

An account of Club Member
Seamus Salmon's
Transatlantic circuit aboard
Saoirse
2004-5

"A Beer Drinkers Guide To The Atlantic Circuit"

Europe

After years of dreaming, months of planning & weeks of provisioning, we were finally ready! Yacht *Saoirse* (a Beneteau First 375) departed Westport on Tuesday 7th Sept 2004 in a glorious, sunny NW breeze. Aboard, were myself, Mick Corrigan from Enniscrone & Robbie Baird from Westport. We arrived into Dingle Marina next morning where we set about installing the Cape Horn Self Steering gear that had arrived a few days before. By Friday evening, we were ready & motored west, hoping to outrun the impending gales forecast for the weekend. By Saturday morning, with 50 knot gusts blowing over the bows, we decided to seek refuge and diverted to Crookhaven, where we were to spend the next 4 nights sheltering from the gales that raged all along Irelands coasts.

We finally left Ireland's shores on Wed 15th Sept. The day started out calm, but within 3 hours, the wind had risen to 20knots SSW. It increased later to 30 knots & for the next 3 days, it at times rose to 40+ knots, blowing us 80 miles off course to the east prompting Michael to invent an acronym for Biscay - Big Incessant Seas Comin' At You! Finally, it veered to the northwest & allowed us to steer a proper course. The Biscay crossing itself was uneventful apart from thousands of Dolphins & the occasional ship or fishing boat, until we were c.80 miles from Spain (Saturday evening). The traffic increased until at one stage, we could see 12 ships, 8 coming at us, and 4 passing us! Almost like someone turned off a switch, at 06.00 Sun morning, the shipping dissappeared. We made land fall in La Coruna, NW Spain on Sunday afternoon 19th Sept. Good going at 4.5 days.

Over the next 3 days, we relaxed, slept & recharged the batteries! Oh, and discovered places where you can still buy a pint for €1.25. Being good value, we had our fill! Wednesday morning, 22nd Sept saw us moving west & then south round Cape Finisterre. With a fresh Northerly breeze, we averaged 7.5 knots all day and were amused by a sole dolphin who repeatedly jumped 12 feet into the air in an incredible display of acrobatics! We made landfall that night in a sleepy, but friendly town called Portosin in Ria De Muros. Thursday 23rd, had us heading south again in a stunning day - flat seas, running downwind in 25 degrees of glorious sunshine. We arrived into a packed Vigo late Thursday night & left again Friday morning, stopping for breakfast in Bayona 8 miles out the bay. Friday night had us in Portugal - Vianna de Castello the port.

The Portugese coastline is varied - in the north you get mile after mile of beautiful flat empty beaches, while in the South, it changes to mile after mile of cliffs. After the laissez faire attitude in Spain, Portugal seemed very formal taking up to half an hour to process our documents in every port. Marina costs are mostly cheap varying from only €10 to €22 per night. We arrived in Oporto Saturday evening and spent much of the night looking in vain for an Irish Pub that might be showing the All Ireland the next day. We had to settle for an increasingly disappointing series of text messages! David Baird (Commodore Mayo Sailing Club) joined us in Lisbon for a week cruising south to the Algarve. By now the winds were almost non existent & the

temperature during the day reached 35 degrees C. David thoughtfully brought us a present of a scrabble board & many evenings were spent arguing over the correct spelling of words like arguing (anyone got a clue?) Eating out was a treat with good wine at €5-6 per bottle & steaks for as low as €8. We spent 4 lazy days in Lagos lounging in sunshine & swimming off Saoirse.

On Monday, 4th October, we left mainland Portugal & headed South West for the 500-mile passage to the archipelago of Madeira. Another gale on the nose slowed our journey from Portugal, but we finally arrived in Porto Santa (the smaller of the two inhabited Madeira islands) on Friday 7th October. It's a delightful island with a golden 7-mile beach and laid back people. Beer at only 50c for a small bottle quenched our thirst on Friday night & we learned that Christopher Columbus had married the Governor's Daughter there in the fifteenth century. Afraid that the same fate might befall my crew, we left early next morning for the 40 mile sail to spend Saturday night in Funchal, the Capital of Madeira.

