

WRITING ABOUT SAILING

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FROM LONG ISLAND TO ST. PIERRE AND MIQUELON

Finding France South of Newfoundland

By Jim Marquardt

Every summer, Sag Harbor's Ian Thomas and Cindy White take a long distance cruise on their Hylas 46 sloop, *Nirvana III*. To the friends who crew with them, most of the destinations have been familiar -- Bermuda, the Chesapeake, the Maine Coast, Nova Scotia. But when they announced their plan last year, they were met with blank stares, and none of the regular shipmates signed on. They had decided to sail to St. Pierre and Miquelon, a couple of dots in the Atlantic 50 miles south of Newfoundland, where the government and language is French, and the currency is in Euros.

Ian neglected to mention even to Cindy that to get there, they would have to cross Cabot Strait, a daunting stretch of water with a tough reputation between Cape Breton and Newfoundland's west coast.

Cindy and Ian work in Manhattan and spend weekends on the east end of Long Island. They sailed for many years in many boats before embarking on their ambitious trip far downeast. Ian remembers, "We bought our first boat, a Clark 14-ft sailing dinghy in 1989 for \$500. That hooked us on sailing and in 1991 we stepped up to a 20-ft O'Day,

and in 1994 a 10-meter Comar built in Italy.” Over the years, they gained a great deal of coastal sailing experience as they poked into the nearby Peconic Bays, Block Island, Fishers Island and Connecticut harbors.

Sailing became their passion and they began dreaming of blue water and a vessel that could take them anywhere they wanted to go. After hundreds of hours of research, many visits to boatyards and boat shows, they decided on a Hylas 46 sloop, designed by German Frers, built in Taiwan and finished in Florida. Ian chose a deeper, 6 ft keel, “An instinctive decision I came to appreciate over the next nine seasons while we accumulated 25,000 nautical miles of sailing.”

A freighter delivered *Nirvana III* for fitting out in Ft. Lauderdale in the spring of 1997. Cindy and Ian and a few boating friends from Sag Harbor flew down to take the Hylas north to Long Island. “The dealer told me about Terry Connor, a professional skipper who was very familiar with the Hylas and its rig,” says Ian, “and I asked him to join us for the maiden voyage. We had planned to stay in the ocean to make faster time, but when we heard reports of a gale developing off Hatteras, we were happy to duck into Morehead City, North Carolina, and follow the ICW north to Norfolk and the Chesapeake.” From there, *Nirvana III* again went into the Atlantic and sailed uneventfully around Montauk into Gardener’s Bay. Ian adds, “By watching and talking to Terry on that week-long trip, I learned more about the Hylas than I could have over an entire summer.”

Ian didn’t need instruction on *Nirvana’s* 60 HP Yanmar diesel. As a youngster in Scotland, he had worked as an apprentice in a diesel engine plant.

Because Nirvana is now nearly ten years old, Ian crack-tested the mast and turnbuckles for stress fractures before departing for Newfoundland. He cleaned the entire aluminum mast, sprayed it with red dye penetrant and coated it with white powder. From a bosun's chair, he then inspected the surface from top to bottom with an ultraviolet light.

A Thousand Miles To Go

On Sunday morning, July 31st last summer, *Nirvana* departed Sag Harbor for St. Pierre and Miquelon about a thousand nautical miles away and soon ran into fog that stayed with her all the way to Cuttyhunk. Once through the Cape Cod Canal they made an unscheduled stop in Provincetown to pick up a replacement sail batten that a cousin of Cindy's brought from Yarmouth. "He's now my favorite cousin," says Cindy.

Leaving Provincetown on Tuesday, they set course straight across the Gulf of Maine. Reports Cindy, "We expected to moor in Shelburne on the southern tip of Nova Scotia, but arrived late and decided not to enter the harbor in the dark. So we went on to Halifax, logging 361 miles under sail and power with two overnights."

