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How to Sail Across the Atlantic

FROM *National Geographic Adventure*

OUT THERE, SOMEWHERE, moonlit swells are rolling through the darkness over a point I have dubbed "The Spot": 2,700 nautical miles equidistant from Cape May, New Jersey, and Lisbon, Portugal, and roughly 1,290 miles southwest of Newfoundland. The Spot marks the halfway point on our journey and is, by definition, the farthest we'll stray from land on our voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. I plotted it before we set out. But now, on watch at 4:00 A.M. in the predawn cold with nothing to do but stare into the dark and fiddle with my new LED headlamp (on, off, on, off), I've become much more intimate with this invisible point. I've measured it twelve times in the past two hours, and I'm pretty sure that at this moment, The Spot is lurking 2.3 nautical miles dead ahead.

To go up on deck, I have to concoct an excuse. Several months ago, after hearing a gruesome story from fellow cruisers about a husband tripping overboard on watch — and his wife waking hours later to find herself alone, surrounded by empty ocean — my wife, Lani Bevacqua, and I made a pact that neither of us steps out of the cockpit when alone on watch. But this is important. The idea of The Spot has become my personal "heart of darkness," and the urge to be on deck staring at the black sea around us when it arrives is impossible to ignore. So I tell myself that the jib, which in all truth is perfectly trimmed, needs some adjustment. It could be chafing against a shroud. Better check.

I click my life harness into the jackline, a web strap with a ten-thousand-pound breaking point that runs to the bow, and I step up to the bowsprit, which despite Leonardo DiCaprio's screeching in the movie *Titanic*, has not lost its exhilarating sense of freedom.

The moon is beginning to set, and the sea is turning absolutely dark. But if you peer long enough into the blackness you can make out shapes. You think you see a fin. You look for the glowing swoosh of bioluminescent plankton just below the surface. You hope that a bunch of lights on the horizon isn't an oncoming tanker. One night, I mistook a rising Venus for a masthead light and spent several minutes trying to hail the planet on the VHF radio.

Conditions are calm right now: twelve knots of wind, two-foot seas. *Lucy* bounds forward with an easy motion that tells me everything is OK. Standing on the deck of a thirty-eight-foot sailboat in the absolute center of the Atlantic in the middle of the night feels more mundane than I had assumed it would. When I imagined this moment months ago from my leather chair in New York City, it was much more Byronic. I was the plucky adventurer thousands of miles from anywhere, alone with the sea, like the people I read about in books and magazines. Instead, as I look out at the barely discernible line of the horizon, I see the concrete facts that led me here: the engine we repaired in Virginia, the rub rail we replaced in Rhode Island, the mortgage, the dodgy ports whose officials we've grown adept at bribing. I see weather faxes predicting approaching storms. I am not surprised. When we began this journey eighteen months ago, concocting our dream to sail around the world on a thirty-eight-foot sailboat, we were hopeless romantics. It didn't take long for the details of staying alive to overwhelm our dreamy fantasies of balmy islands and fruity rum drinks. "My main goal here is to not die," Lani blurted out one afternoon during a frenzied weekend of prelaunch repair work on our boat. It was a primal concern, but one that summed up pretty much everything we had done to that point and everything we intended to do from there forward.

And so, The Spot is a heroic benchmark to contemplate while killing time on watch, but it's less a romantic accomplishment than a logistical one: we managed to organize our lives in such a way as to make it this far (without dying). And now, closing in on The Spot, I realize that the greatest achievement of our voyage is that it was accomplished by us — nautical amateurs — and that anyone who wants to make their own ocean crossing can accomplish the same feat, provided they have a grasp of basic seamanship and are

1. A Bluewater Boat

For us, the task — as decided over martinis one cold February evening in 1999 — was to set off on an ill-defined ocean-crossing voyage that might, or might not, take us around the world. Long-distance ocean voyaging begins and ends with the boat. It's your house, your shield from the weather, and what keeps you from swimming all that way. And after thousands of miles of late-night watch, alone in the cockpit of *Lucy*, I began to appreciate all the superstitious anthropomorphizing that seafarers and sea poets have done over the centuries. At some point, your boat becomes a part of you.

But a boat is also a piece of equipment; and as with anything else, you need to find the one best suited to the task at hand. We knew we needed an ocean-capable boat — what's known in the business as a "bluewater yacht."

