

AVALON SAILING CLUB

NEWSLETTER

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Irma's Awfully Big Adventure

AIRLIE TO SYDNEY ABOARD A VOLVO 60

**THIS
ISSUE**

I was once told by Roger Carlson, in relation to ocean sailing, "It is far better to be in here, wishing you were out there. Than out there wishing you were in here"...and he should know being a veteran of a number of major ocean races. When Irma Birchall told me of her intention to do a long ocean passage aboard "Line7", a full on ocean racing Volvo 60, and asked my opinion I was prompted to pass on Roger's little truism. She didn't listen and went anyway.

What follows is an interview conducted with Irma on her return. I should say that Irma was quite reluctant for me to publish her story but as I pointed out we always have stories of men doing



"stuff" but here is a female ASC member doing what most of us only dream about. As this adventure proves its never too late to realise a dream. I hope you also enjoy this story of "Irma's Awfully Big Adventure"

Irma's
Awfully Big
Adventure

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A New
Yacht for
Ross

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World
Cruising

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Guess Who
Don't Sue

•

Cruising
Musing

Now go to page 4



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Airlie Beach to Sydney on a Volvo 60

Q: You have just completed your first major ocean passage from Airlie Beach to Sydney...quite an adventure. What prompted you to do it Irma?

In the past few years I have had chances to do some blue water sailing. I really enjoy it. The ocean is so beautiful, so large...wanting a few days away from the city and routine, I started looking at different options. The adventure and the challenge of this voyage was really what I looked forward to for weeks. Would I be mentally and physically up to this? A Volvo 60 wow...!

Q: You must have had a lot of possibilities to choose from. What made you choose the "formula 1" Volvo 60 speed machine?

Getaway Sailing Adventures at Drummoyne had placed an ad in "Afloat" looking for crew. After a chat with Andrew Lygo, some encouragement from family and friends I went to see Line 7 at the CYC. Line 7 is 19.25m long and 5.25m wide with a mast height of 26m. I was hooked and yet had all the normal angst. Just think of it...a main sail area of 117 sq.m was it all going to be a bit too fast for me? Going alone was not an issue for me, but taking time off work just for me and not for a family holiday etc...but the voice inside was persistent. Wait another 10 years...do it then? I also wanted to go on a racing yacht for the uniqueness of the experience. This kind of arrangement with a sailing school with the chance of tuition on the run suited me. Now think of this too Mike, what a chance to have a skipper who has travelled over 25,000 offshore nautical miles and the captain who knows his boat inside out. That added to the safety aspect.

Q: Was the trip what you expected? Were there any surprises?

Even with a very fertile imagination, I could not have imagined what it turned out to be like. On my arrival in Proserpine the skipper who had been on my flight was told we were not going to be able to make it to Hamilton that afternoon. Line 7 was going to go up on the hard stand at Able Point Marina until the next high tide...Change of plans...From that moment on I was out of my neat comfort zone and needed to go with the flow. And it all went very well. Any surprises? Well, once on the way, the continual motion was hard to get adjusted to...a "can't change it now..." attitude worked wonders for me and I loved the whole trip.

Q: What was the most beautiful moment, the highs and lows?

Being a delivery back to Sydney, weather conditions and some other factors made it so that we couldn't spend any quiet time in bays in the Cumberland Islands for example. That was a low. But then that's where we saw the first dolphins and luckily they were to stay around for quite a while, day and night. We also saw some whales in the distance. The highs? I enjoyed the teamwork a lot. There were fun exchanges between the 2 watches (we were on 24 hour call, 3 hours on, 3 hours off). Like the changing of the guard, quite structured for logistics reasons but fun. One highlight for me was definitely to be able to watch weather patterns and dynamics evolve and the effects for the trimming of sails or changing of course.

Q: Where did you sleep? What did you eat? Could you get privacy etc?

On board Line 7 there are 12 bunks some bunks were set aside for stowing of luggage and no one had a specific bunk. We were 11 on board and had 2 watches of 5. I chose a bunk towards the aft watertight bulkhead and kept it pretty much for the duration. A little space to retreat to with my reading and a torch. What did we eat? The hot evening meals had been purchased from a great little restaurant in Airlie. Simple no fuss food and some fresh fruit. Re food, I had to laugh. It took me back to my girl guide days where there were also rationing practices in place but somehow some sweet things still seemed to disappear. We never were close to a serious investigation on Line 7 re the other shift's consumption but their courteous tea making offers smoothed relationships. Easy simple food and really one doesn't need that much. Was there privacy? Limited but adequate.

Q: Were there other women and what was the age span?