Madeira is unbelievable - a volcanic mountain that towers out of the Atlantic with a maze-like warren of tunnels linking villages & towns. Dublin City Corporation could do worse than bring their planners out here for a lesson on building an underground system! It also boasts the second highest sea cliffs in the world, although they don't look nearly as spectacular as those in Achill! Apart from the natives, Madeira has become home to lots of retired English & Germans - the temperature rarely falls below 21 or exceeds 24 degrees. It is also, apparently, the newest "in place" for movie & pop stars, but luckily, nobody recognised us! After 4 days, it was time to head south again - destination Tenerife. Although the prevailing winds are northerly, you guessed it, we had southerlies on the nose for the entire 260-mile passage. Beating into the wind has become a way of life for us! I reminisce that only a few short months ago, even a trip to Inisboffin would entail planning for food etc. Now we wouldn't blink at a "mere" 250 mile voyage. Although Tenerife has many marinas, most of them are full with local yachts and we are lucky to find a berth in Santa Cruz, the capital. Robbie takes a break from sailing to spend a week surfing with a friend in Lanzarote & then go to a wedding at home. We are however joined by Claire, Ger & Christina who have flown out from Ireland for a short break & take advantage of the tax free status of Tenerife to do some serious shopping. By now we are also beginning to recognise & become friendly with other yachties who are doing a similar passage to ourselves. They are mostly French, English or Norwegian and only one other Irish boat so far, *Nike* from Drogheda.

After a week in Santa Cruz, Tenerife, we moved down to the south of the Island to Los Christianos. There being no marina there, we anchored in a busy bay between 20 other boats about 200 yards from the beach. Boats on anchor are always more friendly than boats in a marina, and many of them have unusual stories to tell. We had met Armin & Mica (living on their boat here for 8 months now), Stewart from South Africa (he went for a sail 14 years ago & is only now making his way back home) & Peter & Vera, sailing from Kinvarra, Galway on Yacht *Pylades*. Vera is the Daughter of Frank Quinlan, ICC member). They got married in May & were heading to the Caribbean on a one-year honeymoon! We weren't long on anchor when a girl going by on a canoe shouted "Ce chaoi bhuill tu?" Roisin from Co Meath works in the Irish Times Bar here & invited us in for drinks later. This was the first "real" Irish Bar we had come across since leaving home & soon we also met Kenny and Gerry from Galway & many other Irish staff. Gerry plays in the resident band here called Celtic Confusion & they really went out of their way to make us feel welcome, even taking us up the mountain for a Sunday morning jazz session in a beer garden overlooking the bay. Not a bad life!

After a week there, we made the 60-mile passage to Gran Canaria, stopping first in Pasito Blanco as we had arranged to meet Paul & Aine from Knock who were holidaying in Playa del Ingles. We also welcomed Robbie back from his sojourn at home! As anybody who has been to Playa del Ingles will know, it's impossible to walk down the street at night without being harassed by dozens of so called by PR people, all wanting you to eat or drink in their own particular establishment, There is an area here called "The Irish Centre" which houses 20 or so "Irish" pubs & at night, it comes ablaze with a cacophony of sounds ranging from traditional Irish to Country to pop.

After 3 nights of this, we had enough so we sailed 6 miles west to Puerto Rico. This is also commercialised, though not nearly so much as Playa del Ingles. There is an Irish Bar here called "The Crow's Nest" that sells beer for €1 a pint and another bar that sells pints of Vodka & Red Bull for only €2.50! We hired a car & took a drive to Las Palmas, the capital to get some boat spares & see the fleet preparing for the ARC. Of the 2 Irish boats entered this year, we met Robin Kay on his dad's boat. Robin is well known to Mayo sailors, having acted as Race Officer at many regattas including NORA 2004. After all these weeks of acting like tourists, it was time to start provisioning Saoirse for the next leg. At a local Carrefour, we packed the car with everything from Baked Beans to Beer at 16c a can (for the beer)!

