

SUNK BY A WHALE

A PACIFIC CROSSING BECAME A
DRAMATIC MID-OCEAN RESCUE



The crew of *One Tree Island* (pictured right, before setting off from Florida) believe they collided with a young sperm whale (above)

It's noon on Sunday, 23 August, and just another day in the life of our small crew sailing across the Pacific. The Atlantic 46 catamaran *One Tree Island* is making a steady 6-7 knots, heading south-southwest under a reefed mainsail and genoa, both well eased in the 12-knot south-easterly. It's less sail than we'd like to carry, but we've learned to tailor boatspeed to sea state, and the 2m swell is topped by smaller whitecaps that make for an uncomfortably bumpy ride if we push harder. Panama is 2,500 miles astern, we've been at sea for 18 days, and even if we keep to this modest speed we'll be in the Marquesas, 1,500 miles away, in less than ten days.

Shoals of flying fish erupt, startled, from the water around us and scatter among the waves. Willy Stephens, *One Tree Island* skipper and owner, is asleep in his bunk in the port hull. I'm hoping he wakes up before too long to bake another loaf of his rather good bread. His wife, Anne, is below decks, rummaging for a book. I'm mentally planning next year's cruise from Florida to the Bahamas and onward, reading a page of Bruce van Sant's *Passages South* between each lingering look around the horizon. Not that there is ever anything to see; we haven't had an AIS target in days, and only a few seabirds enliven our watches. There is only ever the sea, huge and indifferent.

We are late travellers in the Pacific; the prime season for the Panama-French Polynesia crossing is from February to April. Any later, and you don't get to spend much time in these legendary islands before heading for cyclone season shelter in New Zealand or Australia. In this year of COVID-19, however, there is no normality. Expat Brits (turned Kiwis) Willy and Anne had planned to cross the Atlantic from the United States in May after launching their refitted cat. But as borders began to slam shut in March, their options became more limited by the week. They were

stuck in a Florida boatyard, reading accounts of cruisers in limbo around the world.

With their American visas about to run out, Willy and Anne decided to go for a near straight run to New Zealand, which was only letting in citizens and residents. The Panama Canal was open, though they'd first have to spend two weeks in quarantine. It appeared that they would be able to stop in French Polynesia, the previous weeks at sea being sufficient proof that they weren't carrying COVID-19 to the islands.

I was refitting my own boat in the same yard, but it became apparent my 2020 cruising plans would have to go on indefinite hold. Being in possession of a highly desirable New Zealand passport; I gladly came aboard as the third hand, fulfilling both insurance and nationality requirements.

On this August day we are just over three months into the journey. We've



‘Water, already ankle deep, is gushing into the boat from the port side’

motored down the Intracoastal Waterway from Jacksonville to Fort Pierce, sailed around the Bahamas, and across a lumpy and surly Caribbean Sea. We sweated out our two-week sentence anchored outside Panama’s Shelter Bay marina, then spent another two weeks at anchor waiting on a new staysail and deck awnings.

We know we are better off than many. At least we’ll be welcome in New Zealand for the cyclone season.

WHALE STRIKE

I stretch and take another look around the horizon, beginning with a squint through the rear window of the saloon.

The previous week, while hundreds of miles from land, voices behind the boat had frightened the hell out of me. They turned out to be two Colombian fishermen in a small panga, asking for water (their mothership just over the horizon, minus an AIS transponder). When they peeled away, they were hidden by the swells within minutes.

