

FIRST TIME WITH A FRENCHMAN

A VIRGIN CREW SAILS A CATAMARAN FROM FLORIDA TO FRANCE

STORY AND PHOTOS

The memories are vivid. Dolphins and diesel fumes. A blood-orange moon rising to starboard as engine trouble loomed to port. A spinnaker like a taut, glowing veil before a sun that shone down later on its wet, shredded remains. We were 30 days at sea, a virgin ocean-crossing crew aboard a French-built multihull, bashing our way nonstop from Florida to France. That was the plan, anyway. The actual voyage, with all its detours and unexpected deviations, proved infinitely more memorable than our foolish man-made scheme. It was one of the most exciting, exasperating experiences of our lives.

The Atlantic will test you, but you can be sure that after every turbulent storm or broken boat part there will come a sunrise that reminds you why you left to explore in the first place

In the Days Before One: Fate has twisted plans for our captain. With both retirement as a fighter pilot in the French Navy and his family's next chapter as liveaboard cruisers on the horizon, Captain Yannick has one solitary goal in mind: to sail his 2005 46ft Soubise Freydis, *Andanza*, singlehanded, nonstop from Pensacola, Florida, back home to Roscoff, France. Fate devastates his boat with a lightning strike that costs Yannick six expensive months at the yard and an impressive refit, but also reveals a loyal, motley bunch to serve as his crew.

They emerge first in the form of Johnny, a weathered sailor and diesel mechanic who helps Yannick repair his engines and who—at 71, still surprisingly healthy and with bucket in hand—seeks to scratch “cross the ocean” off his list. My boyfriend, Phillip, and me—slugging away on a devastating refit of our own Niagara 35 at the yard catch wind that the Frenchman on the freaky-looking cat is taking on crew. Having crossed only in cavernous carrier

ships to remote, scorned places in his youth as a U.S. Marine, Phillip is chasing his lifelong dream to cross the pond on a small boat. A tomboy, turned lawyer, turned “this sucks, I quit” vagabond so I can seize the very type of opportunity a transat affords, I sign on for fist-clenching adventure and bluewater experience.

Two weeks from departure, the newly formed crew scrambles to replace blown windows, step the mast, test new sails and pack the cat with 30 days' worth of food, safety gear and supplies in the sweltering May heat.

Day One: Heat pours out of the starboard engine locker as Yannick lifts the lid two hours out of the Pensacola Pass with the high-temperature alarm still ringing in the crew's ears. Boiling the extracted thermostat reveals impaired coolant flow, and installation of a new one affords us a slightly high, but steady temperature on the Lombardini, albeit with a “lot of piss,” I note. The captain finds it com-

forting enough to keep motoring across the glassy gulf and amusing that the first language I start to pick up is Diesel, not French.

Day Two: “It's French for “cheers,” Yannick tells us, as the crew “*santés*” over an immaculate steak dinner in the cockpit. The motoring, while monotonous, affords us beautiful satin sunsets and leisurely time for quid pro quo French-English lessons. “Well, how should I say it?” Yannick asks, when I snort at his post-dinner inquiry of, “How are you going to clean your dirty body?” Chuckling, I reply, “Would you like to take a shower?”

Day Three: Showers of glitter trail behind a pod of dolphins as they zip and glide through the dark waters below the bow. Yannick and I forge a lifelong memory during a midnight shift change when we are mesmerized by the sea creatures slicing through

phosphorescence. Forty-six feet away from the chugging engine to starboard, the only things we can hear are their breathy puffs and water lapping on the hull.

Day Four: “Did you hear an oil alarm?” Johnny asks, raising his head and greasy hands out of the starboard engine locker, a silk sheet of saltwater behind him, trying to figure out why, at 0506, the starboard engine shut down on its own. Replacing a clogged fuel filter proves an easy fix. Making drinkable water from a faulty watermaker does not, and starts the

