



THE LONG WAY BACK

In his voyage from Auckland to Guernsey, Peter Watson proves how tough FPBs really are

As told to: Pippa Park Photos: Peter Watson



As a youngster, my only ambition was to go to sea. I even served in the Merchant Navy for a few years as a radio officer. But despite owning a handful of different craft over the years, I was eager to own the ultimate blue-water boat – one that could take me to places others couldn't.

Steve Dashew was one designer who really stood out for me thanks to his innovative design principles and multiple back-up systems. He creates FPBs (Functional Power Boats) with blue-water capability that also deliver in terms of comfort and speed.

In June 2013 I flew to Auckland, New Zealand to take a look at his boats and was so impressed that I ended up buying two on the spot. I put in an order for an FPB 78 and also bought an FPB 64 that was just six months old, called *Grey Wolf*.

Anyone else would have loaded her on to a ship but I felt I had to bring *Grey Wolf* back home to Guernsey by sea. She was such an able vessel, it just didn't feel right to me to do it any other way. I wanted to get to grips with all her systems and what better opportunity than on an extreme maiden voyage?

The fact that I was friendly with a marine engineer and a naval architect, who were keen for a trip, helped solidify my decision. Together we had the basis of a very strong crew and I asked Berthon Boat Company in Lymington to offer four of its apprentices the chance to join us. It was such a fantastic opportunity for some significant sea time.

When they agreed, I flew back to the UK and left *Grey*

Wolf in Whangarei. For the next three months, I continued with preparation in the UK, sorted out insurance, took a medical course and planned our route. The north-west passage can be dangerous as it's full of ice so