What exactly constitutes a bluewater yacht — as we learned over the first six weeks of our adventure, which we spent poking around marinas from Annapolis to Boston and consulting pretty much every book, Web site, and magazine article we could find on the subject — depends on two competing schools of thought. One school holds that the proper craft for crossing oceans is a heavy, strong, traditionally designed sailboat. The philosophy here is that if you get into a storm you want a boat that is built like a safe and has a proven track record. You want something heavy that won't break up when it gets battered by fifty-foot waves. And you want something that lets you hunker down — the nautical term is "heave to" — in a really bad storm to wait it out.

The diametric view holds that, with the technology at our disposal — specifically weather faxes, relatively accurate satellite weather charts that can be downloaded from the sky mid-ocean — having a strong boat that can withstand tough weather is less advantageous than having a fast one that can outrun it. The theory is that if you can see a perfect storm gathering five hundred miles away and marching toward you, wouldn't you rather race southward at ten knots and suffer little more than some gray skies and choppy seas?

It had been more than a decade since I'd been on a boat, and my experience coastal cruising with my parents in Connecticut, where

the only time we'd been out of sight of land was on foggy days, hardly qualified me for open-water adventure. Lani's experience — a few summers on Sunfishes at YMCA camp — had been even paltrier. So, a few weeks later we settled on an old, neglected Shannon 38, one of the toughest, most conservatively designed sailboats in the world, made to bob through storm after storm without a scratch. Although we'd planned to buy a cheap fixer-upper in the $30,000 to $40,000 range, the boat ended up costing nearly $85,000. We rationalized this, and the mortgage we had to secure, by the fact that she came equipped with some critical pieces of offshore equipment — like a single side band (SSB) radio, a radar, and a life raft — and that she was generally in good shape. In the end, we wound up exceeding our repair-and-equipment budget by about 300 percent.

But such was the fortitude of our spirit that, employing the tools at our disposal, we financed the balance on credit cards and, playing a shell game of balance transfers, housed the deficit of our lives (about $20,000 over eighteen months). On the eve of our departure, we were broke, and in debt. But as true Americans, we felt that this was not only acceptable, but thoroughly normal, and off we sailed.

2. *Don't Worry About Superstitions*

Sailors consider it bad luck to change the name of a boat. But *Rolling Home*, the moniker of our chosen vessel, fell into the unacceptable marine-pun category alongside *Seaquel*, *The Seven C's* (for a large family with the surname Christian or Callaway), *Sea Ya Later*, *Nautomatic*, *Yacht Sea* (with a picture of dice), and so on. As we'd learn, your identity on voyage becomes inextricably entwined with your boat. Plus, we liked the name *Lucy*.

3. *Embrace the Gearhead Within*

When I look back and tally up all the time spent fixing *Lucy* as opposed to sailing her, I am astonished by the fact that over 70 percent of our cruising time was consumed by me hanging upside down in the bilge or scraping my knuckles trying to tighten a hose clamp behind a bulkhead. Erase the images of palmy islands, crys-

talline waters, and warm sun and replace them with oil-covered gaskets, sulphurous water hoses, bloody knuckles, and the sensation (strangely titillating) of twelve volts of electricity coursing through your body, and you'll begin to get an idea of what it's like to go voyaging.

The most rugged thing I had accomplished prior to our trip was hanging some sheetrock in our apartment. But by the time we sold *Lucy* in Toulon, France, I could bleed a diesel engine in the dark in rolling seas. In the process, I collected a cool set of tools, a nifty tool bag, and something called a bosun's chair, which can take you to the top of the mast as the boat heels and bucks fifty feet below. Still, my evolution from effete New Yorker to greasy, low-slung handyman was slow, gradual, and painful. For the first six months, it seemed like everything I tried to fix only got worse.

4. Sweat the Specs

Displacement: Lucy was a moderately heavy vessel — 18,500 pounds empty, 24,000 pounds when we loaded her up with stuff. A typical racer/cruiser of the same length, built for ocean sailing, might weigh 12,000 pounds unloaded; a very heavy boat, 20,000.

Rig: Lucy was a ketch, a two-masted yacht, and was rigged forward with a small jib and a staysail, which meant that she could fly four small sails at once (from aft, or rear: mizzen, main, staysail, and jib) rather than just two very large sails, as is typical of sloops, the most common boat on the water. There are two advantages to this: the smaller sails on a ketch are easier to handle — a consideration for two shorter-than-average people like Lani and me — than those on a sloop. A ketch rig also has the effect of lowering and spreading the center of thrust in the boat, which makes the vessel more balanced, if slightly slower. But when you are sailing a boat shorthanded across an ocean, balance — which translates into the ability of a boat to sail itself — is very important.

