

CORSAIR'S voyage to the Med.

BY S. H. JEFFREY

THIS is a short story of the voyage *Corsair II* made from Cape Town to the Mediterranean during April and May and a brief recital of her six-week cruise in those waters.

Corsair II was designed to a specification not common to small ships intended for ocean voyaging. The requirement was for a motor-sailer with efficient performance both under sail and under power—notwithstanding the prevailing opinion that such an objective is seldom achieved.

The ship eventually designed had the following general specification:

Length o.a.: 53 ft.

Length w.l.: 46 ft.

Breadth o.a.: 14 ft. 6 in.

Depth: 9 ft. 6 in.

Draft: 6 ft.

Engine: Caterpillar diesel, 75 h.p. at 2,000 r.p.m. with Slack & Parr feathering and reversing propeller.

Range under power: Approx. 1,500 miles with reserve fuel (consumption 2.1 gall. per hour) at a speed of 8-9 knots.

Sail area: Working sails (ketch rigged), approx. 1,000 sq. ft. plus facilities for setting larger foresails, including twin running sails, and mizzen staysail.

Corsair II left Cape Town on April 2, 1964, with a crew of seven—five men and two women—bound first for St. Helena, then Ascension, Cape Verde Islands, the Canaries and Gibraltar. Good sailing was expected to north of Ascension, thereafter the Doldrums and then the "steamer route" against the north-east Trades to Gibraltar.

The first 22 hours out of Cape Town were under engine, with steadying sails, against a light headwind or in calms. During this time the log showed 180 miles. Then the southerly Trades were found, to the joy of all concerned, the running foresails hoisted and away she went at a steady seven to eight knots.

During the next eight days winds were fair, but mostly light and variable, with short periods of good Trade blows. The engine was used whenever the daily run appeared to be dropping below the aimed-at figure of 170 miles.

Most of this part of the voyage was under sail, usually twin foresails, main, fisherman staysail and mizzen.

St. Helena was reached nine days 17 hours after leaving Cape Town—unknown to the crew at this time, it was only one hour more than the record voyage made by *Stormvogel* a few days before.

Two days were spent in St. Helena—touring the island and making temporary repairs to the engine cooling system.

Then on to Ascension, bowling along at eight knots before a good south-west Trade. Ascension was sighted after four days—but at night, with lights not shown on the charts, so that anchorage was found only at daybreak the next morning.

This trip from St. Helena to Ascension was probably the best sailing passage of the voyage—with Trade winds up to force 6 or 7—and two broken foresail poles—one during a hard gust ("down with the mainsail") and the other from an honest jibe.



Corsair at anchor in the clear waters of Portenax Bay on the north-west corner of the island of Ibiza in the Balearics.

Photo: Mike Hellawell.

At Ascension we met two other small ships from South Africa resting before they continued their voyages to the West Indies.

After extraordinary hospitality from the Cable Company and the American base at Ascension, and repair of the two broken foresail poles, *Corsair II* set out for the Cape Verde Islands, refuelled and ready for a long trudge through the Doldrums.

This passage covered an area of unpredictable winds and calms, 1,500 miles of it, and so it was mostly spent under engine. The usual squalls and accompanying torrential rain were experienced, also the inevitable spectacle of the ship's complement soaping in the rain, which then stopped, and having to wash off in salt water. Time from Ascension to Cape Verde was nine days—an average of 170 miles a day.

In fact, *Corsair II* probably had more of the Doldrums than is usual—the log shows a continuous 600 miles under engine with no wind during this part of the trip.

The original objective in the Cape Verde Islands was St. Vincent, believing that the more westerly point of the Cape Verde group would give better chances for favourable sailing in the North Atlantic.

However, this plan was changed and it was decided to make for Santiago, the most southerly of the Cape Verde Islands, in full realisation that from then on it meant "bashing it out" against the north-east Trades 1,500 miles to Gibraltar by way of the Canary Islands.

The impressions gained from Santiago, of these Cape Verde possessions of Portugal, were not favourable. Currency is purely local to the Islands. People want to get out—but cannot. Santiago, of course, may not be typical.

