



Kylie vs The North Atlantic

JOHN CAMPBELL tests the mettle of his Contessa 26 on a singlehanded passage from the West Indies to England

WE HAD BEEN OUT three weeks when the barometer started to drop. I say we, but I suppose I am using the 'royal plural' for I was alone with my little 26ft Contessa, *Kylie*. Over the last three weeks I had begun to regard her and me as 'we'.

Big ugly clouds were building up in the west, the wind was increasing steadily, and the barometer continued its plunge. It did not require the services of a meteorologist to predict that we were in for some 'weather'. I did not feel too concerned. We had weathered gales before, *Kylie* and me. I had no reason to suppose that this impending gale would be any worse than the others.

We had left the West Indies toward the end of April and even now there was more than a month before the start of the hurricane season. We had plenty of sea room; the nearest land was in the Azores, almost 400 miles away. I changed the genoa for the staysail, and checked that the mainsail was securely stowed. Then I settled down to make the best of it, resigned to a few days of unpleasant weather, but confident that we would come through together yet again.

About a week out, I suddenly realised the enormity of what I was doing — me, sailing alone across the Atlantic. I bought the boat in Antigua and had spent a couple of years cruising the West Indies and parts of South America. Now it was time to return home to England and nobody was too keen to cross the Atlantic in such a small boat with me. I had enormous confidence in the boat, so decided to go alone.

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After three weeks, life had become an orderly, quite pleasant routine of reading a lot and eating too much. Now that I was used to the idea, I was beginning to enjoy myself.

As the day progressed, the weather continued to deteriorate. By mid-afternoon it was blowing a full gale and I changed down to the tiny storm jib. The seas had built up, and *Kylie* was surfing furiously down the face of the waves. The self-steering was finding it increasingly difficult to cope, so I stayed in the cockpit for a while to help steer.

I could say it was exhilarating as we surfed down those waves, the tiller bending and the rudder humming as I strained to stop her broaching. In fact, it was getting a little scary. The tops of the waves were beginning to tumble. One broke close astern and the top fell into the cockpit. I was more surprised than alarmed, as there was no great force behind it.

My confidence was just beginning to return when we got properly pooped. I didn't see it coming, but suddenly I was up to my waist in water. The cockpit was full to the brim. *Kylie* gave a lurch, and sloshed a lot of the water out over the coamings. The pair of two-inch cockpit drains were woefully inadequate. I bailed more water out of the cockpit with a bucket than had time to seep out of those miserable little drains. By far the greatest amount of water, though, had left the cockpit by way of the non-watertight locker lids. That water was now sloshing about in the bilge.

Pumping with one hand, steering with the other, I started wondering what to do next. I

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was evaluating the various alternatives when it started to rain. That may not sound like a big deal, but rain such as this I have never experienced before or since. To describe how hard it was raining I would have to use similes such as, it was like standing under a fire hose. Such words have little meaning. I huddled at the forward end of the cockpit, numbed in mind and body by the lash of the icy torrent of rain. It was impossible to look to windward, and downwind I could see little beyond the bow. The rain was so heavy that it beat the seas down to little more than an oily swell.

It rained perhaps for five or even maybe ten minutes, before it finally began to slacken. As the rain passed the wind eased. I left the storm jib set as I scrambled below to get dry and warm. We were only about 35°N, but after a couple of years in the Tropics, I was feeling the cold badly.

I took the opportunity to heat up a can of sausages and beans. I was glad I did, for that was to be my last meal for a couple of days.

By the time I had eaten, the wind had increased again. Once more the self-steering was finding it hard to cope, and I was getting

morning. Things never seem quite so bad in daylight.

I had decided not to keep a lookout for ships. The visibility was very poor; there was so much spray flying about. If I did see a ship, it would be too late to do anything about it, so I put my trust in luck and the radar reflector.

I lay in my bunk, and lashed the lee cloth down tight so I didn't roll about as *Kylie* lurched about with the waves. As each hour passed, and nothing dreadful happened, I began to relax. My confidence returned. We would get through it all right, *Kylie* and me.

I slept. Surprisingly enough, I fell into a deep sleep. In my dreams I was aware of a few crashes and bangs from the waves, and the howl of the wind never left me, but I slept.

Dawn never really happened; the night just became less dark. I did not need to get out of my bunk to tell that things were no better. Had I looked out, I would have seen that, in fact, the weather was considerably worse. A very big sea was running, but by now I felt very secure hobbling up and down inside the little plastic duck. I dozed off again.

It must have been almost exactly 0900, although I did not look at my watch until later, because I was fast asleep. I was woken by a tremendous crash. I could not work out where I was. It was dark again. I could not find my way out of my bunk. I was tangled in the lee cloth and my bunk didn't feel like my bunk at all. Then I heard the sound of rushing water, light appeared once more in the windows, and stuff was flying everywhere. We had been rolled over.

I clambered out of my bunk, easy now it was the right way up. I stepped into about eighteen inches of water. The water was sloshing to and fro. Floating in it was a jumble of books and clothes, food and tools. I trampled everything underfoot in my haste to get out into the cockpit. If a second wave hit her while there was still so much water inside, that could be the end. I had to run her off downwind.