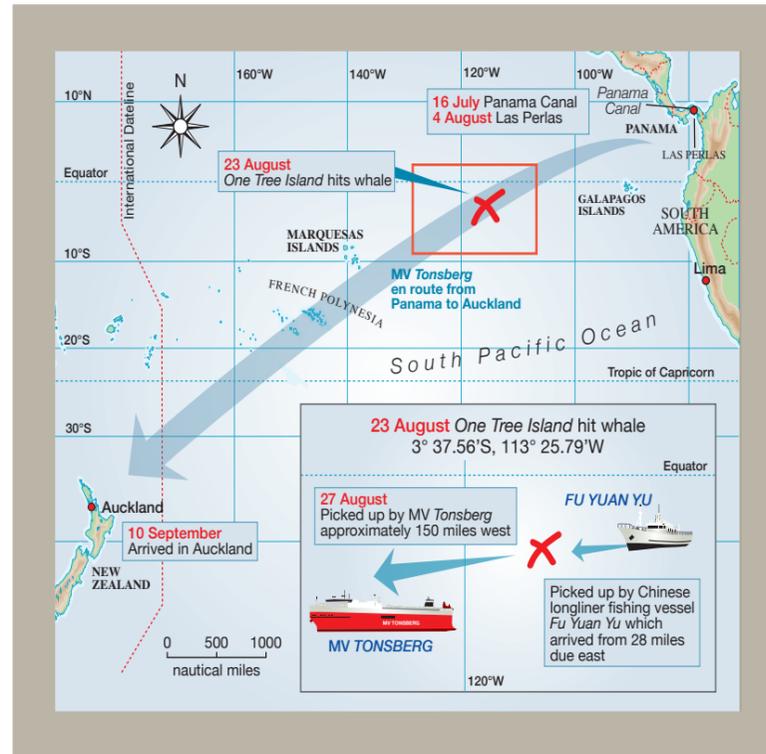
As I turn towards the bow, out of the corner of my eye I register a dark shape in the water just ahead of us. A nanosecond later, at the instant I recognise it as a whale, the port bow makes contact and the boat jolts as if bashing into a steep head sea. I have just enough time to shout “*****! Whale!” at the top of my voice before it passes down the port side. As it does so I hear, and feel, a crunching impact.

Willy shoots out of his bunk, instantly awake, and the three of us stare out the rear portlights at the whale lying on the surface in a froth of pink-tinged foam. For a moment we are all transfixed. Then I see a red warning light on the switch panel and say, “Bilge, check the bilge!”

Willy jumps down the steps into water that’s already ankle deep, gushing into the boat from the hanging locker outboard on the port side. Tearing out the locker’s contents, he sees bright blue sea through a pair of inch-wide vertical cracks in the cedar strip and glass hull, water



Happier days: One Tree Island at Shelter Bay Marina in Panama



spurting into the air. He grabs a couple of T-shirts and stuffs them into the cracks, then disappears into the aft locker and emerges with two of those orange foam rubber cones that are supposed to plug leaks – just not our kind of leaks, as he quickly discovers. Anne is in the cockpit, cranking away at the manual bilge pump, while I pull down the mainsail and roll away the genoa.

With the leak slowed if not staunched, it becomes obvious that we are in no immediate danger of sinking. When Willy replaced the engines he also sealed their compartments, so there is at least some reserve buoyancy in the hulls. There are no watertight bulkheads forward, though, but the entire forepeak is still above water and its door has a high threshold. Willy grabs a roll of sticky-back rubberised tape and applies it all around the door, effectively sealing it, moments before the rising water would have slopped over the sill.

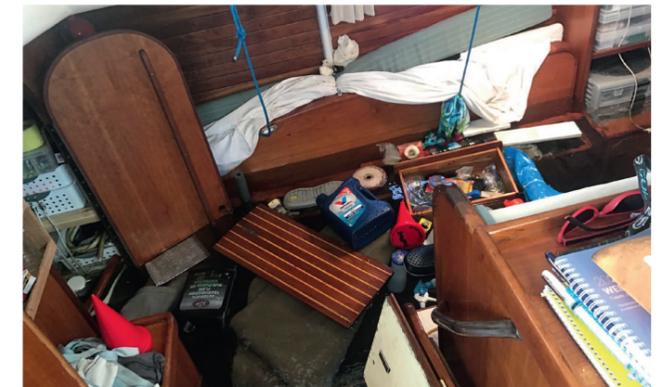
“Right,” he says. “Let’s have a look at the damage. Maybe we can patch it from the outside.” I tie a safety line around his wrist and the owner goes over the side.