Hull Shape: Lucy had a traditional V-shaped hull with a full keel stretching from bow to stern. The keel contained 7,300 pounds of lead, which made her very stable in heavy seas.

Construction: One of the greatest dangers offshore is hitting something (flotsam, a whale) that puts a hole in your boat. *Lucy*'s hull was built with solid fiberglass, which achieved a one-inch thickness below the water line, making it very strong.

5. *The Joys of Plumbing*

A few months after buying *Lucy*, we made a twenty-three-mile "shakedown" sail from Stonington, Connecticut, to Block Island. This trip was marvelous: clear skies and steady ten-knot winds. We'd invited Lani's parents and brother, David, a college student. *Lucy* was majestic with her twin headsails and gentle, even motion through the water. Although Block Island can be overrun with tourists, we found a patch of empty harbor near the docks to anchor.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of the electric toilet cycling endlessly. "I think the toilet's clogged," my mother-in-law, Marilyn, announced as she came out of the head.

I leaped confidently into action. When I pressed the button on the electric pumping mechanism in the toilet, it sounded funny, like it was spinning but nothing was moving. I pushed once more. Certainly what I heard was the sound of a clog somewhere in the line — probably toilet paper. I traced the outflow line to the probable source of the clog, a Y-valve, and proceeded to loosen the hose clamp and pull open the line. I was very careful to close the Y-valve first, based on the articles and books that I had read. I didn't want seawater to come flooding into the boat, getting everything wet.

As I pulled the hose free from the valve, I learned two very important lessons about repairing things. First, that pressure accumulates in a closed system (and, being clogged, the outflow line was a closed system) in equal proportion to how much pumping you do — between Marilyn and myself there had been a lot of pumping so far. And second, that a crucial component of any repair is acquiring all the facts, which in this instance included the following: my father-in-law had also used the head at some point during the night, he had probably done quite a bit of pumping himself, and it was far more than toilet paper clogging the system. In the next moment, the obstruction in question shot out of the line with fire-hose ferocity. It caked the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. It covered me completely from head to toe. I can say, unequivocally, that being showered with another person's crap has been the single worst experience of my life.

That's when I dedicated myself to becoming a much more care-

6. *Zen and the Art of Diesel Repair*

At some point, after a period of mechanical struggle, you will achieve enlightenment. You will realize that your diesel engine is subject to change, and that your suffering and discontent are the result of attachment to the circumstances of your diesel engine and its nature as an impermanent thing. By ridding yourself of this attachment, including attachment to the notion that you are not mechanically inclined, you can be free of suffering.

Add to this a set of head-gasket spares, a torque wrench, and a copy of *Troubleshooting Marine Diesels* by Peter Compton (McGraw-Hill), and you are on your way to complete happiness.

7. *Weather Is Everything*

The most essential component of cruising is, and must always be, weather. The chance that you might run into a storm informs everything you do, from boat choice to equipment to the chitchat between sailors. (Some basic knowledge about low-pressure systems and the movement of fronts goes a long way on the dock.)

Granted, few run-of-the-mill cruisers ever encounter seriously dangerous weather at sea. The reason for this is that they follow a standard set of cruising routes around the world designed to avoid storm seasons. This is sort of disillusioning. You imagine that you'll simply sail wherever you want, whenever you want. Instead, if you want to avoid storms — and, trust me, you do want to avoid storms — the path around the world is pretty well circumscribed.

8. *Go with the Flow*

The correct way around the world follows the trade winds and predominant ocean currents as they move through the tropical latitudes from east to west. Timing is everything. You want to leave one part of the globe as hurricane season begins and enter the next part as it's ending. A typical circumnavigation with a departure from the east coast of the United States goes something like this.

Hurricane season in the Caribbean lasts from June to November, so either you embark before this and spend those months in some relatively safe harbor just south of the hurricane belt (which lies roughly between fifteen degrees north and thirty degrees north),

usually in Trinidad, Venezuela, or Colombia, or you try slipping south after hurricane season in December (attempting also to avoid the onset of winter). In any case, you want to arrive at the Panama Canal around March.

Cyclone season in the Pacific Ocean lasts from December until April or May. This is about the time you want to be exiting the other side of the canal. You now have about eight months (from April to November) to cross the Pacific and find a safe spot on the other side before cyclone season begins again. A lot of boats divide the trip in half by heading to New Zealand for the austral summer there, and then sailing back north to tropical climes the following May. Others push on directly to Australia.

