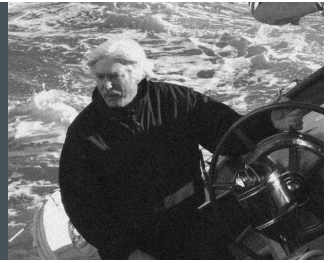


Tom Cunliffe



Coasting Home

Tom takes an alternative route back to the UK from the West Indies



It's pleasant sailing in the Caribbean, but the question is how to get home

Few would argue with the statement that the first half of a Caribbean cruise from Northern Europe is generally the easiest. Many crews opt to make this passage as part of an ARC Rally, others go it alone but, however executed, it remains what should be a relatively trouble-free ocean trip. A late summer sail down to the Canaries, on to Cabo Verde, then a downhill slide to the Islands and the best winter's yachting anyone with a powerful boat could ask for. Towards the end of the West Indian season, however, real life in the shape of the North Atlantic rears its head. You have to get home again.

The classic route leads back to the UK via Bermuda and the Azores in what, at least according to the pilot charts, ought to be reasonable weather. The first leg can be a tough call starting out with a boisterous tradewind blowing hard from forward of the beam. Then there's the long haul to the Azores, sometimes with not enough wind to make respectable way though the inevitable slop of a mid-ocean sea. I've had a heavy thrashing from northerlies trying to lay the English Channel from Horta and ended up in Spain, so if your luck's out, the whole affair may fail the strawberries-and-cream yachting test. There is, however, an alternative.

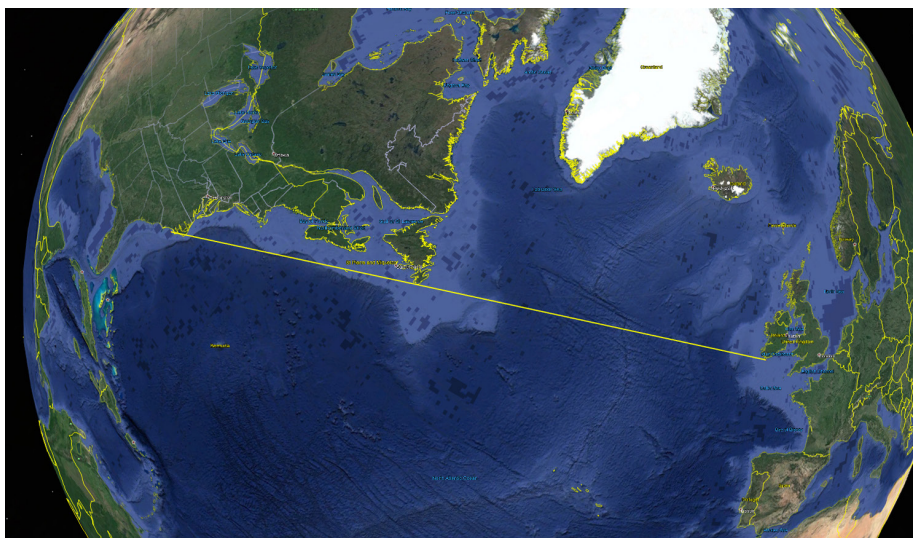
What one might call 'the western and northern passage' offers, at the cost of 600 extra miles, a fascinating coastal voyage through North America. It also has the novelty value of a trip still made by surprisingly few Europeans.

This 'Coastal Route' home divides into three legs. The first is a 1,200-mile run from the Virgin Islands to Beaufort or Charleston in the Carolinas. Much of this is likely to be a broad reach in the trades. The second is 1,700 miles of fair-weather, inshore sailing, a lot of it actually inland with berths galore and the option of 'all night in' nearly every evening. The third hop should be a lively sail home from Newfoundland to Cape Clear across a mere 1,650 miles of western ocean.

Conditions for making the first part of this voyage are generally ideal. If you leave the islands in mid-April you are months ahead of the hurricane season and the trades are blowing strong and sure. May is beautiful in Carolina - not too hot - and you have the whole summer to enjoy the Eastern Seaboard of America. The final leg from Newfoundland is statistically likely to supply at least one gale. There are no good times to cross the North Atlantic, only less bad ones, but it is not a long passage. Balanced against the delights it buys you, the price is usually cheap enough.

It is North America that provides the interest of the voyage. The east coast of the USA is honeycombed with bays and rivers. Off-lying banks and islands provide sheltered sounds perfect for easy passage-making, and the whole fascinating package is tied together where necessary with the dredged canal cuts of the Intracoastal Waterway. There are one or two short sections where you have to sail offshore for a day or so, but with these exceptions an ambitious oarsman could make the passage from Charleston to Cape Cod in a well-hooped powder barrel. It's interesting to lay a ruler from South Carolina to southern Ireland across a Great Circle Gnomonic chart, or do it electronically on Google Earth as I have done here. The course never passes much more than 100 miles offshore until it steps off into the Atlantic proper from Cape Race in Newfoundland.