Finally on Saturday 6th November, we sailed out of Puerto Rico for the 850 mile journey south to the Cape Verde Islands. The first 2 days were calm with little wind. Then we had a gale for 2 days (on the nose, as usual), followed by a day totally becalmed. Every day, the temperature got warmer & we were entertained every day by schools of dolphins & shoals of flying fish, some of whom could fly great distances with remarkable agility. Eventually, the wind went easterly for a final 4 day reach into Porto de Palmeira on Ilha do Sal, Cape Verdes. The Cape Verdes are situated 350 miles west of Senegal, the most Westerly point of Africa, and used to be owned by Portugal until they achieved independence in 1975. They are very poor with limited natural resources other than fishing and a fledgling tourist market. The people, however, are very friendly, apart from a few enterprising individuals who offer to "mind your dinghy" for a fee! David Baird again joined us for a week and we cruised from Sal to St Vincent via Boa Vista & St Nicholas. By 23rd November, the trade winds appeared to have become established, and we loaded up with 40 gallons of fresh water, 40 gallons of diesel & as much fresh food as we could fit and pulled anchor, heading west.

The Crossing!

The first day was very calm with light easterlies, but gradually the effect of the Trade winds becomes more noticeable. The wind direction is a constant easterly of between 10 and 30 knots. Our sail combination varies from Reefed Main & Genny to Full Main & Spinnaker, with daily mileages of between 90 & 150 miles. After 3 days, we were overtaken by "*Leopard Of London*", the lead boat in the ARC, who went on to complete the crossing from Gran Canaria in only 12 days! Apart from this, we see almost no shipping at all! We do 3-hour individual watches, with a 6-hour break after each watch. This system means that our watch moves forward by 3 hours every day so the same person isn't doing the 3am to 6am every day. Various cooking recipes are tried with the limited ingredients available to us, and occasionally we are surprised with a Dorado biting on our Trolling line! Every evening we play Scrabble & our extensive book library is gradually being devoured.

Our Satellite phone proves invaluable for hearing news from home & getting constant weather updates studiously supplied by David Baird. At 1,000 miles out, we heave-to and all go for a swim, hoping that the sharks are on a day off, and that Saoirse does not take off without us!

The only other diversion we have is the countless millions of flying fish & dolphins. The nights are magnificent, with millions of stars in cloudless skies. Lightning storms to our north occasionally illuminate the heavens, and while they are fascinating to watch, we hope they don't come any nearer. The days, nights and miles pass by until finally, on the morning of 9th December, after 16 days at sea, we spot the outline of Barbados on the horizon. We proudly motor into Deepwater Harbour, behind 3 huge Cruise Ships & clear in through Immigration, Customs and Health (we are gladly able to tick the "no" box in the part of their questionnaire that asks if any crew members have died since clearing the last port!). We motor round to Carlisle Bay and drop anchor among the 50 or so boats anchored there, and jump overboard to soak in the warm clear waters of the Caribbean!

The Windward Islands

After 10 days of partying, resting wreck diving & soaking up the sun in Barbados, we say farewell to Robbie, who is heading on to Trinidad & Venezuela. We weigh anchor and head west again for the 100-mile overnight downwind sail to St Lucia, arriving the next morning into Rodney Bay, where many of the ARC fleet are still tied up. There is lots of room in the spacious marina, which becomes our home for the next few weeks. We tie up alongside a large motor yacht named "*Quiet Place*", and soon befriend the crew & owner. It's unusual to be served Christmas Dinner by a swimming pool in 30 degrees, but it takes beating! St Lucia is a relatively advanced island economically, & many Irish people have bought investment properties there. Visually, it's stunning with sandy beaches, sheltered anchorages, rolling green hills, a challenging Golf Course and of course, its most famous landmark, the Pitons (2 volcanic peaks that rise 2,500 feet above the sea). Sadly, it's lacking in nightlife, with little happening after 11 pm.

St Vincent is 30 miles south of St Lucia, and it was our next port of call. Although the main island is poor, with little to offer (although "*Pirates of the Caribbean*" was filmed here), St Vincent also incorporates the Grenadines, a group of smaller islands including Bequia, Mustique, Union & Tobago Cays. Bequia is super, with a huge sheltered bay that can easily hold 200 boats on anchor. Indeed, many boats come here for a night and stay for a month! Beautiful sandy beaches with good snorkling are complimented ashore by a good selection of restaurants, chandleries & pubs. Luckily, our visit coincided with the annual Bequia Blues Festival, with various bands belting it out over 3 nights. We also met the crew of a large private yacht "*Starry Night*", which many sailors will have seen in Crosshaven during Cork Week, at which it is a regular.