“There’s a big dent maybe 3ft across, with two cracks in it, just above the keel,” he reports. That’s possibly the worst place for it. There’s no way we can fother it with a sailcloth patch, and nothing will stick to slimy, ablative antifouling.

By now the water is chest-deep in the port hull, but it seems to have reached a natural level just a few inches below the bridgedeck. The hull cracks are well out of reach from the inside, not that we can plug them effectively. We have not yet sent out a distress signal, although Anne has



Willy and Anne knee deep in water in the port hull



Sole boards and locker contents start to float around inside, but One Tree Island does maintain some buoyancy

begun letting their shoreside contact in New Zealand, Frank Michaux, know what is happening via Iridium Go.

Willy and I talk through the situation. Could we sail or motor the boat? If we were 100 miles from shore, we would give it a go. But we are 1,500 miles from the nearest land, and with so many tonnes of water in the hull, would be lucky to make a couple of knots.

Are we in danger of sinking? Not immediately. Catamarans are hard to sink, and this one is especially so, by virtue of its wood and foam construction.

What would make the situation worse? If the wind increases and the sea state gets up, there’s a good chance that water will slop over into the starboard hull and sink us lower in the water. Predictwind has the wind increasing to 20 knots in a couple of days. Do we want to abandon the boat? No, but it seems we have no option. The liferaft, though, will be the very last resort.