While in Halifax enjoying the hospitality of the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron, Ian searched for additional charts of waters to the north and east. Many Canadian charts are based on British Admiralty work from the early 19th Century, and Ian was told to expect inaccuracies. "I'm glad I remembered to bring along an old Cruising Club of America's guide to Newfoundland that I found in Newport a couple of years earlier. It was a big help."

Ian also learned more about Cabot Strait. At 70 miles wide, it's the broadest of three outlets from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the Atlantic and is an international shipping route to the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes. A publication of the

Transportation Safety Board of Canada commented that it is “one of the roughest areas in Atlantic Canadian waters and is exposed to very long open water fetches that can create big seas.” Cold water from the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Labrador Current mixing with warmer water from the seaway creates large eddies. Ian read that the waterway has a long history of maritime disasters, with the wrecks of more than 40 ships resting at the bottom of the strait.

Nirvana went on to Liscomb, further north on Nova Scotia, then proceeded through St. Peter’s Canal into the Bras d’Or Lake where she anchored in French Cove. A couple of years ago, Cindy had read in the *National Geographic Traveler* that the Bras d’Or (Arms of Gold) was considered one of the most naturally beautiful locations in the world. Two channels and a canal link the Bras d’Or Lake to the Atlantic, forming a combination of ocean and lake dominating the center of Cape Breton Island. The enclosed basin measures roughly 60 by 30 miles, and deer, moose and eagles live in its surrounding, wooded hills.

On the 7th of August *Nirvana* sailed to Sydney, Cape Breton’s major port, to top off with fuel at Dobson’s Y.C. They knew they were getting far from home when the dock attendant said the 46’ Hylas was the “biggest boat we ever fueled.” Ian says they were fortunate to meet Ray Pierce, head of the Cape Breton Coast Guard. “He gave us invaluable information about Cabot Strait, warning us to expect strong currents, fog and sudden squalls. He later checked on us every day by satellite email.” Pierce said 50 knt. winds were common in the strait and advised the couple to go with the prevailing westerlies and head directly for St. Pierre rather than the nearer Port Aux Basques on

Newfoundland. *Nirvana III* could then work its way back in short sails along the southwest coast before returning to Cape Breton.

Ian believes they luckily didn't run into the worst Cabot Strait can produce, but as *Nirvana III* crossed the strait she felt occasional storm force gusts, thick fog and conflicting currents from suddenly changing depths. "We surfed down big following seas, hanging onto the wheel to avoid broaching," says Ian. "As we neared the coast of Newfoundland, we took green water over the bow from breaking waves and heavy spray over the dodger and bimini."

"We both stayed in the cockpit alternating two-hour watches," says Cindy. "As if the weather wasn't enough of a problem, in the middle of the night I saw a blip on the radar coming right at us. I woke up Ian who was asleep on the cockpit bench. We made evasive moves but the other boat seemed to alter direction too and stayed on a collision course. I tried to raise them on the VHF but got no answer. In the last minutes we turned sharply and a fishing dragger passed close by. We figured the crew was sleeping and had entered course changes into their auto pilot. We had no trouble staying awake after that scare."

A St. Pierre Welcome

Despite the conditions, *Nirvana* made a swift passage to St. Pierre running before the wind under double-reefed main. Accompanied by white-beaked dolphins, seals and a curious humpback whale, *Nirvana* arrived in St. Pierre at sunrise on August 9th, having covered 170 miles in 24 hours. At the St. Pierre Yachting Center a coast guardsman and a gendarme took the lines and came aboard to fill out entry papers. Cindy says they were very French and very pleasant to the exhausted couple, but they informed them that a

tank truck would come to the dock only to deliver more than 250 liters of fuel. Anything less had to be carried a quarter mile in jerry cans. “We decided we had enough fuel for the time being,” says Cindy.

Cindy and Ian rested and explored St. Pierre for two days and were relieved to be in port when a 50 knt. gale blew through. “We weren’t surprised to find several good restaurants, French of course, a good bakery, and we were delighted to meet another American couple, Jamie and Laurie, who had sailed from Marblehead in their Sabre 36. We kept in touch with them for the rest of the cruise, exchanging information along the way.”