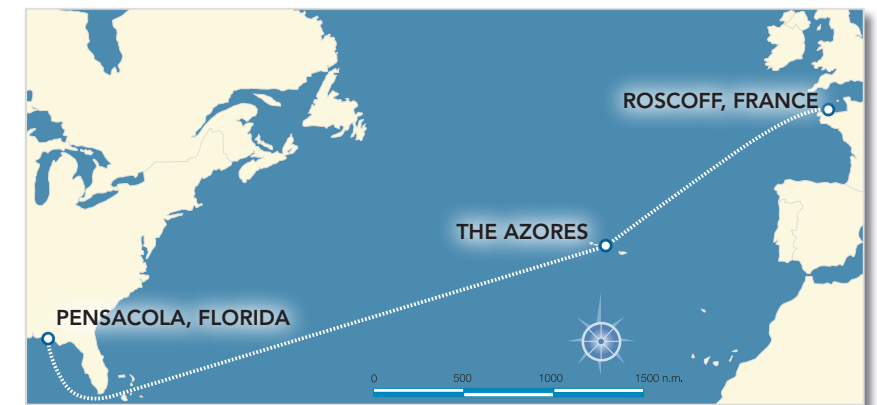
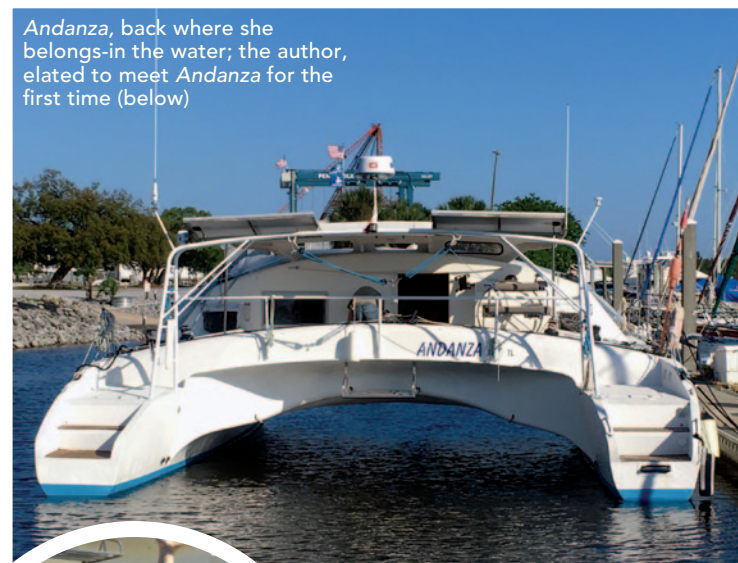


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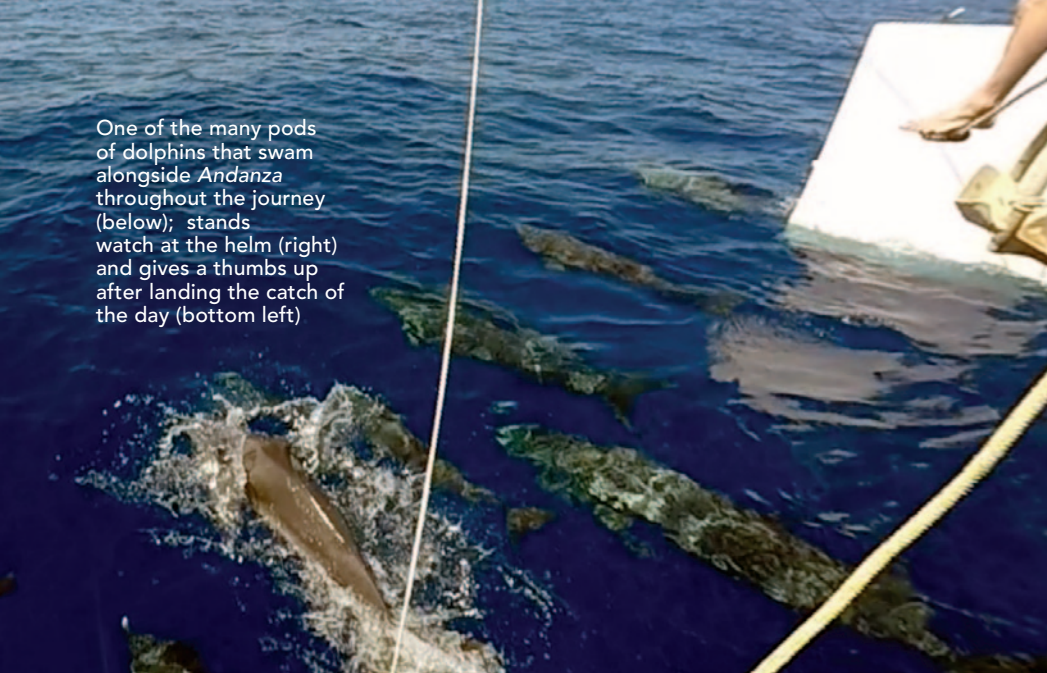
The crew (from left) before setting out (above); gathering provisions for the 30-day passage (below left); making repairs after a lightening strike (below right)