From the Cape Verde to the Canaries it was Hobson's choice—just butt into the north-east Trades or otherwise go the long way round.

The passages to the Canaries, and from the Canaries to Gibraltar, were gruelling tests of a small boat under power, against winds varying from 15 to 30 knots and heaving seas.

To relieve the tedium and ease the perpetual pitching and sea-swept decks, the sails would be hoisted for a day's run of 120 miles with 70 miles made good. For the rest a minimum daily demand on distance of 170 miles under engine proved mostly achievable.

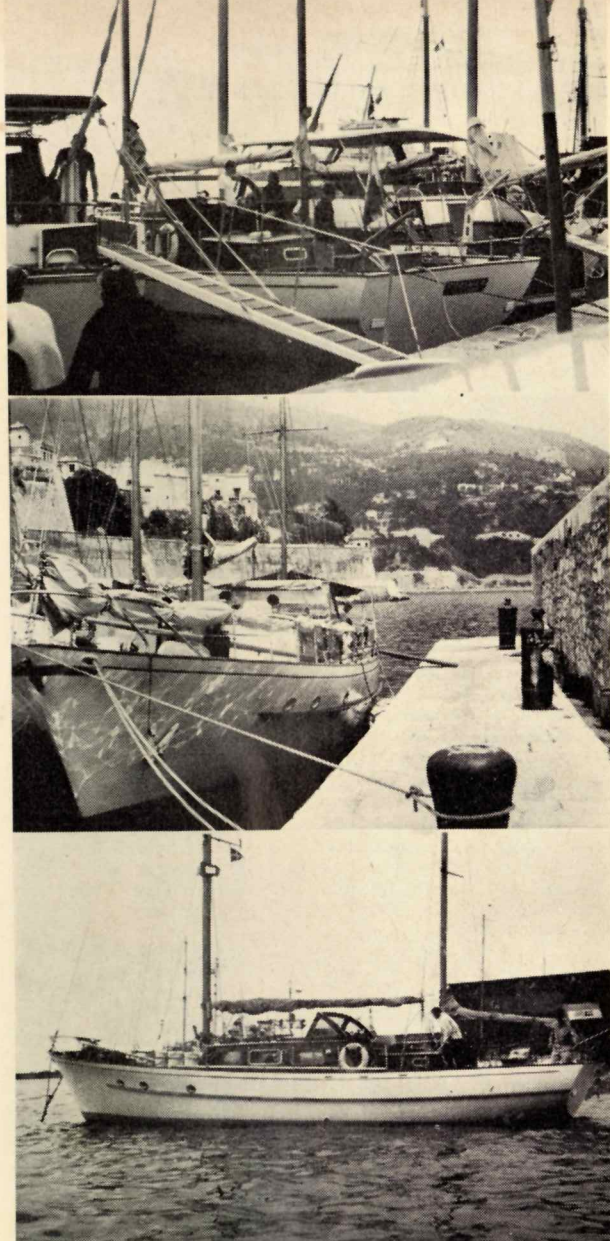
Although *Corsair II* is an exceptionally dry ship, with her high topsides and flared bows, below decks was frequently awash and living up forward was impracticable.

The Canaries—in the form of the beautiful island of Tenerife—was reached after six days of hard and monotonous work. Here there was evidence of a modern harbour, industrial development, including a modern oil refinery (diesel fuel at 7c a gallon), progressive agriculture and lovely flowers.

From the Canaries to the Straits of Gibraltar the hydrographic charts offered some hope of winds that would be less unfavourable, but these hopes did not materialise except that in general they were lighter, the seas less steep and the going—all under engine—somewhat easier.

The night of May 15 saw *Corsair II* making up to the

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ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM:

Corsair lay stern-to in typical Mediterranean manner at San Tropez where she was wedged amongst hordes of other large yachts.

Old cannons, set into the wall, made picturesque mooring bollards at Villefranche.

Laying in the Royal Cape's basin, Blue Peter flying, just before leaving for St. Helena

Photos: Mike Hellawell.

