

Storms and albatrosses

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Durban 2010 and Beyond – Race 8 – Hawaii to Santa Cruz – 2028 nm

Pieter and I were on our way to join the fleet at Santa Cruz, near San Francisco in California and within 24 hours we were on our way to Hawaii! How cool is that?

Ricky Chalmers, the skipper of Durban 2010 and Beyond emailed us 24 hours before we were due to leave for the USA and asked us to rather fly to Hawaii and join the fleet there. We were over the moon with excitement and what followed was a frenzied 12 hours of changing flights and hotel reservations.

The fleet was based at the Hawaii and Waikiki Yacht Clubs in Honolulu on the island of O'ahu.

The Hawaiian group of islands consists of six islands. From the west to the south lies O'ahu, Molokai, Lana, Kahoolawe, Maui and the "big island" Hawaii. The islands are situated in the Northern Pacific and are 2028 nautical miles from the west coast of America.

We stayed at a hotel on Waikiki beach, one of the most famous surfing spots in the world, the other one of course is North Beach, with the world's biggest waves. Palm trees, fabulous sunsets, Mai-tai's and beautiful people - and we were ready to stay forever. The islanders are easy going and very friendly. Hawaii is the 52nd state of the USA which means it is also a first world country, island style. There are strict building regulations (unlike in Hermanus) which ensures the islands stays unspoilt and preserved for all to enjoy. Only 5% of each island may be developed for commercial and residential purposes. The result is that the islands are stunningly beautiful with pristine beaches, mountains, waterfalls, rivers and hundreds of palm trees, flowers, birds and wildlife. The islanders' revere nature and they do not separate nature from their own lives.

When you arrive in Hawaii you are greeted with the words "Aloha!" and a lei of orchids and frangipani flowers are hung around your neck. There are statues of famous surfers, people and wildlife everywhere. These statues are also adorned with fresh leis left there by people that remember them.

Because of the dismasting of both Durban and Western Australia, 3 600 nm from China and the subsequent delay in the repairs, Durban and WA left Hawaii five days after the rest of the fleet. Eight boats will race to Santa Cruz and the two of us will sail as well as motor sail there.

Encountering the "Perfect Storm"

We encountered a vicious storm the day after we left with force 8 winds and rough seas. The Northern Pacific is known for these storms caused by high pressure systems. For Pieter and me it was a trial by fire. The boat was wet from crashing waves, more than once waves broke into the cockpit and flooded the saloon and navigation area. The ocean was mountainous and the boat was sailing up waves 30 feet high and came crashing down on the other side at an even steeper angle. Initially only the most experienced crew members took the helm but since we are here to learn, it did not take long for us to helm too. The most scary and also the most awe inspiring experience of my life. Nothing can compare to being at the helm if such a powerful machine, at the mercy of nature and still able to survive the onslaught.

The boat was built for this and to be behind her wheel in seas that most sailors never encounter in their lives is unforgettable. For five days the wind and rain never let up. Twenty-four hours a day the boat and her crew were assaulted by the wind, the sound of which reminded me of a rushing freight train, mountains of water, sailing permanently at an angle of 30%, damp and at times soaking bunks and clothes from condensation and leaks from the chain plates. We were hanging on for dear life and most things like cooking and dressing was done sitting on the floor.

Dressing involves getting out of a pitching bunk, pulling on long johns, socks, salopettes (waterproof pants like dungarees) and boots. Next a

fleece jacket, waterproof jacket and your "oily" jacket.

After that your life jacket, beanie, gloves, scarf, headtorch (if on watch at night) and leatherman. This dressing game takes at least half an hour each time, four times a day. We all had falls and lots of bruises to show from this encounter.

Sleeping was nearly impossible even after being out on deck for three or four hours. Imagine a boat weighing forty-six tones being brought almost to a complete standstill by a big wave and at other times completed lifted from the water for a few seconds and literally slammed down again. Walking is nearly impossible and you learn to hold on tightly or crawl. It makes for an interesting life at sea.

Blue skies again

It was both terrifying and exciting at times - like being on a roller-coaster, but everyone was relieved when on the sixth day the sun broke through the clouds, the sea calmed somewhat and dolphins played at our bow. We could dry our sodden gear in the sun again. But this is what sailing is about and nothing on earth quite compares to this.

Albatrosses seem to regard stormy seas as their playground. We saw them flying behind the boat, the tips of their wings touching the water at times. They are magnificent flyers, so effortless and graceful. From the 16 species of albatrosses found in the world, three are found in the Northern Pacific.

They are the black-footed albatross with a wingspan of 2,26 m, the Laysan albatross with a wingspan of 2,08 meters and the very rare short-tailed albatross. We saw the first two almost every day. The largest albatross in the world is the wandering albatross with a wingspan of 3,30 m found in the circumpolar regions of the southern hemisphere.

Life on board revolves around keeping watch - on deck, which involves the actual sailing of the boat, trimming, sail changes and whatever is necessary to reach our destination in the fastest possible time, mother watch - which means cleaning the common areas, cooking meals and at three o'clock every morning baking bread for the next day as well as standby for the on deck watch when necessary.

The third watch is off watch and is sleeping and relaxing by reading books. Books are devoured by the crew. Even Pieter started reading. The crew of 14 are grouped into three watches and rotated on a three hourly basis.

After that storm, we encountered milder weather with winds between force 4 and 6 on the nose, which extended the passage from 11 days to 14. When the wind dies down to force 2 we motorsail as we have to reach Santa Cruz in the fastest possible time.

Our ETA (estimated time of arrival) is 23 April in Santa Cruz at 00:15 GMT. We will do quick repairs as a flying yankee sheet ripped off our starboard jammers, the riggers must do a final check on our rigging and we must replenish our supply of fresh fruit (lots of oranges), Earl Grey tea, hot chocolate for those cold night watches and other essentials.

The Clipper fleet starts race 9 from Santa Cruz to Panama on Thursday 25 April.



IT'S A WRAP Doing her share on board the Durban 2010 and Beyond that is participating in the Clipper Around the World yacht race is a smiling Patricia Storbeck (left) from Hermanus. Patricia and her son Pieter are crew members on the yacht during the second last stage of the race.