

The voyage of Iskybibble

By Karen Earnshaw

Intended for reading by the Majuro Lagoon Writers

Meltdown. A breathless, ghastly few minutes just staring at the disappearing shore, brain in turmoil: What on earth are we doing on a sailboat without a mast? What's the back-up?

None. There is no back-up. All our eggs are in one 50 horse power motor. But I'd known that was going to be the case from the moment I agreed to crew for Cary. Breathe. Just breathe and move on. Don't think about it.

The hours begin to slide by, the island dips below the horizon, and the engine is pushing us forward. And, to be honest, it's not too bad. Every now and then a wave, a foot or so taller than the rest and coming at the hull from a slightly different direction, makes the hull rise up and slap back down onto the next roller as walls creak and moan below. But, overall, Iskybibble is a comfortable ride, despite not having the weight of a hefty spar and sails aloft.

The hours turn into days and, like so many voyages in the past, Cary and I find the rhythm of the days at sea: night watches in three hour stints; bringing together meals that match the strength of the wind; putting out the fishing lines at first light...

Now we're three days into it and Wake Island is a distant memory. It's probably about 2am and the moon has been up for a few hours. A light is turned on below and Cary comes up the companionway. The engine's not sounding quite right. He thinks there's something clogging the fuel intake. So he's going to have to turn it off and sort it out. Okay. No gasping. We're doing fine. Relax. I release the auto-pilot and try and hold the course with the over-sized wheel. Six or seven minutes pass. Cary's back in the cockpit and turns the key. Will it start? Yes! Brrrm, brrrm... and we're off again.

Three hundred miles, four hundred. And now we're truly in the Marshall Islands, with the iPad's screen showing the little red boat gradually slithering at five miles an hour between the northern chain of islands. Majuro is still 350 miles or so away, but we're on our way home.

Lunchtime comes around and it is calm enough to cook eggs and sausages; even some toast to go with it. Sitting together up top and enjoying the moment.

And then... nothing. Booming loudly above the sound of the wind and the waves tickling the hull is silence. The engine has shut itself off.

Cary tries the same tactic as before, assuming another glob of dirt is holding up the flow of fuel. No luck there. He tries another idea to get the Yanmar purring again... and then another and another. Nothing is working, but he's not giving up on it.

There's sails. Of course there is. I open the lazaret and pull out various bags and containers and dump them on the cockpit floor. Ah, there's a spinnaker. Light fabric and not too big by the look of it. Not feeling particularly hopeful, we don our harnesses and attached ourselves to the jacklines running along the side decks. Cary drags the sail forward and clips the sail's head to the pulpit. We both drag the two other corners after and, using some thin line, attach them to the stanchions about half way back.

By tightening the clew on the port side to the rail and giving the starboard sheet some freedom, we manage to catch some wind in the blue, white and yellow sail. Wow. Well done team.

But, sadly, it's not really pushing us at any great speed and when the wind shifts even slightly, the sail empties of wind. Still, the GPS is showing that we're averaging 1.5 to 2 knots. But it's not in the right direction.

Majuro lies at 190 degrees from our position, and we're only able to keep the sail full if we steer 260 degrees, putting us in line with Wotje Atoll. So what. Wotje is a perfectly good place and as home to one of the two high schools on the Marshalls' outer islands, it has quite a healthy sized population. Heading for Wotje is good.

This morning when I got up, we were twelve miles from the eastern point, now we're more like eight miles out. But the wind is dying and the sail is mostly lying flat and every now and then rustling on the cabin top.

Standing up and staring forward, wanting so much to be the first one of us to sight land, and there it is. Unbelievable. A tiny blue triangle in the distance. It's a canoe. A canoe!

Ten minutes go by. Twenty. And, yes, they're definitely coming our way. Fantastic.

We pull out the fenders from the aft bathroom and drape them over the starboard side in preparation for docking the canoe alongside. We wave. They wave. And then they're

just a few feet from us and they release their mainsheet, and pull to a stop next to us all the while looking at us expectantly.

There's two men and a teenager in the 25-foot traditional outrigger canoe. We can see they've had a successful morning fishing, with a dozen or so rainbow runners lying in the bilge. What's the problem, one guy asks, so we explain that we're trying to get to Wotje, but the wind isn't playing fair.

Could they tow us, we ask ourselves? Nah. Not enough power in their little sail. But what if we use their sail as our sail. Crazy, freaky idea, but it may just work.

It took the five of us an hour, but finally it was done. The proud little canoe is now lashed tight to the cabin top, right where the base of the mast had been. Cary takes the helm and nods to Emos, Hackney and Peter, who in turn raise their mast and blue sail, with Emos holding the mainsheet.

As the sail fills with wind and Cary makes a good course, I watch the GPS and, yes, we're moving. One knot becomes two, two becomes three...