Next up was Mustique - home to the rich and famous. It's a private island, owned & governed by the 100 or so people who have homes here, including Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Princess Margaret and Tommy Hilffiger. Some of these magnificent homes are available for rent at prices ranging from USD\$5,000 to over USD\$40,000 a week! 10 miles southwest of Mustique lies Tobago Cays. This small, deserted group of islands and coral reefs is stunning, with miles of shallow water. You can snorkel for hours in water so warm and clear you just don't want to get out! Union Island is just 4 miles south of here, and it was our last port of call in the Grenadines. Small & friendly, it is the only island I've ever been to where you can tie up your dinghy & walk 200 yards to the airport! Sailing south from Union to Grenada, via Carriacou, we sailed over the underwater volcano "Kick 'em Jenny", which has erupted 12 times since 1939. There is still an exclusion zone around the summit which lies 200m below the surface. Grenada was devastated when Hurricane Ivan passed through it last September. Most of the houses in the Caribbean have galvanised roofs (insulation not being a priority) and most of these were shredded by Ivan. Hundreds of boats were wrecked also, and the evidence of this is still, sadly,

obvious. Grenadians are a very friendly people despite years of political turmoil & an attempted American invasion!

Our engine was giving us trouble and unfortunately, we were unable to have it repaired in Grenada. We had befriended a group of Norwegian sailors, who kindly offered to tow us south to Trinidad. In the event, they towed us out of St. Georges Bay & we were able to sail most of the 80 miles before the wind dropped again the next morning, & they towed us into Chaguaramus Harbour, Port Of Spain, Trinidad on 3rd Feb. Trinidad, apart from home to 1,000s of wild parrots & monkeys, is definitely the home of yachting in the south Caribbean with many marinas, and dozens of chandleries & specialist boat workshops. Thousands of boats are based here with many of them sporting "For Sale" signs. Here we were lucky to meet a boatyard owner named Kevin O'Farrell, who studied in Clongowes & whose dad is the local Irish Consul. Kevin "lent" us one of his mechanics and our engine was sorted in no time!

Carnival (Carne vale - farewell to the flesh) is the biggest annual party event in the Caribbean. It originates from the 1700s when French plantation owners in Trinidad dressed up as slaves in the days leading up to Lent. Secretly, the slaves also celebrated Carnival by mimicking & satirising the colonial gentry. Nowadays, the celebrations start after Christmas with huge Steel Pan and Calypso Bands practising for the showdown that takes place on the Monday & Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. It is mind boggling, with up to 100 bands, each with up to 1000 members, parading through the streets of Port of Spain 24 hours a day in the most elaborate costumes imaginable! Just think St Patricks Day Parade & multiply it by 100, both in terms of size and outrageousness! After a week of partying in Trinidad, we needed a rest. It was time to be moving on - to the pirate-infested waters of Venezuela.

We had been warned by many other yachties to keep at least 50 miles off the Venezuelan coastline enroute to Isla Margarita as over the past year, there have been many incidences of piracy by powerful, armed motorboats coming alongside, usually under the pretext of looking for some "agua", and then boarding and robbing the boat and it's occupants of any valuables they possess. Having your own weapons on board (as many boats do) is useless unless you're willing to shoot first. In the event, we went 10 miles offshore and using a 2 knot current to our advantage, did a night sail without navigation lights and arrived in Margarita to the accompaniment of 1000's of pelicans early on 12th Feb.

Porlamar Harbour is full of yachts, many of whom spend up to a year here enjoying the fabulous weather, scenery and fun. Oh, and being able to buy petrol at 3c/litre & beer at 16c/can also helps! This cheap fuel, combined with the poor economy means that most of the cars here are 50 year old gas-guzzling American bangers, the drivers of whom drive like lunatics! The yachties here are well organised with nightly neighbourhood watches shared between all boats to deter any potential dinghy thieves. Among the yachties here, we met a couple from Dublin who have been living on board their yacht "*Synbad*" with their 3 children for 7 years now. Indeed, many of the long term liveaboards here educate their children via correspondence courses and they all claim their children are better for it!