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Straits of Gibraltar in fair weather. By dawn the wind was a fierce easterly and the Straits were entered at two knots (if that) and with little visibility, except of the spume-swept sea. Good fortune, however, enabled a favourable current inset to be found and by noon *Corsair II* was standing off the Rock with Yellow Jack hoisted and radio requesting pratique.

Total logged distance Cape Town to Gibraltar—5,800 miles. Total elapsed time—43 days. Total time at sea—35 days. Average daily run—166 miles.

At Gibraltar five days were spent in the usual sight-seeing, plus necessary minor repairs to sails (mostly damaged when used for steadying while under power), machinery and electrical gear put out of action by excess of sea water down below.

Tied up alongside at Gibraltar was another small ship of the same name, the Italian Naval Training Ship *Corsaro II*—a sleek 73 ft. ocean-racing ketch off across the Atlantic to race against *Stormvogel* and others for the Bermuda Cup. This was a happy chance meeting.

The lessons to be learnt from *Corsair's* voyage to Gibraltar, accepting that at no time were extremely adverse conditions experienced, can best be summarised thus:

(a) There is merit in the motor-sailer design, provided too much is not expected in either capacity. Under fair weather conditions an *average* distance made good of 170 miles a day can thereby be accomplished.

(b) Sailing a direct passage regardless of favourable winds (steamer routes) in a small ship entails some trials and tribulations. Keeping dry is difficult. Sleeping up forward is impossible. Protection from the weather for the helmsman is (almost) essential. Damage to sails when used for steadying under power is more severe than when sailing with fair winds.

(c) In general, a pure sailing ship would be well advised to take the Trades with her to north of the 30th parallel and then make Gibraltar by way of the Azores.

NOTE: This is debatable, as *Corsair's* own experience is not proof of it.

From Gibraltar *Corsair's* Mediterranean cruise followed a fairly conventional pattern—with the accent on finding places of beauty not unduly frequented by the tourists.

The following are places and occasions which stand out in the memory of her crew:

The beautiful mosaic promenade and fountain at Alicante in Spain and the friendly feeling engendered in that city.

The bloody business of a bullfight session—seven bulls killed for the delectation of the crowd—but the beef in the shops was both tasteless and tough.

The magnificent yacht club at Palma, Majorca, and the beautiful *calas* (coves) in the Balearic Islands—specially in Ibiza, the smallest of this group.

The bogy of the Maestral (known under many different names, but these winds are alleged to blow at 100 m.p.h.) which *Corsair II* was thankful not to experience.

The incredible changeability of the French and Italian Riviera—from terraced farmlands which rise in sheer cliffs of arable soil to millionaires' villas and ancient castles.

The tourist congestion (film stars and all) of St. Tropez and Monaco and the tawdry magnificence of the Casino at Monte Carlo—fruit machines being more favoured than baccarat.

The charm of Villefranche in its old-world architecture (notwithstanding that the Riviera highway runs 300 metres inland) and the 300-ton schooner that lies there as a ship-owner's holiday home and museum of antiques.

The flowering beauty of the little harbour of Portafino—where the flowers from the cliffs above your ship drug the night with scent.

The lack of population (in an over-populated Europe) of Corsica and Sardinia and the amazing beauty of their coves and of the small islands surrounding them.

The lack of fish life (kreef at R4 a time) and the industrious Mediterranean fisherman. Everything is caught, and eaten, from sea snakes and octopi to fingerlings 2 in. long. Fishing methods which are impossible to think of under South African conditions are adopted—which would make a story in itself.

The remnants of the past—as in the Roman harbour of Ventatone Island, unknown to the tourist, where *Corsair II* lay tied up to bollards carved from the living rock 2,000-odd years ago.

The sophisticated, but delightful, beauty of islands such as Ischia and Capri—the Blue Grotto is worth an hour of any man's time, in spite of the billboards.

The luxurious yachts, lying side by side with small single-handed voyageurs. Note—the principle seems to be: the bigger the yachts the less they go to sea.

The graceful, but highly-efficient, way in which the Continental relieves his fellow men (from other parts) of his ill-gotten gains.

So much for the impressions of the Mediterranean—which are probably the same as is gained by most of the visitors to this part of the world. ■■