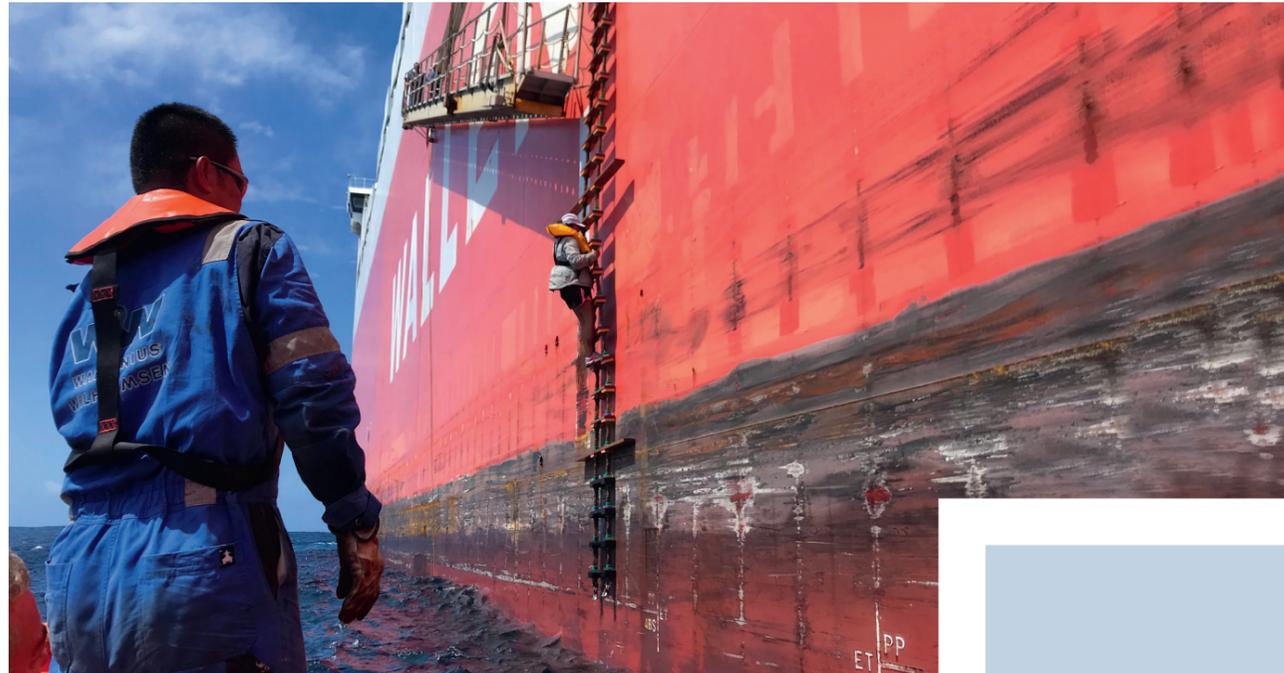
ABANDON SHIP

Already we are taking some hefty slams from waves surging under the hull and smashing against the bridgedeck, and the decision is made. Willy activates the EPIRB, and I hit the emergency button on my SPOT X satellite communicator, tapping out a short message: STRUCK BY WHALE. TAKING ON WATER. Just over half an hour later, Willy gets an email from the Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC) in Honolulu, Hawaii, asking us to confirm the EPIRB signal.

From then on, events develop in a slightly surreal

fashion. The JRCC brings the Peruvian Coastguard into the picture (the US and Peru have a joint SAR agreement to work together in the Eastern Pacific) and we are handed over to an enthusiastic Peruvian Coastguard officer, who tells us that a Chinese fishing boat 24 miles away has agreed to take us on board. The Chinese longliner won’t be with us until after dark, some six hours from now, which gives us plenty of time to pack a change of clothes and some personal effects to take with us. We decide these emergency supplies will include the contents of the freezer and wine lockers, and all the chocolate and candy bars on board, as we doubt there’ll be much of that on a Chinese fishing boat. There’s a large piece of rather good steak in the fridge that we don’t want to leave to Neptune, so we cook that up for our last lunch. Then, there is nothing to do but wait.

As night falls, a bright light astern signals the arrival of the Fu Yuan Yu. We each fire a red flare – mostly just to say we’ve done it in anger, as we’ve got every light on board going so there’s no way she can miss us. As the small



Far left: MV Tonsberg hoves to off the Fu Yuan Yu. Left: Anne scales the ladder on the sheer sides of the massive Tonsberg. Below: the rescued trio with Tonsberg officers

'The Tonsberg's clifflike topsides stretch 30m above the water'

ship draws close to windward the excited shouts of her crew drown out the throb of her diesel. She stops and drifts down on us, and the two vessels meet with a crunch. Her fish gate is only a couple of feet above our deck. Willing hands snatch the bags we pass up and then, one by one, timing the rolls, we are plucked off *One Tree Island*.

Next, half a dozen fishing crew swarm onto the cat. Two head for the dinghy and outboard, which are hoisted aboard in short order. Others disappear below deck, emerging with odd items of gear. Pillows and blankets come flying up to the deck, a pile of books is thrown aboard one by one. Towels, sun lotion, charts, random items of clothing, Willy's drone, even my travel umbrella make their way onto a growing pile. There is shouting, a lot of it.

There is a final flurry as the crew carry up more tools, handheld VHF's and the like, all of which disappear up to the bridge of *Fu Yuan Yu*. Meanwhile the swell is increasing and the two vessels roll and grind against one another. I see the stanchions ripped loose and feel the crunching as the ship's steel gunwale crushes *One Tree Island's* hull-deck joint. One of the crew almost falls between the boats as he scrambles back aboard. Then suddenly *One Tree Island* is drifting astern, her lights still ablaze.

I look at my watch. It is 2130, just nine hours since we hit what we later agree is a half-grown sperm whale and eight hours since we triggered the EPIRB. In this part of the ocean, it must be a record for a rescue. The transition from flooded sailing boat to noisy, brightly lit fishing boat is surreal. The din from the engine is overpowering, and there seem to be people everywhere, all trying to help us in one way or another. We are ushered into a tiny cabin, just

10ft by 7ft, with four bunks in it. Somehow we fit all our possessions in there and immediately understand why the crew salvaged our blankets and pillows: there were no spares on this boat. There are not even mattresses, the crew sleep on half-inch-thick futons. But an AC unit keeps the temperature manageable, and it's still an awful lot more comfortable than a liferaft.

