

# ATLANTIC CROSSING

DEAN NISBETT WAS A NOVICE SAILOR  
WHEN HE DECIDED TO CROSS AN OCEAN  
BY BEN FORREST



by Ben Forrest

Just before the turn of the century, Dean Nisbett went to a quiet place with a pen and piece of paper to think about what he wanted to accomplish next.

He was 53 years old and a successful optometrist, who lived with his wife Leslie in a small house on a cliff overlooking Lake Huron, near Bayfield, when the thought came to him.

‘Sail across the Atlantic Ocean’ he wrote, knowing there were two major obstacles in his way. First, he was a novice sailor; and second, he didn’t own a boat. He scratched down the goal anyway and moved toward it.

Dean grew up in Kincardine and moved to Huron County in 1981, after finishing an optometry degree at the University of Waterloo. His life on the water began in 1995, mostly on powerboats and personal watercraft. He was introduced to sailing when he crewed on boats out of Grand Bend and Bayfield, in racing events. But sailing across the Atlantic Ocean would require a great deal more training.

“You just can’t charge across the ocean. It’s not a commonly-done thing, and even in a modern era, it’s quite an undertaking.”

Dean took many courses from the Canadian Power and Sail Squadron, including one in celestial navigation, and he voyaged on the Great Lakes and in the British Virgin Island.

He also solved his boat problem, partnering with Brian Hall, of Grand Bend, to acquire ‘Necessity,’ a 40-foot Corbin Mark 2 Pilot House Cutter, which could handle an ocean passage.

“You have to get an ocean-going boat,” he said. “It has to be properly outfitted with specific equipment, and you have to acquire the skill and knowledge to handle all sailing conditions in all types of weather.”

In September 2006, Dean and Brian sailed Necessity from Bayfield to Tonawanda, New York, and made a 350 nautical mile journey through the Erie Barge Canal, all the way to the Hudson River at Catskill, NY.

They hauled Necessity out of the water and kept her on the hard over winter, while Dean made one final training voyage, the North Atlantic Rally to the Caribbean (NARC), on a 37-foot Beneteau that sailed under the name ‘Sea Life.’

Under Canadian Yachting Instructor Rick Butler, the crew made the 650 nautical mile journey from Newport, Rhode Island, to Bermuda, and then a second 850 nautical mile passage from Bermuda to the British Virgin Islands.

“You learn how to cross the gulfstream and sail in bad weather,” he said. “The most afraid I’ve been was on

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## THE BUCKET LIST



these training trips. The vessel was smaller and not as well designed for ocean passages.”

### Tackling the Atlantic

In the spring of 2007, Necessity made her way down the Hudson River to New York City for her final provisioning. Dean and Brian, along with Brian’s wife Irene and their friend Frank Strickland, of Goderich, began their 3,000-mile trek across the Atlantic.

They spent 18 days at sea on the first leg of the crossing, moving at a quick pace to cover 2,000 nautical miles to the Azores, a breathtaking archipelago two-thirds of the way across the ocean.

“We had a magical sailing experience for the first week at sea because we were in a high-pressure ridge. We were even able to run our spinnaker – a big, colourful sail you put out in front, like a big balloon – for two days.”

They dodged Tropical Storm Andrea, which curled away from them as Necessity sailed eastward, but they ran into another brutal storm, with nasty 45-knot winds and 20-foot waves.

They surfed down the face of large waves, doing 15 knots at times, a dangerous speed because the vessel could have tipped over or thrust its bow into the base of the wave ahead, Dean said. The crew turned and headed into the waves at an angle, an effective strategy that slowed down the boat. But the lack of speed meant they couldn’t get over some of the larger waves. The boat would stall and go backwards until the wave passed underneath.

“We turned the engine on, and we could use a combination of engine power and sail power to get ourselves over top of the larger waves,” Dean said. “Then, about 20 hours later, the cold front passed through our position. The wind dropped from 45 knots to 25 knots in about 20 minutes.”

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As the winds abated, the boat rocked and rolled. It was uncomfortable, but Dean knew they would be safe.

“I wasn’t happy, but we were so far out, it’s getting beyond rescuing you,” he said. “We had enough confidence in the boat that we were pretty sure we were going to be all right. It took a lot of concentration, and you just have to rise to the occasion and do it.”

As they approached the Azores, there was a predictable sense of accomplishment, and the thrill of seeing a full horizon after 18 days of nothing but water. The crew began to congratulate one another, but a terse remark from Frank brought them down to earth.

“Well, there won’t be a band playing,” he said, according to Dean.

“He was completely right,” Dean said. “Many sailors we met in the Azores had completed multiple ocean passages, including circumnavigations.”

They’d accomplished a remarkable thing, but realizing others had done much more, many times before, was sobering.

### Completing the journey

A year later, they set out from the Azores and sailed to the Rias region of northern Spain, a seven-day, 900 nautical mile journey that completed their Atlantic crossing. Along the way they cruised through the Azorean islands of Terceira and San Miguel, and spent two months cruising the Rias region, as well as the entire coast of Portugal.

“A lot of people like sunsets,” said Dean, when asked about the most rewarding part of the journey. “I really like sunrises, because the waves – they’re half as big, the wind is half as howling.”

They also saw dolphins nearly every day.

“It’s a pretty magical experience to have a group of dolphins playing in the bow.”

Dean believes he became the best version of himself during the Atlantic crossing, and as he travelled through the Mediterranean over the next 10 years.

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“You’re really alive,” he said. “You have to be always thinking ahead, and have lots of concentration.”

But, despite their best efforts, a great deal went wrong.

Two days into the first leg of the crossing, the bilge alarm went off, signaling the boat was taking on water. A taste test confirmed it was salt water, meaning it was coming from outside the boat.

“It turned out to be a faulty drain locker,” said Dean. “We traced it, found where it was coming from, and then plugged that up. But that’s concerning.”

Then, roughly four days out, the boat wouldn’t steer. It turned out to be a lubrication problem on the top rudderpost that was easily fixed, but, for a while, they wondered if they had broken the rudder steering mechanism.

Another time, the vessel’s autopilot quit. They emailed the manufacturer of the hydraulic system back in Canada, who told them to try various tactics.

“Nothing worked,” Dean said. “And then they finally

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said, ‘Hit it with a hammer.’” That did the trick.

A set of brushes on the hydraulic motor had jammed, and tapping the unit with a hammer caused the brushes to slide properly, Dean explained. The autopilot fired back up.

All of this taught Dean he could not sail alone.

“My mind is able to go to very dark, scary places easily,” he said. “But if I have someone to talk to, it keeps it all in perspective.”

### The sailing continues

Dean has always enjoyed the act of moving, be it on a motorcycle, snowmobile, personal watercraft or sailboat. He also enjoys a challenge, and that was the main appeal of his Atlantic crossing.

He now has roughly 23,000 nautical miles under his belt, and he continues to charter boats to sail in locations around the world, including Thailand, Tonga, the Azores, Turkey, and the British Virgin Islands.

“I’m not really itching to say, go across the Pacific,” he said. “I like this other idea of just exploring specific sailing grounds that I’ve never been to before.”

He is still a big believer in going to a quiet place with a pen and paper to think about his life, and what he might like to accomplish next.

“A lot of people won’t untie from the dock because the obstacles that are put up in front of them seem to be insurmountable,” he said.

“But if you have a passion, if you really want to accomplish something, and you think it through, there will always be ways to achieve your goals.” ■



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