I paused only to grab a foul weather jacket before climbing out into the cockpit. On deck I was horrified at the size of the waves. They were enormous, grey and menacing. I became very frightened as I realised we really were in trouble, *Kylie* and me.

I ran her off downwind. She began to do about five or six knots just under the windage of her mast. As she ran down the face of each wave, I could feel the water run forward, and I could see the bow go down. If we pitched now, that would be it. Running up the back of the waves, the water ran aft, and I pumped like there was no tomorrow. Maybe there would be no tomorrow.

I steered dead downwind, and as I pumped

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surfacing like a submarine. I could hardly believe my eyes.

I do not remember climbing aboard, but I do remember pumping. She was very low in the water, and I thought she would sink. I pumped for ages before the pump finally sucked air. After that, things looked up a bit. There were no more monster waves, just a regular procession of 30-footers. I had to steer the rest of that day and all night. I did not dare leave her to be a hull, and I could not get her to steer herself downwind.

By dawn the next day I was able to reset the storm jib and engage the self-steering. I was exhausted. I flopped down among the debris on the cabin sole and slept for almost ten hours. By the time I awoke, conditions had improved and I was able to put up more sail and to set a course once more for the Azores. It was to be another four days before we could rest in Horta Harbour, *Kylie* and me.

When I got back to England, I went to the Met Office and studied the weather maps for the duration of the voyage. I had been running along the line of an intense frontal system; had I been a little farther north or south, I would have missed the extreme weather. Because of my course, I stayed with the bad weather and had four days when the wind was over gale force. A ship close to my position at the time of the knockdown measured a consistent hurricane force wind, with gusts to 90 knots, so the weather was extreme.

I have crossed the Atlantic four more times since then and have not experienced anything near as bad, but it is as well to be prepared to meet extreme conditions.

Kylie was fitted with guardrails set on stainless steel stanchions, about 30 inches

the water out and she became lighter. *Kylie* began to surf. We had surl'd before on waves, but now she surfed for a minute at a time. As each wave broke, we were surrounded by dirty grey foam as far as I could see in every direction. Whole sheets of foam and spray were being blown off the top of the waves; it was impossible to look directly to windward.

If *Kylie* was on top of a wave as it started to break, the force just threw her forward. She seemed to fly through the air for a little way, crash down, then surl off at a terrifying speed. The whole thing felt decidedly unsafe and it was obvious that I would have to try something else.

I decided to stream some warps. Perhaps that would stop her from being thrown out of the waves as they broke. I had two lengths of heavy warp, each about 200 feet long, and these I streamed in a bight. All the other shorter warps I streamed astern with a tangle of fenders and fuel cans tied on the end to increase the drag.

Things felt a lot safer. No longer was she being thrown out of the waves, nor was she surfing so wildly. I could even convince myself that the warps were smoothing the seas astern. Now I had time to put on my jacket and secure the built-in harness. Luckily I had gone to sleep wearing my nylon fur Polar suit, which was doing its best to keep me warm. I began to relax a little and look round. If the waves were not so frightening, they would have been majestic. They were certainly higher than the masthead which stood at 29ft above the water. I had never seen such enormous waves. For about an hour we ran this way, relatively under control and not taking any heavy water on deck. Again my confidence rose, but once

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more it was premature. I became aware of a dark shape looming astern through the spray. The shape came rapidly closer and materialised into a wave. Not just an ordinary 30ft wave, but a real monster.

In the few seconds it took to approach, I remembered attending a lecture on wave formation. In a discussion on so-called freak waves, the lecturer quite glibly stated that in a typical wave pattern, every six-hundred-thousandth wave will be four times the mean height of the other waves. Without a doubt, this was my six-hundred-thousandth wave. It was not four times the height of the 'normal' 30 footers, but I would bet money it was a good 60ft, perhaps considerably more. There was nothing to compare it with. As it reared up behind us, I knew we were in trouble; perhaps this was the end of the voyage. How could any vessel survive such a wave.

I kept *Kylie* pointed downwind. As the wave curled over, I let go of the tiller, unhooked my arms around the mainsheet horse. The wave broke right over the boat. The first thing I became aware of was that I was swimming. By chance I surfaced facing downwind and all I could see was *Kylie's* mast. My thoughts raced. It looked as if the mast had been washed overboard and was being tumbled in the waves. Then incredibly *Kylie* reappeared. She was still attached to the mast, and she was

long. The force of the water in the knockdown bent all the stanchions on the leeward side. This was just the force of the water on the stanchions and the guardrails; there was nothing attached to them. This gives some small indication of the forces involved.

For any vessel in bad weather, it is of paramount importance to keep water out of the boat. *Kylie* very nearly sank because of poorly designed lids that opened into cockpit lockers leading directly to the bilge. Each and every opening into a boat must be watertight and be capable of being securely fastened closed.

Freak waves are not freaks. They happen with predictable regularity. Be prepared, if ocean cruising, to meet such a wave. Mathematically, one probably never will, and I hope the odds are even longer that I will meet a second one; but as always with the sea, one never knows. ◊

Note: Kylie is a non-standard Contessa. The 26ft Contessa is no longer built but all boats in the J Rogers range have cockpit locker catches as standard. While these, if fastened, would not prevent leakage under such conditions they would certainly prevent the ingress of water in serious quantity.