We also met up with Robbie again (he has been here since the New Year) & were joined by Vinny & Gerry (my brother & a friend from home) and David Baird, who has become a very welcome, regular visitor in every continent so far! David is excellent at honing up our Scrabble skills and it's great to catch up with all the news from home! Venezuela is famous for, among other things, it's beauty, oil & political upheaval. Despite its current socialist government, the gap between the rich & the poor continues to widen. I have never met a nation of people with

such strong political opinions - they either love President Chavez or they think he is a crook! Inflation is rife, & officially, Venezuelans are not allowed hold foreign currencies. This has led to a huge black-market economy - banks will give you c.1,950 Bolivars per US dollar, but you can get up to 2,500 Bolivars per US dollar on the streets!

After 3 weeks in Margarita, it was time to be on the move again as we had arranged to meet friends in Antigua, 400 miles to windward. On our first day out of Margarita, our Genny halyard broke, so we had to motor sail and diverted northeast to Bequia for repairs, and then overnighed again, north to Martinique. It was like being back in Europe - most of the cars are Peugeot, Citroen or Renault with everybody speaking French. And, we were spending Euros again for the first time in months! Unfortunately, we were pressed for time and only got to spend 2 days here before sailing north again on another overnight passage, to Antigua.

The Leeward Isles

Antigua is the centre of Caribbean sailing with yachts ranging in size from 20' to well over 300'. Its clear waters, 365 beaches and vast array of hotels also make it a huge holiday destination for many Americans & English, as well as being a port of call for most of the monstrous cruise liners that radiate throughout the Caribbean every day. English and Falmouth Harbours are side by side in the southern side of the island, and this is where most of the yachts and yachting activity is based. It's a hub of activity, with crews of every nationality meeting up for happy hour most evenings between 5 & 7pm. Many of the super yachts have full time crews of up to 10 people and it was interesting to hear meet a few of the Irish people working on them (tough life, or what?!). For St Patrick's Day, having met Bryana & Kieran (friends from Ireland) we sailed over to Monsterrat, the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean. It was originally settled by the Irish fleeing from Cromwell and it's the only other place in the world where St Patrick's Day is a national holiday. No obvious Irish people live there anymore, but most of the names are of Irish origin, like Carty, Farrell, Ryan & Sweeney. One local coloured & colourful individual I met wearing a "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" t-shirt, turned out to be a man named James Irish, who immediately agreed to change his name to Seamus Irish! Irish influences can also be heard in their music and the people are so friendly. Unfortunately, almost 2 thirds of Monsterrat is off limits as a result of a volcano that started to erupt in 1995 destroying much of the southern half of the island including the capital Plymouth, the Airport and the Golf Course. The volcano is still spewing out sulphurs gas and the population of the Island has diminished from 11,000 to 4,000 in the past 10 years. Alas, the only useable harbour, Little Bay, is even rollier than Clare Island with an easterly wind blowing, making it almost impossible to sleep, so we returned to Antigua after 2 nights.

Antigua is preparing for the biggest event of the sailing calendar, Antigua Sailing Week. It starts off on April 8th, with the Mega Yacht Challenge, a regatta for yachts of 100 ft or more, continues on April 14th with the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta and culminates April 24th with the main event! Rather than wait around, we opt to do a little more touring. Next port of call was St Barths, where the annual St Barths Bucket (a regatta for mega yachts) was about to begin. The harbourmaster was like an air traffic controller each morning & evening as he co-ordinated 28 of these giant, multi-million dollar yachts in & out of their berths before & after racing. There was also a visit by the 250ft *Mirabella V*, the worlds largest single masted sailing yacht. It cost US\$50m to build, but can be chartered for only US\$250,000 a week! To give you an idea of size, its mast is 292ft high (Saoirse's mast is 50ft) & its mainsail is the size of seven tennis courts! Apparently, it grounded in the Mediterranean shortly after it was launched last year & cost US\$7m to repair! Unfortunately, the €6.50 cost of a beer was rapidly depleting our budget, so we weighed anchor after the weekend and sailed the 15 miles NW to St Martin.