After transiting the Torres Strait between Australia and Indonesia sometime in June, you can go north of the Equator and cross the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, and then move on to the Mediterranean; or you can push south, staying below the Equator, to South Africa. For the former, you can make your transit anytime between November and March — so it's a little more leisurely with several months in late summer to kick about Indonesia. (Of course, there are pirates to contend with; read on.) On the southern route, cyclone season in the Indian Ocean starts up again in late October, so you need to scoot from the Pacific in July or August and get across that ocean as quickly as you can.

Beyond the Cape of Good Hope (which is anything but), it's usually a cakewalk up to the Caribbean, as the South Atlantic is the one ocean on earth without a tropical storm season.

9. . . . Or Don't

The wrong way around the world goes west to east in the temperate latitudes. Going this route, you don't enjoy the benefits of following trade winds and are often forced to buck currents and flukey headwinds. From the United States, you cross to Europe at forty degrees north, stopping at the Azores. Next comes a transit of the Mediterranean, then down the Red Sea with the wind at your back. In the Indian Ocean the winds are largely on the nose, though you can hug the edge of the Arabian Peninsula and Indian subcontinent and eventually make your way to Malaysia. From here, you shoot through the archipelagoes of the western Pacific, get-

pan. Then comes your transpacific cruise, maybe stopping in the Aleutians, down the west coast of the United States and Mexico, through the Canal, and home.

Our route followed neither of these because we weren't committed to a circumnavigation. We left New York City in September 2000 and hugged the U.S. shore until hurricane season was over. In mid-November we pushed to the Caribbean and Central America, where we made a clockwise circuit of its northwest reaches, from Jamaica to Honduras's Islas de las Bahías, then up to Rio Dulce of Guatemala, and on to the barrier reef of Belize, through the Yucatan Channel, and then to Havana.

In early June, when the normally tempestuous North Atlantic is at its calmest, we set out for Europe, stopping in Bermuda and the Azores, eventually landing in Gibraltar. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

10. About Time

Unless you're sprinting around Antarctica in a tricked-out maxi catamaran (fifty-eight days is the record, held by Steve Fossett), it'll take you at least two and a half years to sail around the world following the seasons. Add to this the rule that everything takes doubly long in sailing; the average completion time among circumnavigators we met was four and a half years. Considering our rate of progress, if we'd gone all the way around, it would have taken us nearly seven years.

11. Watchman Fundamentals

"So, where will we pull over to sleep at night?" Lani asked one afternoon as we were driving back to New York from a weekend aboard *Lucy* shortly after we bought her.

You don't. In the middle of the ocean there are no rest stops. And unless you carry ten thousand feet of chain (twenty thousand when sailing over a trench), you're not anchoring anywhere. Someone had better be awake at all times when you're under way.

We began our trip following a standard four hours on, four hours off watch rotation. But we soon discovered that anything less than six hours of sleep a night had adverse effects on mental acuity.

"a cold, dark, and lonely business." I, on the other hand, got a kick out of the stars and the darkness. So, after a couple of weeks, we devised our own lopsided schedule centered around the key hours between midnight and noon. I took the nighttime half, from midnight to 0600, and Lani took the morning from 0600 to noon. We divided up the remaining hours into segments organized around naps and meals.

12. *Love and Marriage*

Very early in our trip (Jamaica) we realized that 95 percent of the cruisers we met were traveling as couples, and that of these there were essentially two types: those who seemed to be at the point of implosion — snapping at each other publicly, visibly unhappy together, visibly happy apart — and those who seemed blissfully content. And a short time later (Honduras), we discerned the root cause of this division. In the troubled relationships, the men were absolutely driven by some tangible goal, usually to complete a circumnavigation, and the women seemed dragged along on the scheme rather unthinkingly.

The happy couples, by contrast, were strikingly goalless. A kind of therapeutic laziness pervaded their anchorages. So, somewhere in the lower part of the Belize barrier reef we decided to pursue, stubbornly, one goal above all others: to keep our marriage intact. And as February passed into March, we happily turned our backs on the possibility of a circumnavigation for the more-marriage-preserving plan of simply sailing "about" the world.

13. *The Pink and the Blue*

After a couple of weeks aboard *Lucy*, we woke up one morning to find that we'd divided all the onboard duties into pink tasks and blue tasks. It was as if we'd sailed back in time forty years. And it was this way for nearly every other boat we ran into. The woman aboard was in charge of organizing and cleaning and maintaining the living space below decks; the man was in charge of making sure everything worked. She was June Cleaver and he was Mr. Goodwrench — even if in real life she was a trial lawyer and he was a science

content in these traditional roles? It was a somewhat unsettling idea.