Andanza, back where she belongs—in the water; the author, elated to meet *Andanza* for the first time (below)



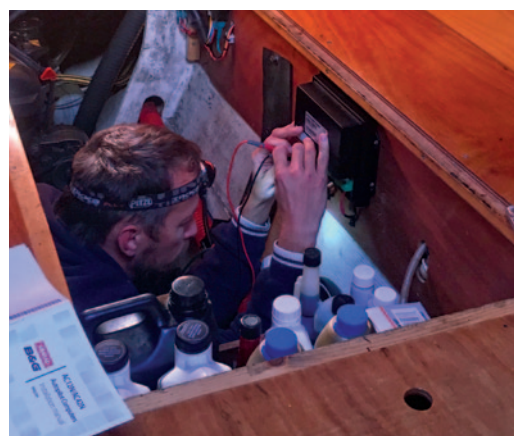
They're off and running! The crew makes adjustments to the spinnaker, the first sail raised as they embark on the voyage across the Atlantic



One of the many pods of dolphins that swam alongside *Andanza* throughout the journey (below); stands watch at the helm (right) and gives a thumbs up after landing the catch of the day (bottom left)



Captain Yannick, either plotting his course, or practicing his balancing skills



A quick lesson in the physics of a rotating mast (left); a creative muffler repair saves the day (center); Yannick in project mode (right)

slow parade of minor equipment failures and boiling of the captain's blood.

Day Five: Blood rains down from the fighting tuna as Phillip thunders "Fish on!" to the crew. Soon, boat sushi is bouncing in our bellies during a swift, sweaty two-hour stop in Key West for fuel, ice, water, "and a not so crappy can opener!" Yannick shouts, orchestrating our pillage from the boat as the crew shoots into the town like darts.

Day Six: Rain darts into Yannick's eyes at the mast while he directs the crew's first attempt at reefing as a squall off the tip of Florida brings winds over 30 knots. An intense but brief storm proves fortuitous, as the crew learn their many mere discussions about safe practices did not serve them nearly as well as practice would have. The afternoon is spent doing reefing drills. The captain also makes up separate reefing instructions for each crewmember, taped to his or her designated post.

Day Seven: "Post A connects to Post B," Yannick reads from yet another manual. I watch, half in admiration, half in exhaustion as the he flutters from one project to the next. Cleaning out the elbow of the starboard engine exhaust, tapping new holes in the water pump, even sawing a chunk out of our only cutting board to make a mount for the Windex that allows it to account for the boat's rotating mast. "That's fine," our head chef, Phillip, grunts from the galley. "If you use it all, I'll just cut on the counters."

Day Eight: Cans jump on the counters. Teeth jar in mouths. The bashing of the water on the hulls is like a nervous system message so strong it bypasses your brain. Muscles flinch without instruction. The crew grows accustomed to it, but never comfortable with it. When 200 nautical miles are slaughtered in a day, we know: with bashing comes bumpy but beneficial speed.

Day Nine: "It is used, primarily, for speed," Yannick says, trying simultaneously to learn and teach the crew the purpose of his rotating mast, one with so much windage it can be trimmed like a sail. Strictly monohull sailors, the crew stares at him dumbly, not nearly as intrigued by the ability to use the mast as a fourth reef as the initial inquiry that started this free physics lesson: with a rotating mast, what happens if you overtighten the shrouds?

Day Ten: The shrouds continue their murderous shudder with each crash of the boat. As non-catamaran sailors, the crew knows not how tight the shrouds on a Freydis should be but that they should not be so loose as to clang to their death with each romp of the boat. The Captain sends satellite messages to professionals, checks the chain plate on the port side hourly and tears through texts on rig tuning.