*An interesting
perspective on
the straight line
course home*





*A typical
scene
on the
Intracoastal
Waterway*

According to the published information, the whole Intracoastal Waterway north of Beaufort has a controlling depth of at least 12ft, but it tends to silt to less than this between Beaufort and Charleston. Even north of Beaufort 12ft is optimistic in places, but I have made that part of the passage with 8 feet of draught with no difficulty.

Great highways and lazy country roads cross the waterway in many places, but create no problems. The smaller roads have a colourful variety of swing and lift bridges. Slow-moving Southerners lean over parapets and push their baseball hats back in disbelief as the red duster of a passing Brit glides through. The UK Merchant flag always attracts comment, often along the lines of, 'Did you guys come all the way from Australia in that thing?'

Growing tired once of putting these honest folk straight, I asked whether I sounded like an Australian.

'You sure do. Just like that Crocodile Dundee...'

I answered him in my best Mancunian, but I don't think he got the point.

Often the bridges are in the middle of small towns. On my early passages, idling Chevrolets waited, shimmering in the heat, while characters from Uncle Remus sat patiently with withy rods under the trees, hoping for the catfish that never comes. Today, Toyotas elbow their way in among the home-grown products, but Time still slows down in the depths of the Carolinas just as it always has done.

Not all the bridges open, because the repercussions of stopping the traffic on Interstate 95 would probably be felt on Mars, but all the fixed bridges offer at least 65ft vertical clearance to anyone with suitable air draught.

Overall, you will probably motor about half the way from Carolina to New York City. After that you can sail as much as you like. You don't need a particularly powerful engine for the canals and rivers and it's surprising how much sailing a handy boat can do.

Charts and pilot books for the Intracoastal Waterway are readily and cheaply available. NOAA



raster charts can be downloaded for free, offered by a government which, unlike some, understands that they have been surveyed from the public purse and are therefore everybody's property. In practice, I have found it rarely necessary to buy. Many local sailors carry spare sets which they are happy to trade. Americans are justly proud of their waterways and will do all they can to help you to enjoy them to the full.

Further along the way, charts of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland are best acquired in good time, but you won't have to stump up for a daunting number, and electronic apps are always at hand.

The major decision to make before leaving the Caribbean is whether to enter the US at Charleston or Beaufort. Both are under 1300 miles from Anguilla or the Virgin Islands. It is perfectly possible to enter in Florida, but if you are using the waterway to get back to the UK it is worth noting that it is almost as far from the islands to Miami as Charleston. The journey between the two is long and in places tedious. From Charleston onward it is a series of delights.



The significant lighthouse off Charleston

Entry at the beautiful city of Charleston is very easy. There is a big lighthouse and no grief offshore. Once on your way north after clearing in and pocketing a cruising permit, two short days of peaceful green-reed motoring under a huge blue sky brings you into the Great Waccamaw River. This is the star of the show south of Beaufort.

If you like trees it's worth the 10 days or so extra that the Charleston entry involves to visit this enchanted place. The river winds its way through a 'first growth' cypress forest of epic proportions. Black stumps of cypress, dead for years, stand among the living, and the whole fairyland is festooned with Spanish moss. There are navigable creeks and backwaters here where you can find primeval solitude to anchor undisturbed for as long as you wish. Turtles and the occasional alligator 'stop by' to peer at you, and the only sound is the birdsong echoing through the dim green woodland.



A quiet mooring up a creek



Beaufort

After the peace of the swamps, you pass close behind the great beaches of Carolina which seem to go on for ever. Bustling resort towns can supply any physical requirements that may have evolved during your rustic journey, and three days later you are at Beaufort, North Carolina, the second important entry port.

The entrance to Beaufort is not as easy as Charleston but, once inside, it is a pretty town. It has no high-rise buildings and is made up of gaily painted clapboard houses and clean streets. The anchorage is sheltered in all weathers and is a crossroads of the cruising world.

North of Beaufort you have two choices, depending on your fancy. If, by now, you are a confirmed swamp freak, you can go up the 'ditch' and pass through more glorious forest. It doesn't quite measure up to the Great Waccamaw, but it's a good second. This will involve you in more motoring, so if you feel like a sail and a bite of some thing completely different you can cross the wide waters of Pamlico Sound and visit the Outer Banks.

The Outer Banks are a series of sand bars thrown up off the Carolina coast. They run, with narrow inlets between them, from Beaufort around Cape Hatteras, past Kitty Hawk, where Wilbur and Orville Wright astonished the world, and on up to the Virginia State line. On their seaward beaches the world is reduced to three dimensions: limitless ocean, colossal sky and, somewhere under your feet, a tightrope of sandy soil. The banks move ceaselessly but small communities still cling on. The Gulf Stream surges by and the shoals off Hatteras have wrecks enough for all the world, but inside the islands there are safe havens and a rare welcome for the few foreigners who make it to their shores.

On Ocracoke Island lies a tiny cemetery for World War Two British merchantmen, over which the Union Flag is hoisted every morning and handed at sunset. An unexpected corner of a foreign field.