14. A River in the Ocean

A hundred miles or so off the East Coast, lying perpendicular to our progress like a stone wall, was one of the most powerful forces on the globe. The Gulf Stream is formed by a warm-water current that flows up from the Caribbean, sweeps past the east coast of the United States, and then spindles out into swirling tentacles in the North Atlantic. The Stream, as it is called by sailors with a kind of knowing nod, can move as fast as five or six knots, pushing a boat sideways and, during the time it takes to traverse the current, miles off course. It also acts like a magnet for inclement weather, and a kind of all-around badness clings to it like lampreys on a fish. One way to tell you're about to enter the Gulf Stream is that a distinct band of rain squalls will appear on the horizon on an otherwise sunny day.

If you're smart and lucky, it's possible to plan your route to actually take advantage of the Stream — you might cross at a point where the Stream veers a little southward and toward Bermuda, or you might try to hit an eddy on the right side and let it kind of fling you southward. Our test-run passage down to Bermuda was textbook perfect. We hit an eddy on the correct edge and made Bermuda in five and a half days. If you're unlucky, you can also get screwed by the Stream. Our trip back took twice as long.

15. Survival 101

During a night watch about two hundred miles off the coast of Bermuda, I reread (by headlamp) *Adrift*, Steve Callahan's famous account of hitting what he suspects was a whale, watching his boat sink in the middle of the Atlantic, and spending seventy-six days at sea on a life raft fighting off sharks, catching dorados, and flirting with insanity. His survival depended on the singular fact that he'd prepared very well for this type of emergency by carrying a life raft and packing a ditch bag. I had tried to imitate Callahan's preparations as much as possible. *Lucy* had a ditch bag and, mounted on her foredeck, a six-man life raft in a pressure-release canister.

is stuff that will help you get rescued, like flares, mirrors, and an emergency position-indicating radio beacon (EPIRB), which, when activated, sends out a distress signal with your GPS coordinates. The second category is stuff that will help you get by until you get rescued. First aid kit shares top billing with water, or some kind of apparatus for making potable water. Callahan had some old rubber stills, in which water evaporated and then condensed in a little cup at the bottom. They were ingenious in their simplicity, but Callahan spent most of his time drifting across the Atlantic repairing the rubber as it quickly degraded in the tropical sun. In the past ten years, the technology of drawing freshwater from saltwater has evolved by several magnitudes; for $500 we purchased a handheld reverse-osmosis "watermaker" that fit into our ditch bag. You also need some way of getting food, which when you're in a life raft in the middle of the ocean pretty much comes down to catching fish. To this end, we packed a fishing line, hooks, lures, and several knives. There were also a couple of radiant blankets, to prevent exposure, and a bunch of water jugs and Luna bars. The kit itself sat on the shelf behind the navigation station, theoretically impossible to miss in a catastrophe.

Occasionally, while on watch during our voyage, I ran through the abandon-ship scenario in my head: grab ditch bag, go forward to release the raft. I was supposed to heave the canister over the side and let the natural motion of it floating away tug the tether and release the raft. But the last time I moved that thing, to paint the teak cradle underneath it, I was surprised to discover it weighed more than a hundred pounds. With adrenaline pounding through my body I could probably do it quickly. But what about 105-pound Lani? Such questions are easy to ponder onshore, less so when you're standing in the cockpit of a rocking boat in the empty ocean.

16. Mal de Mer

Comanche flu, getting green about the gills, motion maladaption syndrome — whatever you call it, seasickness is a major hazard in voyaging. Making a passage of more than three days with a partner who is incapacitated is equivalent to setting off single-handedly without preparation.

became a serious safety concern on long passages because she was able to control it pretty well through a careful combination of drugs (scopolamine patches and Stugeron, an antihistamine widely used in Germany and the U.K. but not approved in the United States) and homespun preventatives (favorites include ginger ale, ginger tea, ginger gum, and arrowroot). We once read that lettuce is good for seasickness, but since it wilts and turns to soup in a matter of days, we never relied on it.