Day Eleven: "Tuning must be done very slowly,"

Johnny and I chuckle to ourselves, cotter pins in our teeth, wrenches in trembling hands, as we tighten the shuddering shrouds on each side wondering how anyone could possibly do this quickly. Coupling this advice from a rigger back home with a turnbuckle thread measurement from the previous owner, Yannick supervises the rig tuning, and we slowly ease the shuddering of the rig underway.

Day Twelve: While on a cat underway, it is a myth that you do not have to stow anything. Bowls slosh off counters. Wine glasses topple (and are quickly refilled) as the crew celebrates a record 243-nautical-mile day and a peak boatspeed of 19.5 knots. Steady winds of 23 knots and eight to 10-foot rolling seas entrance as the catamaran climbs and skids down each wave.

Day Thirteen: "Magnificent," Yannick sneers as he eyes the melted end of the muffler Johnny has extracted off the port engine at dawn. Phillip and I now know we were wrong in thinking the easing winds and smooth motoring the night before had been a gift, as we now cough up melted-plastic fumes while clambering out of our port berth. Undeterred, Yannick earns his "MacGyver certificate" by reassembling the melted exit point of the muffler with the PVC tiller extender arm from his outboard, a blowtorch and some hose clamps.

Day Fourteen: Hands clamp and tug the head of the spinnaker as she billows ethereal and enormous in the water behind the starboard transom. Her halyard, having been secured by the winch, but not clutched down at the mast, allowed the hungry waters of the Atlantic to suck her down between the hulls and drag her all the way to the stern. Yannick, in a sacrificial attempt to salvage both the sail and the starboard rudder, emerges blood-speckled, dripping on the spinnaker's remains splayed out on the trampoline, wet, twinkling and tattered.

Day Fifteen: "Tattered glittery skirts," I hear Yannick telling Phillip as he hunts for a hard drive. Mourning the loss of our spinnaker, Yannick claims, will be eased by a video he and the other wearisome pilots used to watch during long hours on the carrier ship. It is a four-hour rendering of the glittered, scantily-clad, cosmetically enhanced women who populate the neon-lit night clubs of Ibiza, and he is right. We find ourselves immensely comforted by thumping pink panties.

Day Sixteen: "They're my Paris panties," I explain as Yannick eyes a pair of rather fifth-grade looking underwear with little Eiffel Towers and "Bonjour's" on the lifelines. "I bought them special for the trip," I say with a smile as Laundry Day proves a special bonding time for the crew and reminds us how few blue-water days we have left.

Day Seventeen: Left, only left. It freezes the wheel



The author takes in a stunning hilltop view in the Azores (above); tradition calls for celebratory drinks at Peter's Café Sport (inset)



only when Yannick turns left. The cat's 10-year-old electronic autopilot starts to show its first signs of wear when it refuses to disengage when de-powered and allows steering only to the right in what the Captain dubs, "ratchet-fashion."

Day Eighteen: "Hand me a ratchet." Yannick's requests come muffled from the starboard engine locker as the autopilot's housing refuses him any attempt for disassembly or repair underway. Auto-Turn-Notto will die. Soon. And all we can do is watch and listen as each mechanical movement of the wheel is followed by a grind and squeal.

Day Nineteen: "Whee!" I can't help it. Gleeful squeals burst out of me at the top of each wave. The boat moves underneath me like a stallion galloping at speeds equal to the 22-knot winds that hold during my entire night shift. Only when a wave kicks the stern out and shoves us almost 90 degrees off our heading do I stop squealing and decide to get my bearings.

Day Twenty: Bearings and bolt threads that were once intact and operating in the cavity of the autopilot now pour out into a pile of metal dust on the saloon table. "R.I.P. Auto" reads the log book as I head up to

hold my first night shift hand-steering. "Dress warm. Wear gloves," Phillip warns.

Day Twenty-One: Warning him "we should not do it" would have been better, but the crew reflexively and simply tells the captain "we can do it" as he struggles to decide whether to hand-steer the remaining eight or nine days to France versus stopping to repair the autopilot when we reach the Azores in two days. A stern discussion between the fighter pilot and the marine results in a wise decision to stop our nonstop voyage mid-Atlantic.