As I said there were 6 paying crew and 5 Line 7 experienced crew. I was the only woman out of the paying crew. The owner's daughter was on board and in fact she is a most impressive sailor at the tender age of 22. The skipper also enjoyed the company of his girlfriend on board and she too knew the ropes extremely well. The ages varied from 30 to 54. A most interesting group of people.

Q: Did you manage to keep in contact with your family?

Mobile phone contact was not possible for the first few days. But then the family was in good hands with Bob at home and some pre-prepared meals. They tell me they enjoyed the extra indulgences. While the cats away...mmmm?

Q: Did you ever wish you were onshore safely tucked up in bed.

On the morning of the 3rd day at about 1.40 AM I woke up from a nightmare thinking I was in a TGV in France zooming through a series of tunnels filled with water at great speed! Well, it was real. I was not in a train but in a boat planning on waves at speeds of up to 15knots. The watch after us got up to speeds of 19.3 knots. They were so excited...during our watch from 3am to 6am... it was exhilarating too, we didn't quite have the same wind strengths. I was 'on edge' but ok...the men loved it, some turned into yahoing teenagers and one of the helmsman called it "his best night". Now did I really want to be out there when we were hit by a storm just north of Newcastle on the Sunday the 1/9? You remember that storm Mike? Well, that is a different story. With winds around 35 knots peaking at 45 knots, a hail storm and plenty of rain and wash over the bow of the boat...That was an experience I am pleased to have had but even more pleased to have been in experienced hands. How much endurance one needs if these conditions last for more than our 6 hours, is what really was on my mind. We also had minor damages...what a humbling experience The elements can be very fierce.

Go to Page 9



Airlie to Sydney

Continued

Q: We watched you pass Bilgola Headland under a three reef main and storm jib. The wind was about 40 - 45 knots and there had been a

terrible hail storm. Tell us about how you coped?

By this time I was very comfortable in the group. I could unashamedly say: "shit...this is a bit much!" But I was looked after, which was so nice! But also, everyone was very alert to the directions of the skipper. The navigator kept giving new instructions re course to sail and wind information. We, the crew were working out strategies for fast action but also safety. We were looking after each other. Most of the time when on deck we had wet weather trousers and at night our harnesses on. We experienced the complete gamut of winds over the 6 days of the return voyage. Once passed Fraser



Island the southerly/easterly winds finally changed to northerly and westerly winds. All the instruments on board are very interesting. At night the readings stood out bright and clear in the night light and we all took turns at the helm during each shift. To stay on course requires much concentration as well as being in tune with the boat. That was probably my biggest challenge. To fine tune oneself, to provide a more comfortable ride for the others to follow the navigators instructions, not easy but very rewarding. The storm that hit us just north of Newcastle was really the strongest I have ever experienced. Look...I was scared but it was fascinating. The skipper and 2 other crew members stayed out for the total 6 hour duration. After our shift, we just tried to stay wedged in somewhere below waiting it out. 'Positive thinking Irma'...was my mantra and keep that imagination under wraps!

Q: Did your "Soleil" and "SnowGoose" experience stand you in good stead?

These boats are not comparable with a Volvo 60. OK, I know what you are thinking. Still...all previous experiences help. I remembered needing to reef the main during a freak storm one year during a Quartet Bowl race with Phil at the helm and with minimum skills at the time when the storm hit us. It helped me a bit to know what was happening...

Q: Did you fly the spinnaker?

No but we flew an MPS...and this in fact is an example where my experience with "Soleil" worked against me. One of the crew members called David injured his foot on the first day and very bravely with major swelling hobbled for the next 5. Well, when it came to the time to drop the MPS, I was instructed to go down below and help David to pull the MPS down. I proceeded quickly down the gangway stairs, past David and crawled over lots of sailbags to the bow and the forward hatch. THEN...I realized that the commotion was coming from the cabin and I reversed quickly (all this in full wet weather gear and harness) back to find David completely

swamped with the soft fabric of the MPS. (procedure was, unlike Soleil, to bring the MPS down through the main companionway.) It now is so funny when I think of me apologizing to David: I am so sorry...I'll get you out from under there!

Q: How did you cope with running back stays and water ballast?

Fascinating and yet somehow with regards to the running backstays they can make decisions for you as instead of a quick easy tack you might wait and see due to it's complex mechanism...The water ballast system just makes such a difference. It also pumps

water so fast that the adjustment of angle of heeling is very fast. There was also a desalinising system. All really interesting. The real time tracking on the endeavour electronic chart was also a new interesting thing to learn.

Q: Is it true you are lobbying the other owners of Soleil to buy a bigger more exciting boat?

This is something I can't disclose to your readers I will only say " watch this space"!

Q: When are you going again?

Mike, haven't you been saying for years: let's go cruising...well, that sounds very appealing and Bob will certainly be interested in that too. But this time next year?

Irma Birchall