17. It's Different in the Tropics

One afternoon in the Bahamas, we took a stroll along a quiet beach on the ocean side of Exuma Island. The place was deserted. Nothing but seaweed, seashells, sea-tossed tree trunks — whatever had been lifted onto the sand during the most recent rough weather. After a while, we noticed a strange lump in the distance, and as we got closer we recognized the sad figure of a sailboat lying on its side in the sand. We learned the story later in town while lifting pints at the Two Turtles Inn: some guy had gotten all turned around in the waters here a few weeks past and ran over the barrier reef offshore, tearing up his hull. Once caught inside the reef, he tried frantically to extricate himself, but kept bashing into the coral until eventually, with water flooding the bottom of his boat, he turned and drove onto the beach.

Making your way around tropical waters is an entirely different game from navigating in northern waters. For one, in places like the Bahamas, which is riddled with reefs and sandbars, the waters are largely uncharted. One key skill to master, if you're going to spend any time in tropical areas, is the ability to read the color of the water for signs of reefs or hazards. Remember these dicta: blue (deep) water is good; green (shallow) water is not so good; white (very shallow with sand) is even worse; and brown (fiberglass-chewing coral extremely close to the surface) water is disastrous.

18. Tankers Are Real

Late one night in 1995, Judith and Mike Sleavin and their two young children were on their way from Tonga to New Zealand aboard their Compass 47, *Melinda Lee.* Judith was on watch. Down

below, the two kids and their father slept. Judith had just made an entry in the logbook and was climbing out of the cabin into the cockpit when a thousand-ton freighter sliced through the *Melinda Lee*, sending her to the bottom in a matter of seconds. Their son, Ben, who was sleeping in the forward berth, died instantly. Somehow Mike and daughter Annie crawled out of the cabin as the boat sank and were able to join Judith on a half-inflated dinghy that bobbed to the surface. But within a day, both father and daughter succumbed to hypothermia and died. Judith alone survived, floating for more than sixty hours and eventually landing on a beach in New Zealand's Bay of Islands.

On the open sea, cargo ships and tankers usually travel at about twenty knots. The horizon, on a clear day or night, might be seven nautical miles away, which means that if that ship is coming directly toward you, you have about twenty minutes to get out of its way. Therefore, the rule of thumb is that the person on watch has to stand up and methodically scan the horizon for any signs of life every fifteen minutes.

To put this in perspective, twenty minutes is about the time it takes a person to boil some ramen, slice a few vegetables for a salad, run a little seawater over the dishes to clean them, and climb out of the cabin into the cockpit. Those were Lani's actions on a calm evening during the return leg of our shakedown cruise to Bermuda. I was awake in the cockpit with a book, lying down on the lazaretto. Technically, Lani was on watch, but since we were both awake no one was really paying attention. Not until she came up with our noodles and salad, and then, glancing over my shoulder toward the water, began stammering "uh, uh, uh . . ."

When I turned around, I had trouble craning my neck far enough to look up at the thousand-ton container ship barreling past us. It might have been a hundred yards away, which, given the size of the ocean, is distressingly close. So close that if it had been heading one degree farther south there would have been nothing to do except watch as it sliced through *Lucy*.

After that, Lani and I became religious about scanning the horizon regularly. Despite this, we were surprised quite often by tankers sneaking up on us from nowhere. According to Lloyd's, the insurance giant that maintains a register of oceangoing ships, there are nearly ninety thousand ships (in the hundred-gross-ton category)

currently plying the ocean. The problem is that these vessels stick to the same seasonally advantageous shipping lanes favored by oceangoing sailboats. This is one of the great shocks of offshore passagemaking. You assume that when you get two thousand, or even two hundred, miles away from land that it will be just you and Mother Ocean. Then the sun goes down and you see the horizon dotted with lights. In eight thousand miles of sailing we had two nights (one in the middle of the Atlantic and one off Honduras) during which we didn't see a single ship. Forget also the idea that the crew of the ship is looking out for you and that they will nudge their behemoth one way or the other to sidestep a thirty-eight-foot sailboat. The crew is most likely watching videos or sleeping. And even if alert to your plight, don't assume they'll launch a rescue. Judith Sleavin recounts that after her boat was sunk, the freighter circled back and watched them for a few minutes before inexplicably sailing off.

19. Pirates Are Also Real

Piracy still poses a regular danger to voyagers. The worst parts of the world for this are the narrow straits of Indonesia and the Gulf of Aden, where the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa pinch together at the mouth of the Red Sea. These tight squeezes, lined by poor countries, are geographically favorable places for pirates to attack. There have also been reports of sailboats being boarded in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and on the Rio Dulce in Guatemala (where we ventured). Usually, thieves sneak aboard in the evening (if no dinghy is hanging off the back, they assume the boat is empty), break in, and take things that are useful to them such as outboards, fishing tackle, and liquor. There are stories of pirates passing over laptops in favor of a set of oars.