Day Twenty-Two: "Mid-Atlantic Yacht Services," a female voice answers over the satphone, 15 hours from the Azores, as the captain books a slip at Horta Marina and schedules autopilot repairs. Morale soars as we see whales and sight land for the first time in 16 days, and then immediately tanks when bad injectors on the starboard engine cause it to shut down an hour from port.

Day Twenty-Three: I'm on the port hull with the big "boat-saver" fender as we shove off from the hun-

dreds of colorful, weathered boat insignias on the Horta dock. After nine incredible days downing beers at Peter's Café Sport, exploring volcanos and indulging in impossibly fresh cheese from the very cows chewing cud on the hillside (and eating steaks from their siblings), we leave the Azores under port engine alone and steer *Andanza* north to France by daintily clicking buttons on a screen.

Day Twenty-Four: The screen lights our faces as the crew indulges in book after book, movie after movie, matinees, even double features in beautiful 15-knot winds from astern. Crossing an ocean with a functioning autopilot makes even devil's work too much for our idle hands.

Day Twenty-Five: My hands are tied. Yannick has outright busted me. "Oh, it's a time change day," he says in a mocking high-pitched voice. "Oh, we need to conveniently jump forward an hour again, during your shift again," as he squints his evil French eyes at me. *Putain!* Time change occurs during Phillip's shift that day and I take revenge by choosing *My Cousin Vinny* as the movie that night, as it seemed, among our rather impressive 500GB hard-drive of movies, the most...American.

Day Twenty-Six: "Try not to act so American," Yannick advises us as we approach Roscoff. "No selfies, eat slow, wait for the check and don't revert to Spanish when you can't recall your French." He looks at me. "We know the difference." Fun, lighthearted discussions about our expected arrival in two days seem to jinx us, as the day ends with a rather harrowing hoist of the captain up his 72ft mast after the main-sail came inexplicably flying down on its own around dusk. We suspect the topping lift, inadvertently left taut, may have chafed through the halyard.

This mystery, however, is instantly tabled when the captain's descent brings even worse news: the rig is compromised. The troubling shuddering of the shrouds earlier in the trip has caused five of the 16 wires on the starboard shroud to snap just below the swage at the mast. Worried a wind-filled main or worse, change to a starboard tack, could dismast us, the crew decides to remain on port tack, flying only the genny for the remainder of the now four-to-five-day trip. Yannick spends the night poring over rigging textbooks and catamaran specs.

Day Twenty-Seven: Yannick spends the morning documenting potential cracks at the base of the mast and re-tightening the spinnaker halyard we ran to a starboard cleat in case the shroud goes. I find him later standing in silence, his heavy head laid against the bulkhead in his berth. The crew tries to rally *le capitaine* with the cinematic masterpiece that is *Hot Tub Time Machine*, and succeeds when we settle upon Yannick's mantra for the trip—"I'm on my waa-ay. Home sweet

home!"—blasted at decibels that could be heard from Roscoff, rounding out the movie's final score.

Day Twenty-Eight: I score no sympathy points from the captain as I pass him at 0200, flashlight in hand, on my way to the port engine locker. I can't decide whether I want to prove or disprove my mind's wild conviction—down in the auditory carnival that is my berth—that the port engine has become submerged, fallen out and left a gaping hole in the hull of the boat. Yannick laughs when I seem vexed at the sight of a completely safe, dry engine and says, "Tonight, I've only slept 20 minutes."



Dry land is a bittersweet sight as the voyage comes to an end

Day Twenty-Nine: Twenty ships surround us in the English Channel. The radar screen that has offered only an empty halo around our boat for weeks is now filled with dozens of vessels. The excitement of the night shift is bittersweet as we all know it will be the last of this voyage. In an amazing show of endurance and inspiration, the boat and captain, equally tired and compromised, carry on, both fighting their way to France.

Day Thirty: Fighter pilots scream by in a heroic show of unity at seeing their former comrade coming home by way of sailboat across the Atlantic Ocean. Yannick waves heartily at them from the bow, his smile so big I can see it from the stern. A small crowd cheers as the crew and boat see the finish line, as we prepare to dock the gallant Freydis in Roscoff. Yannick's son's voice is the first we hear in France as his small, powerful pipes rip through the air: "*Bonjour Papa!*" *

spends most of her time traveling, swearing and sailing on her Niagara 35 (in that order).