The only other boats in the harbor were fishing boats – hauled on shore by hand-powered red capstans and unfortunately idle because of the decline of the Atlantic fisheries.

On the 11th, *Nirvana* cast off for Sam Hitches Harbor on Newfoundland’s southwest coast, threading the narrow entrance in thick fog with Ian nervously standing off a rocky cliff to port while Cindy in the bow shouted “Go to port!” Fog on the trip wasn’t quite as bad as they expected, in all only six out of 28 days. August temperatures were mostly in the 50’s in daytime and 40’s at night. “The fiord was so narrow that *Nirvana* hardly felt a ripple when another gale roared overhead during the night. But it sure was noisy,” says Cindy.

They found the southwest coast of Newfoundland breathtakingly beautiful, with coastal barrens, forested hills and deep fingers of the ocean cutting through the cliffs and reaching miles into a tundra-covered wilderness. Small fishing villages, accessible only from the sea, dotted the crenellated coastline. Ian says the people they met were reserved

but had a dry sense of humor and were eager to help. He noted that aids to navigation are far less frequent than along the New England coast. Sometime bird watchers, the couple kept busy identifying razorbills, shearwaters, kittiwakes, puffins, and thousands of Wilson's Stormy Petrels.

The next day *Nirvana* motored through 50 miles of magnificent fiords in the Lampidoes Passage to St. Albans, a town of 2000 people, and spent the night in Macallum, another fishing village with boardwalk streets, docks made of log rafts and homes on pilings on the rocky shore. They continued into Doctor's Cove near Burgeo, then west to Little Garia Bay, finishing up on August 15th at Channel Port Aux Basques where ferries shuttle to North Sydney. "Planning ahead for our return across Cabot Strait, this time we persuaded a tank truck to deliver diesel to the dock," says Cindy. "Fresh water came through a 200 ft hose. We met Stan, a retired government employee, who took us sightseeing in Cod Roy Valley. And there was no charge for *Nirvana's* dockage or the fresh water we took on."

Throughout the cruise, especially in Newfoundland, the voyagers paid extra close attention to weather. Ian says there are no NOAA reports but Canadian weather forecasts were fairly accurate. Due to the rapid succession of lows they predicted only what was likely that day and an "outlook" for the following day. According to Ian, weather fronts move much more quickly in the Maritimes and any system below 564 isobars deserves great respect.

Welcome Back

The intrepid couple saw a break in the strong winds and sailed close-hauled back to the beautiful harbor of Ingonish, on northern Cape Breton Island. “The next morning we were hailed by a police launch sent by Ray Pierce, welcoming us back to Nova Scotia,” says Ian. “It made us feel great. We spent two days revisiting the Bras d’Or Lake, and one evening feasted on mussels and oysters and sang along to Ray’s accompaniment on the mandolin.”

From the Bras d’Or, *Nirvana* headed southwest to Liscomb, then past Halifax, stopping at Sambro after dodging container ships along the way. The cruising guide said that Sambro offered good holding ground, but during a strong southeast blow the voyagers failed three times to set the plow anchor. “Finally,” relates Ian, “four guys in a powerboat saw our problem and bounced through the chop to lead us to a protected mooring. We invited them aboard for cold beers and they turned out to be cousins -- two were fishermen, the others a boat dealer and a tourist guide. The next morning they knocked on the hull and presented us with a gift of two pounds of haddock.”

On Sunday, the 21st, *Nirvana* sailed to Lunenburg, then ran a long, foggy leg all the way to the Maine coast with eyes on the radar. At 3 am, the moon broke through.

Ian has an even more challenging destination in mind for the future, but hasn’t been able to find a crew. “I want to sail south, through the Gulf of Mexico and the Panama Canal, down the west coast of South America and around the Horn, the easy way, west to east.” Cindy says he’ll have to make that trip without her.

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