Maria and instead head directly to Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel. However, a superb final day was spent sailing in calm waters as the sun set. Spirits high, I plucked up the courage to launch the drone. It was a real challenge to launch and retrieve but it was well worth it.

Tim has made a film of the passage, including retrieval of the drogue which can be viewed at: www.chasingcontours.com/series-drogue

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