There are also organized crime rings — mostly in the Gulf of Aden — that track sailboats on radar and attack them suddenly and violently. One such story came to mind while I was on watch in the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti. A family sailing past here many years back was surprised by armed speedboat bandits who boarded them, forced the family into their dinghy, and set them adrift. The family survived, but only after watching the pirates loot and then burn their boat to its water line.

Which is why talking about pirates always brings up the most con-

tentious question in cruising — whether to pack a gun on your boat. The argument for carrying a gun is cynically straightforward; sailing a yacht in the vicinity of poor countries is like walking through the zoo's polar bear exhibit wearing a seal-skin suit.

The arguments against guns are just as forceful. As a former policewoman (now gun-toting ocean cruiser) explained to me in St. George's harbor in Bermuda, the first question you need to ask yourself is whether you could actually kill another person. If you're not ready to do that, then you'd better not even think of bringing a gun onboard. Lani knew there was no way she could ever take someone's life. As for me, I could imagine some pretty horrific scenarios that would make me pull the trigger.

Not that a gun guarantees anything. In 2001, Sir Peter Blake, the New Zealander who twice captured the America's Cup, was attacked by pirates in the mouth of the Amazon. He reached for his rifle, but one of the robbers shot him dead. The policewoman pointed out that wielding a gun is not as Hollywood portrays it. "There's this false idea that if an intruder comes aboard your boat in the middle of the night that you're going to wake up and come out shooting like Dirty Harry," she explained. "That's just wrong. If you're inexperienced then you'll probably never hit anything."

In the end, we decided not to carry a gun.

20. Look! No Hands!

Whether you let your sailing be dominated by gadgets is a stylistic choice. We met cruisers who had everything from a clothes dryer to an electric winch that lowered their dinghy into the water. We met others who peed in a bucket. Since we departed in debt and money was an issue, I tried to acquire only equipment that would make our trip safer.

That said, I've never made a better purchase in my life than our Monitor wind vane. In an age of electronic autopilots that track to a course line, the mechanical wind vane, which steers a boat according to the wind direction, is a bit of a relic. But considering that the average autopilot has only four thousand miles of life in it, any serious ocean cruiser needs to think about using a wind vane.

Moe, as we called our wind vane, sailed *Lucy* for nearly 95 percent of our trip. He was unflagging, capable, and loyal — like a stainless steel border collie. I couldn't have sailed without him.

21. Here Comes the Bribe

I didn't understand why the Jamaican port captain was sweating. I wasn't that hot. And we couldn't figure out why he wouldn't leave All our papers were in order. He'd stamped our forms. We'd paic the boat tax. He'd given a cursory look over our cabinets to make sure we weren't smuggling any fruits or livestock. But then he jus sat there tapping his fingers.

"He wanted a tip," Hulk later explained. Hulk lived on a houseboat in the middle of the lagoon, and he saw the port captain visi boats every day. By tip, of course, he meant a bribe.

We eventually learned how to spot this. The sad *federalistas* tending the customs house in Livingston, Guatemala, definitely wantec one. So did the sweaty doctor who spoke flawless English in Havana; his eyes gave him away.

Bribing is an acquired art. Dollars are accepted everywhere There's the obvious wadding and passing of bills across the table Or the sly slipping of money into a stack of papers you have to fill out. Then there are the subtler techniques of serving tea or having a cold American beer at the ready — which may not be a bribe pei se, but can still lubricate the bureaucratic machine. Neither ol us smokes, but we carried several cartons of Marlboros. Any nice thing that you can share gets counted against your baksheesh liability.

22. Sea Food

The bulk of our provisioning was done en route in the local markets. Certainly we visited places with little in the way of interesting local cuisine — four weeks in the Bahamas was bland as hell — but for the most part, eating our way around the world proved to be as much of an adventure as sailing. There was *feijoada* (black bean and pork stew) at an all-night beer fest in the Azores, lime soup in Mexico, some mysterious rum concoction in Bermuda. We reached the zenith in Port Antonio, Jamaica, where we ate goat's head soup with a veterinarian whose skill in identifying the skull parts was phenomenal.

On passage, we'd feast on fruit and greens for the first few days

beans. (Unless you're a rabid carnivore, meat is best avoided on long voyages — it spoils quickly.)

Oh, and fish aren't as easy to catch as you'd think. In eight thousand miles, we caught four.