This island is shared by the French & Dutch with a border across the middle. The whole island is a duty free paradise, & with an enclosed, navigable lagoon, & very modern facilities, it has become then powerboat centre of the Caribbean. Beer at US\$2 (US\$1 during happy hour) heightened our appreciation of this popular holiday destination! After a week in St Martin, we headed back to Antigua where the Classic Yacht Regatta was about to start. There, we met up again with our Norwegian friends aboard *Ida*, a traditional 1938 gaff rigged cutter (not too unlike a Galway Hooker). We entered *Ida* for the regatta, coming second in our class. The regatta itself was stunning with 50 traditional or classic yachts competing in a perfect setting of sunshine and 15 knots of wind every day. Many of these yachts are made of wood and have crew onboard whose sole job seems to be polishing & varnishing the perfect gleaming finishes!

Most of the yachts that cruise the Caribbean end up in Antigua for the sailing regattas, and will leave from here to start their return leg across the Atlantic to Europe before the hurricane season starts. But we still have more to see..... After Antigua week, Michael took leave of *Saoirse* to help on a delivery of "*Starry Night*", a luxury Oyster 68, the Captain of which we had befriended over the past 5 months. *Starry Night* was headed to Portugal, & she set off on 18th April with a crew of 5. Meanwhile, I continued to stay on in Antigua where we had made many friends. The main event, Antigua Week, was about to start and the harbour was thronged with boats. Included were "*Begorrah*" & "*Begob*" (2 boats chartered here by a bunch of Dublin guys for the event) and *Farrfly*, a Farr 68 owned by an Irish guy, and kept in Grenada where it operates a charter business. Parties abounded every night.

Claire joined me for a couple of weeks, and we first sailed 30 miles north to Barbuda, a relatively small island governed by Antigua. For many years, this stunning paradise was leased by the Codrington Family from the Brits for the princely sum of 1 Fat Sheep a year. The Codringtons are long gone and the current inhabitants (decendants of former slaves) are determined to resist any further big developments. Consequently, it remains one of the few wild life sanctuaries in the Caribbean, with millions of Frigates and other threatened bird species, and miles of sandy beaches surrounded by clear blue seas. Unfortunately, the down side is that there are no pubs or restaurants! And then there's that local sense of censorship: when I tried to buy a pack of cigarettes in the only local grocery/hardware store, I was told "we don't sell them - 'cos we don't like them!!!" (Consequently, anyone who wishes to smoke on the Island would have to import their own supply!)

We left at 06.00 next day for the very pleasant 65 mile sail back to St Barths. *Saoirse* had been there a month previously for a mega-yacht regatta, and the place was much more pleasant now that the crowds had left. There, we were delighted to meet our friends from the yacht *Bon Vivante* again. On the west side of the island, we found a beautiful deserted anchorage called Anse du Colombier, with lots of moorings and we witnessed great displays from turtles and even got to swim with sting rays!

After a quick stop in St Martin, we overnighted to the British Virgin Islands, clearing into Road Harbour, Tortola early on May 7th. Finding the harbour a bit rolly in the southerly swell, we motored around to the idyllic Cane Garden Bay on the West side of Tortolla. It's a busy anchorage and popular with the local charter boats. Most of the European yachts that cruise the Virgin Islands stay on the British side because of the formalities imposed by the America authorities on the US side. Essentially, you must be in possession of a valid Visa if arriving by any method other than by public transport. Invariably, this means applying to the US Embassy

of your home country for an appointment, attending at the appointment, and paying a fee of up to several hundred dollars (not to mention the hours wasted queuing on the phone and in the Embassy). The other regular option (pursued by many of the visa-less crew of private luxury yachts) is to fly to Bermuda (the only Caribbean Island with a US embassy) & do the procedure there. We tried a different approach - we got a ferry from Tortolla (British V.I.) across to St John (USVI) and went through emigration there. The officials there were the most courteous we had come across in all the Caribbean and had no problem issuing a 90 day visa, allowing us to get the 20 minute ferry back to Tortolla and cruise at will among the USVI thereafter! The USVI are very laid back by American standards, but ultra efficient by Caribbean standards - waiters and barmen actually smile! Most of the bays are nature reserves and have visitors moorings laid out to avoid damaging coral by anchors. All the Virgin Islands are within 4 or 5 miles of each other, and quite often in the shallower areas, the water is so clear that the bottom is clearly visible, making navigation a matter of having someone keep watch over the bow! In addition to countless turtles here, we also came across a strange fish called a Remora. This scavenging fish grows to about 3 feet and has ribbed suckers on its forehead enabling it to attach itself to sharks, whales and turtles and get a free ride as well as helping share their food! In one particular bay I was snorkelling in, I came across a large turtle grazing contently on sea grass in about 6 feet of water with 3 remoras attached to his shell. Surfacing for air every few minutes before resuming his eating, he was totally oblivious to the remora and indeed to myself, trying to photograph the moment!