North of the sounds, the Virginia Cut leads up to Norfolk and the Chesapeake Bay. In the whole wide world there can be nowhere for boat bits like Norfolk. Mothballed warships and vessels in commission line the banks of its



rivers for miles, but you can anchor by a park right in the middle of the city. In order to plunder this wonderland of spares you need a car and a guide, but every American is an amateur courier. You will never meet folks more generous with their time and equipment. You need a car? You will always find one, and as like as not there'll be a barbecue dinner thrown in as the soft southern night descends after your shopping.

One of my boats had an ancient Ford engine. Ford UK assured me that certain spares were no longer available; as one does, I left home anyway and hoped for the best. Having been taught by experience always to fear the worst, however, I walked into the Ford truck dealer in Norfolk and told him I was in need of a cylinder head gasket. 'That'll be a Ford 4-D,' he drawled, 'sure, we got plenty of bits for those. We had a load in last week. Come from some place called Dagen Ham.' (two words, you'll note) I could only smile at the inscription on my gasket: 'Made in England'.



*Annapolis
waterfront
on the
Chesapeake*

You could sail all summer in the Chesapeake Bay and plenty of people do. It is 150 miles from north to south and volumes have been written about its history and geography. All the way up the bay are beautiful anchorages and towns of classic colonial buildings, like Annapolis. At the top is the 'C and D' (Chesapeake and Delaware) Canal. This 12-mile cut joins the Bay with the Delaware River estuary. The Delaware is bleak and the offshore passage from its mouth to Sandy Hook offers little, but once around Sandy Hook, life begins with a capital 'L'.

Sailing through New York City is a mind-blowing experience. You pass the Statue of Liberty with its invitation to the tired, poor and huddled masses yearning to be free, before leaving Battery Point to port and entering the East River. Bowling along with Manhattan soaring a biscuit's toss to port and an ever-increasing tide under the keel, you overtake the jammed-up cabs on the Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR) Drive and get a great view of the track-suited joggers with glazed eyes and Walkmen turned up strong.

The streets of mid-town are so straight that you can look clear down 44th past the New York Yacht Club to the Hudson River. The Empire State building, the Chrysler and the Trump Tower hang in the sky overhead, while the roar of the city drowns the beat of your engine. Then, as the street numbers rise into the hundreds and the Harlem River dives off into the jungle to port, you are squirted through a series of cantilever and suspension bridges by the ripping tide of Hell's Gate, and out past Throg's Neck into the placid summer waters of Long Island Sound.



From City Island to Mystic, Connecticut, the Sound is 150 miles long and sheltered all the way. It is emphatically not the place to search for solitude, but the numerous harbours, marinas and rivers offer an interesting cruise for those who want to study the better class of American suburban life. If you can't stand it you can traverse the lot in 24 hours and fetch up at Mystic Seaport for one of the 'musts' of the trip.

Mystic Seaport Museum is undoubtedly the world's finest popular sea museum. It consists of a reconstructed 19th century village. They have a working wooden ship-repair yard where such massive projects as the restoration of the Yankee whaleship *Charles W Morgan* have been successfully undertaken. The *Morgan* is open daily to the public and so are the other ships and small boats. Libraries and indoor exhibits abound, including a full-scale planetarium. A small boat shop builds exquisite examples of the craft of bygone years.



Mystic - a must for your itinerary

As you sail up to the great bays of Maine the population thins out and space increases: islands, pine forests and mountains replace the rolling lushness of southern New England. The fog begins in earnest, but that isn't so bad for a UK-bred sailor. Maine schooners are still to be found working their passage without engines, some of them after 100 years or more. On my last trip up here, the fastest of the fleet, in spite of many recent additions, was still the *Adventure*, once a Grand Banks fishing schooner. To be eclipsed under her mighty lee as she thunders across Penobscot Bay at 14 knots is a memory to carry all your days.

Now you are really penetrating the far reaches of North America. As you enter Canada, by way of Nova Scotia, the scenery doesn't change much, but the down-to-earth approach of the people reminds you that you are a long way from the bustling dollar-burdened cities further west.



In the clapboard town of Lunenburg, once the mainspring of Canada's fleet of Grand Bankers, the wharves are silent and the schooners are no more, yet one morning I awoke at anchor to find a whole box of smoked mackerel on my deck. We enjoyed them all the way home. The islands around Lunenburg and Halifax make for superb cruising, and the fishing communities open their hearts to seamen from over the water. The jokes around the saloon tables will keep you going on many a night to come when laughs may prove hard to find.



Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

The first time I made this trip I ran out of time because I went fishing, and sailed direct from Lunenburg to Kinsale in the Irish Republic. In later years I have sailed into Newfoundland and found my experiences in Nova Scotia mirrored and expanded by an even more entertaining set of characters. Newfoundland is on the periphery of Canadian society. The locals are ambivalent about their national status; times are often hard in eastern Canada and men drove dog sleds across the winter ice within living memory. I drank with those guys on my first trip and the human spirit still burns strong today. You'll never forget the welcome.

By the time you've climbed onto the brave west wind past Cape Race, out across the Grand Banks as so many have done before you, to chase the Gulf Stream home in late summer, the West Indies will seem a long way astern. The discovery of North America is not for everybody, but for those who make the effort, the perspective it gives on the people of the New World and the stock of new memories are a rich reward.

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Tom Cunliffe - Yachts and Yarns