23. *Wildlife*

One time I went snorkeling in eight feet of murky water around a mangrove key and came nose-to-nose with a small shark. It terrified me. On the way back from Bermuda, off New Jersey, Lani was peering over the stern of *Lucy* to check the exhaust and saw a huge shadow of a shark swim out from under the boat. We saw a lemon shark in the Bahamas; another bull shark in the Bahamas; some kind of gray shark in the Bahamas; and then another unidentified shark in the Bahamas.

Three things: sharks are a part of voyaging. I hate sharks. The Bahamas are Shark Central. Ergo, I am not that fond of the Bahamas.

Whales, likewise, made me nervous our entire trip. A tanker, at least, could be dodged. But whales have been known to attack — and sink — sailboats. How would *Lucy* fare if a mammoth creature double her size decided to ram her, repeatedly? Not well, I imagined. These fears only mounted as we made our way from Bermuda to the Azores, through an area so rife with whales that it's known as Whale Alley.

For days we'd been hearing reports about whales from other boats in the vicinity. Someone saw a spout; the next day a tail. Finally, on the afternoon of June 28, after nine hundred miles and seven days at sea, we met our first leviathan. We were on a broad reach with twelve knots of wind, and I was taking advantage of the heel of the boat by lying on the leeward (or lower) cockpit lazaretto. I was completely in tune with the rhythmic motion of *Lucy*. And then the rhythm stopped. We heeled quickly, another five or ten degrees, in an awkward and unnatural motion, and slid back to flat. I shot upright, and there, not three feet from my face, was the large, slick, brown head of a sperm whale. He (she?) exhaled and seemed to sink in the water slightly. I had the distinct impression that we'd awakened it. It took several seconds, until we were a hundred yards away, before the head disappeared below water and the

24. *Perfect Enough Storm*

Our first gale arrived the day after we passed The Spot. As the weather fax had predicted, the winds picked up out of the southwest through the night and then settled at thirty-five knots for an entire day. Our anemometer was broken at this point in the voyage, so we couldn't measure wind speed precisely, but we heard from another sailor in our area (maybe twenty miles away) that he'd recorded gusts of forty-five knots, which is damn high. The waves reached twenty feet by noon; and with the wind blowing in the opposite direction of them, the waves looked like large, square teeth chomping at *Lucy*'s stern.

When conditions get very rough on a sailboat, you have two options: to turn into the waves and heave to until the storm passes, or to turn away from the wind and run with the storm. In our case, since we still had six hundred miles to go and the storm was running in our direction, I turned *Lucy* and went with it.

Eventually, we disengaged Moe, our wind vane, who seemed to be struggling as *Lucy* surfed down the waves at seven knots. At some point — you lose sense of time — I emerged from the cabin to see a medium-sized humpback whale breach from the white froth in our wake. Or at least I think I saw it. Your sense of reality starts to get lost as well. Once, when *Lucy* rose high enough on a wave, we were able to catch sight of a large tanker nearby that had somehow escaped both naked eye and rain-choked radar.

Weather like this has the effect of stripping everything to its essentials: sails reduced to mere scrap, technological doodads rendered useless, sleeping in our rain gear and peeing in the cockpit, holding on and waiting it out.

25. *Landfall*

Because of all the variables — weather, seasons, currents, alluring harbors — cruising stories tend to have no real beginning, middle, or end. We met sailors, such as Lin and Larry Pardey, who'd set out for a nice sail one day and were still at it over thirty-six years and 180,000 miles later. We met others who'd had very definite plans to circumnavigate in three years and hadn't managed to extricate themselves from the northwest Caribbean yet. Many, like ourselves,

found their course altered on a daily basis. A cold front from the north approaches, and suddenly you're off to Cuba rather than Honduras.

In the autumn of 2001, we found ourselves crossing the Mediterranean. After a brief stop in Menorca in the Balearics, we pressed on to Sicily and the stinking cesspool of Palermo harbor, and from there, to little Cefalu on the north coast of the island. We stayed for a week trying to figure out the next step; whether to stay put and winter in Sicily, or make a late-season run to Greece, say, or maybe Israel.

I returned from an Internet café in Cefalu one day with these possibilities bobbing in my head to find Lani standing in the cabin, beaming. In her hand lay an obviously positive pregnancy test.

So, pregnant and broke, we sold *Lucy* in Toulon for a meager profit, which just about covered our credit cards.

From everything I hear, the adventure of parenting will make sailing across the Atlantic seem like a breeze.