Ann Doherty from Westport arrived for a couple of weeks holiday, and we entered the annual St Johns Commodore Cup Regatta. Being the only non-American boat made us a popular entry and soon we had a queue of locals volunteering to crew with us! We ended up getting a credible third place in our class for which we received as part of our prize, a lunch in the exclusive Caneel Bay Resort (accommodation here costs c.\$1,800 per night). We also partook in a late night sail on board another boat to an infamous floating Bar/Restaurant called "Willie T's" where the tradition is to dive naked from the top deck to win a free T-Shirt. Despite much cajoling from all present, Anne Doherty refused to jump!

After 3 weeks cruising the Virgins, it was time to move on again. For almost a month now, we had seen hardly any other European yachts - most of them had started making their way across the Atlantic after Antigua Week to avoid the impending hurricane season which officially starts on June 1st. Michael had returned from his trip to Portugal, our visitors had left, and on May 27th, we set out on the first leg of our journey home: the 840 mile trip north to Bermuda. This week long voyage started out in extreme heat (almost 40 degrees during the day) and finished with us wearing shoes and raingear for the first time in 8 months! The nights of the passage had us experiencing some incredible lightning storms with the skies often being illuminated like a magnificent fireworks display.

After 7 days, we sighted Bermuda on a cold, wet miserable morning. As its coastline is strewn with semi-submerged coral, visiting boats are obliged to radio ahead for clearance and directions (ships not intending to visit are requested to keep 30 miles off the coast). To our surprise, the Coast Guard Radio Officer turned out to be an Irishman - a former Malin Head Radio operative no less. He turned out to be most helpful and came round for a visit after we had tied up. Imagine my surprise later that evening to be welcomed into the popular Freddie's bar/restaurant by a hostess from Ballyhaunis!!! We were joined next day by Nial Gilroy, from Enniscrone who was to be our third man on the voyage home, and Mattie, a friend also from Enniscrone who was out for a weeks holiday. Bermuda turned out to be land of pleasant surprises: firstly, it's not one island but 7 larger (linked) islands and dozens of smaller islands. It

boasts the 3rd highest income per capita and the highest golf course ratio per square mile in the world. The C-shaped archipelago is only about 12 miles long by 1.5 miles wide, meaning that all 65,000 inhabitants live less than a mile from the ocean! The unbelievable scenery, miles of pink sandy beaches, almost perfect weather (18 degrees in the winter, 28 degrees in the summer), a very favourable tax regime and the friendliness of the people have made it one of the most sought after places in the world to live in. So much so, that in an effort to curtail house prices, the government has introduced legislation forbidding Bermudans to sell their homes to non-Bermudans (i.e. non-Bermudans may only buy from non-Bermudans). They have also imposed a 25% tax on property purchased by non-Bermudans. Even with these restrictions, average houses sell for over \$1M to locals (with non-Bermudans paying up to \$5M!) making it beyond the reach of most citizens (the Bermudans say it'll soon be as bad as Ireland!!!). A most unusual feature of the houses here are the roofs - all of them are white! Limestone tiles covered with whitewash reflect the sun, but also apparently act as a filter for rainwater, all of which is funnelled into underground tanks and stored for domestic use, as Bermuda has no natural springs (or rivers or streams). We hired out scooters (tourists are not allowed to hire cars) and spent a few very enjoyable days exploring the islands. On our last night there, we met up for many beers with Padraic Molloy from Galway Bay Sailing Club. Padraic had bought a boat in Texas and was en-route to back to Galway with 3 friends! Next day, Sunday, 12th June, saw us sadly pulling anchor and sailing out of Bermuda for the 1,800 mile voyage to the Azores...

