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Two codgers and a boat: marriage made in yachtsmen's heaven

By Edward Gorman, Sailing Correspondent

Fierce winds touch 80 knots

Duo still two months from home

Fans follow progress on web

THE plan was logical, simple, adventurous, mildly eccentric or completely crazy, depending on your point of view. The execution of it has proved not only one of the great feats of short-handed ocean sailing but also one of the most delightfully entertaining episodes in the sport's recent history. Alex Whitworth, 62, and Peter Crozier, 59, who describe themselves as "two old farts in a small boat", had grown bored of the challenge of the Sydney to Hobart Race, in which they had sailed year after year in their modest but rugged 33ft sloop, Berrimilla. For a change, they thought, "Why not let us do the Fastnet Race?"

While the Sydney to Hobart sets sail on Boxing Day, the Fastnet starts in the English midsummer just after Cowes Week. Over the years, boats have competed in both classics with the help of a container ship to get them to the respective start lines. Whitworth and Crozier came up with an altogether more challenging idea.

They would race in the Sydney to Hobart, then dismiss their crew at Hobart, sail 14,000 nautical miles to Cowes, race in the Fastnet and then sail straight back to Sydney in time for this year's Hobart. The Australian pair are now three quarters of the way to accomplishing their mammoth task.

Berrimilla completed the Hobart on New Year's Day, finished an amazing eleventh overall on handicap in the Fastnet in August and is this morning rumbling along gamely, about 1,700 miles due south of Cape Town on her way back to Australia. She is still two months from home, by which time she will have sailed about 31,000 miles.

The boat, a Joubert-designed Brolga 33, has stood up to wild conditions with apparent ease and has gone round the world at her own speed, a sedate 1960s-era five knots. This means she and her intrepid crew will have spent four cold months in the Southern Ocean and four months in the Atlantic in a year that Ellen MacArthur went round the planet in 71 days.

Whitworth and Crozier admit to episodes of boredom but have revelled in the pace of their progress, entertaining a steadily increasing audience of armchair enthusiasts with their daily "sit reps" on their website. Whitworth, who was born in England and began sailing on the Beaulieu River, is steeped in nautical lore and expertise.

An unabashed traditionalist, he has a great sense of humour and writes beautifully about everything from the sea and wildlife to the food (and drink) on board, plus discourses on sailing technique, especially in heavy weather.

The pair have certainly seen their fair share of that. Berrimilla was knocked down off New Zealand by a huge breaking wave when Whitworth suffered severe bruising to his ribs. She routinely ran before winds of 50 to 70 knots on the way to Cape Horn and braved two storms in the South Atlantic, when the wind touched 80 knots. During one of these maelstroms the liferaft was washed overboard where it ignited, filled with water and had to be cut away.

Whitworth tells it all with wit but without exaggeration. He has his own colourful jargon – "Consultation": drinking alcohol ("and there have been a fair few of those"); "Medicine Chest": the booze locker; "Party gear": foul-weather clothing; "Ferals": general dirt and smelliness; "Vogons ": bad weather.

Over the months of their voyaging, more and more people have been e-mailing them and Whitworth tries to respond to as many as he can, greeting one old friend with a memorable "Scupper me dingbats!"

Here he is in typically cheeky mood about 800 miles west of Cape Horn in March, as Berrimilla trucked along through some of the most dangerous and lonely waters on earth: "Sit rep: 18.35hrs 03 Mar 2005 . . . For lease: Hydroponic garden allotment, excellent greenhouse climate for diversification into bacteriology, etc; two-bed mobile dwelling, attached, with all fac., fantastic water views, adj wildlife park; currently cropping cress, alfalfa, fenugreek and mung beans. Latest irrigation, douche and pumping equip, well-stocked cellar; absolutely no work required; pleasant odour of cooking socks."

Later that day, he summarised the approach to Cape Horn with a musical flavour. "Cape Horn is now on screen on the Gps (satellite navigation system) and the laptop and the countdown has begun. Already well south of the Straits of Magellan . . . adequate stocks of all essential supplies – just hope we can get a real lift from the remains of this (weather) system. Drum roll, fade in Men at Work, or (Joan) Baez singing We Shall Overcome – not yet time for Kathleen Ferrier and Blow the Wind Southerly but maybe Copeland's Fanfare or a Hoffnung symphony for Vacuum Cleaner, Bathtub and Orchestra."

Whitworth loves his birds and the majestic albatross never fails to inspire the Berrimilla crew. "Absorbing to watch and delightful to have them for company," Whitworth wrote of a pair in the Southern Pacific. "Like Tenniel's pictures of the dodo, they sort of contemplate us and each other, or they soar and glide and do slow dives and floating passes at water level."

There are many remarkable aspects to this adventure: the considerable ages of the two men, the considerable age of their boat, its small size, the size of the voyages they are undertaking and the way their trip has captured the imagination of so many. But perhaps the most remarkable aspect is that Whitworth and Crozier have stayed the distance together. Even after 14,000 miles and 126 days at sea for the outbound trip, they had no qualms in getting back on board and taking on the return leg. Crozier admits they have had plenty of disagreements but they never let matters get out of hand. "Normally, a G & T 5pm will resolve it."

Visit the website [www.berrimilla.com](http://www.berrimilla.com)

**BIG WAVE: WHY IT PAYS TO HAVE FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES**

Times

In March, when Berrimilla was sailing through the desolate waters of the Southern Pacific Ocean, Alex Whitworth, the co-skipper, speculated on his website that he and Peter Crozier were probably the most isolated humans on earth and that the crew of the ISS were their nearest neighbours for a few minutes each day as they passed overhead.

Nasa got to hear of this and, before long, Whitworth was in contact with Chiao, who was commanding the ISS Expedition 10 mission with a Russian colleague. During Berrimilla's brief stop in the Falkland Islands, Whitworth spoke to Chiao and they agreed to try and spot each other as the yacht sailed north.

They tried signalling the ISS with white rocket flares and a lamp at prearranged times, but although the sailors picked out the ISS twice, the astronauts did not spot them. When the sailors reached Falmouth, Chiao and his wife went to visit Berrimilla and, according to Whitworth, the four spent a "splendid day checking out the local Cornish brewers".

The next day they all went for lunch at the Cornwall home of John le Carré in a battered French car that the sailors had commandeered. "Two old geezers drove Nasa's favourite astronaut and his wife to lunch at Le Carré's house in ancient banger – an extraordinary meeting," Whitworth wrote.

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