By the next night, we are in tune with the ship's rhythm. It steams on a zigzag course, alternately paying out its miles of fishing line and baited hooks and reeling it all back in again. The primary target is sharks, but we also see marlin, tuna and big mahi-mahi reeled in. Each time there's a fish on the line, the ship slows while it is gaffed and hauled on board. The sharks' fins, great delicacies in China, are cut off, bagged and snap-frozen; their owners are weighed and then join their fins in the freezers. Much of the by-catch goes to the galley, and the staple diet on the ship is rice and fish. The captain, aware of the political sensitivity surrounding longlining, makes clear that he'll confiscate our electronics if we take photographs. He even gets angry when he sees me writing in my notebook.

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT

In the meantime, Willy has been in contact with the Peruvian Coastguard, who has been phoning the captain at odd hours. Each time, Willy is called up to the captain's cabin, where he must drink beer and smoke cigarettes with our host while they communicate via the time-honoured method of sign language and raised voices.

The problem is finding a way back to land for us, given that the captain is as keen to get us off as we are to leave.

The *Fu Yuan Yu* won't be back in port for another six months. Our only hope of getting off seems to be on one of the tankers from Panama or Peru that periodically resupply the 250-odd Chinese fishing boats in the eastern Pacific. This may not happen for a few weeks: a dire prospect.

However, back in New Zealand, Frank has been tirelessly working on our behalf. He has found and contacted the agents for ships coming through Panama and heading west past our general location, which is on the rhumb line to Tahiti. He has good news; the captain of Wallenius Wilhelmsen's MV *Tonsberg*, a RORO ship bound for—hurrah!—Auckland, has agreed to stop by and rescue us from our rescuers. Finally, much beer and smoke later, there is consensus: the captain agrees to meet the *Tonsberg* at a specified position, the end point of one of its longlines. We will be transferred via the *Tonsberg's* rescue boat.

As we wait, we slip into the routine of the *Fu Yuan Yu*. We join the crew at mealtimes, eating our rice and fish at the officers' table. The young deck hands are from Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Some speak a little English, and Anne speaks some Indonesian. They tell us they were hired on two-year contracts, and haven't touched land since the previous October. They fish around the clock, every single day. It's a hard life. Dangerous, too; the ship rolls enough in calm weather and I wouldn't want to be on deck in a blow.

There's high excitement among the crew when the *Tonsberg* finally comes into view, a huge red and white presence blocking the horizon. There's a big swell running, and we are relieved to see the *Tonsberg's* rescue boat is considerably larger than the RIB I'd been expecting. It gingerly comes alongside, its bow rising and falling a metre

WHAT WE LEARNED

- **Communication is key.** The ability to exchange information with rescuers can save your life. Take a satphone, a device like Iridium Go, Garmin InReach or SPOT X, and watertight bags or cases for phone or tablet.
- **Don't panic.** We went through the stages one by one – identify and try to stop the leak, send the emergency signals once we were sure the boat could not be saved, communicate with the authorities, add other equipment and supplies to the grab bag we had already packed. We were lucky in that the boat was not about to sink. Had *One Tree Island* been a monohull, I'm sure we'd have been in the liferaft within an hour.
- **Expect the unexpected.** The hardest thing to defend against on a small boat is hitting something you cannot see. You won't see objects that are just awash until you are literally on top of them.
- **Stop the leak.** Could we have saved the boat? Willy comments: "Of all the safety gear, tools and spares on board, I had nothing to plug a hull breach of this size and shape (two narrow 8in cracks, perhaps an inch wide at the middles). I had three or four JB Weld epoxy putty sticks, I needed 20 times more!
"It is so frustrating that I had no solution to plug a simple, fully accessible hull breach! What I needed was a six-pack of cricket ball sized epoxy putty balls. Knead for two minutes, stuff it into or over the hole, hold while curing, repeat until the leak is plugged: simple. Why is there no such thing on the market?"