The North Atlantic & The Azores.

We left Bermuda on Sunday evening and motored northeast into a gentle easterly breeze. By later that night we had enough wind to hoist sail and for the next week, we were able to sail a true course with the wind more or less behind us. Indeed, we had covered over 1,000 miles when the wind went back on the nose, making progress difficult thereafter. Every day seemed to get colder, but at least it stayed dry. Apart from an occasional passing ship, the only diversion we had to break the monotony was the abundance of sea life. Indeed we were quite impressed with the almost daily displays of groups of up to six whales, sometimes accompanied by dolphins. On calmer days, turtles could easily be seen as well as millions of Portuguese man-of-war jellyfish floating by with their inflated pink "sails". Finally, on our 15th day, we made landfall in Corvo, the smallest of the Azore Islands. With little shelter, only a handful of yachts visit here each year, and we are the first this year! Although they had virtually no English (and our Portuguese isn't so hot), you couldn't have asked for a friendlier bunch of people. With a population of just 400 people, everybody knows each other and within no time, they all seemed to know us also! Fernando, our tourist guide & taxi driver took us on a tour of the island right up to the 2km wide caldeira (crater) of the former volcano, now with its own lakes & islands 700m above sea level. Afterwards, we partied until morning, with Fernando insisting we stay another night and laying on a dinner party in our honour!

We reluctantly took leave after 2 nights and sailed 18 miles south to Flores (Island of Flowers). Among the many yachts anchored here, we met Eugene Lambe from Kinvarra on "*Fana*", a steel hulled boat he built himself. Eugene is a renowned Uilleann Pipe maker & player and we had our own Fleadh Ceoil in Paula's Bar, accompanied by Alex, a Frenchman sailing the return leg of a two year trip to New Zealand (who knew more Irish tunes than myself)! Within an hour, we were joined by an old Portuguese man who also makes his own instruments - a cross between a guitar and a mandolin - and before long, many locals and sailors were clapping along! We left the next day to sail the 130 miles east to Horta on the east side of Faial where we were being joined again by David Baird.

The Azores are one of the few places in the world where more visitors arrive by yacht than by air with over 1,000 yachts passing through each year, and this is very evident in Horta, renowned for being one of the four busiest yacht transit harbours in the world. It was buzzing, mainly with yachts returning to Europe after the season in the Caribbean. As all the marina berths were full, we rafted up alongside 2 other yachts inside the breakwater. Every inch of wall space is covered in murals painted by the crew of yachts who have passed through over the years, many with unreal detail. There is a bar here called "Peters Sport Cafe" which is now so famous that three shops have been set up selling merchandise and memorabilia from it. It was great to meet so many familiar faces that we had crossed paths with in the Caribbean and if profits in Peter's Sport Cafe are down this year, it certainly won't be our fault!

The Azores are one of the major whale watching centres in the world with up to 20 species of whale and dolphin being spotted every year. Whale hunting was a huge industry here in the past and from this developed art known as scrimshaw. This involves the polishing and engraving of whales teeth with etchings depicting boats or other nautical scenes. Many examples of this fine art are for sale with good ones fetching up to EU300 each! After 4 nights, we sadly left and sailed 70 miles east again to Terciera, with a brief stopover in Sao Jorge along the way. Angra Do Heroismo, in Terciera, is a 16th century city with a unique "olde worlde" charm. Having been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1983, the authorities have been careful to preserve its historic appeal, without stunting it's growth. The result is a very attractive, friendly city with old fashioned hardware and grocery stores (with everything in shelves behind the counter) alongside modern fashion and computer stores. It also has a marina with the cleanest, most modern facilities we have ever seen. On our last night in Angra, we were invited along to a bull running event. This is a serious adrenaline generating activity, with the bulls charging through the narrow streets of a residential area of the town.

Sadly, our final day has arrived. It is time to stock up Saoirse again and sail the final 1,200 mile leg of our odyssey. Since leaving Ireland we have sailed more than 11,000 miles and have visited 40 different islands in 16 countries! It's been an unforgettable experience. Can't wait to do it again!!!