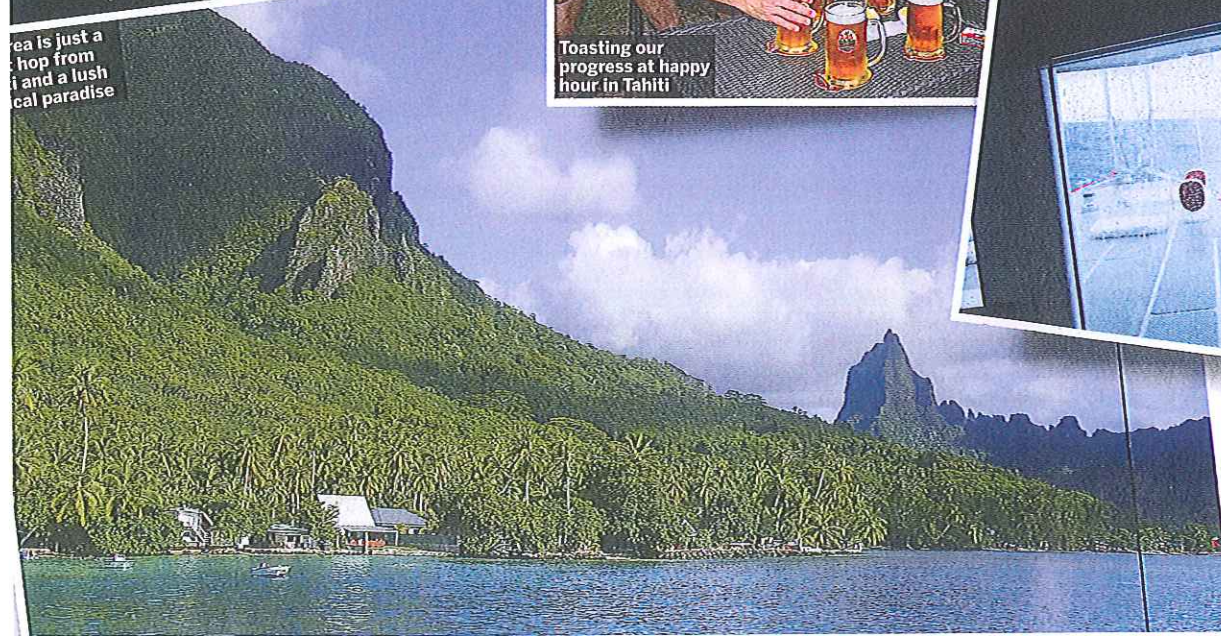


Toasting our progress at happy hour in Tahiti

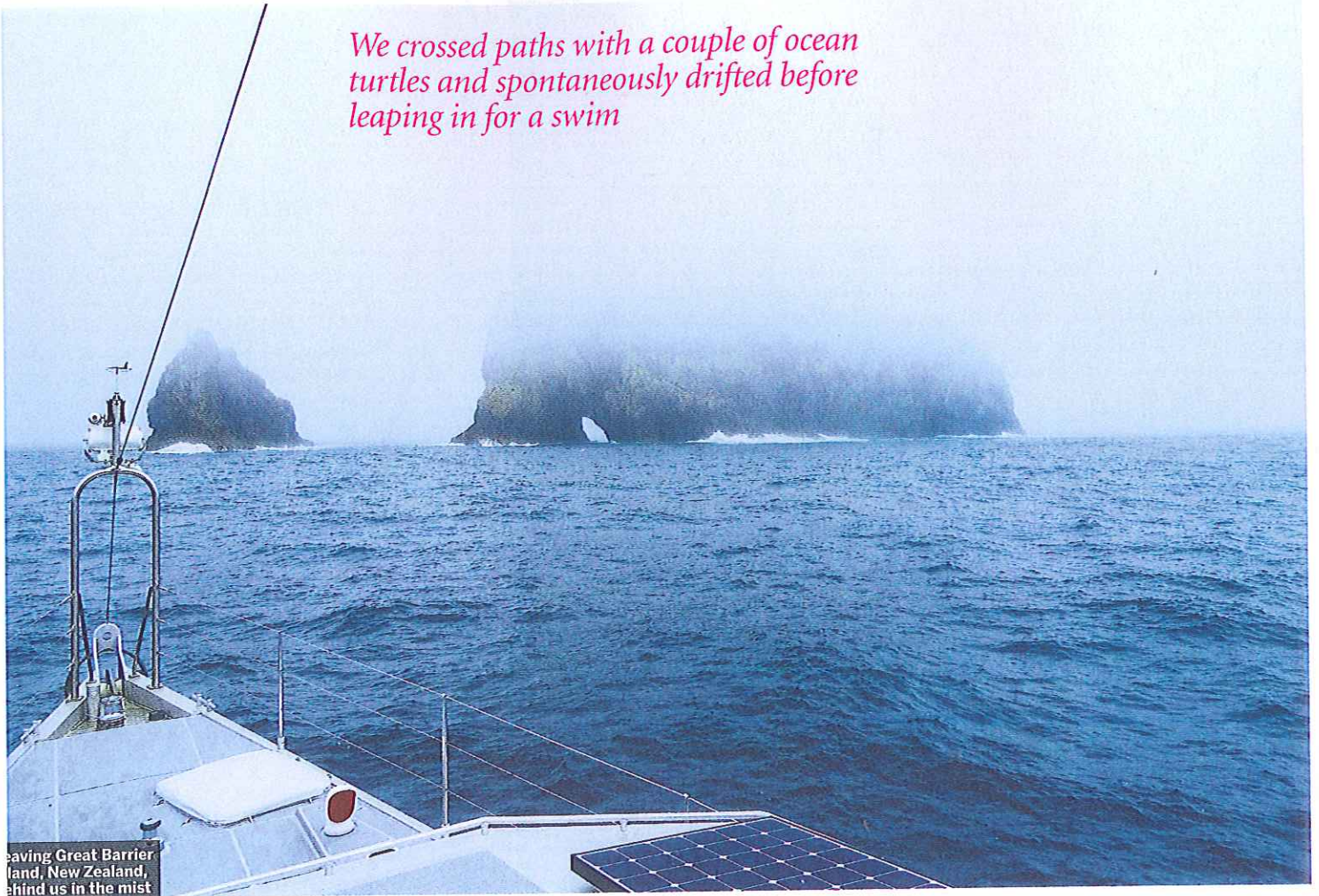
Miles and miles of open ocean stretched to the horizon



area is just a hop from Tahiti and a lush tropical paradise



We crossed paths with a couple of ocean turtles and spontaneously drifted before leaping in for a swim



Leaving Great Barrier Island, New Zealand, behind us in the mist

stead I decided to travel via the Panama Canal. I was certainly apprehensive, but also excited and ready to go.

In January 2014, I returned to New Zealand and spent three months preparing the boat, equipping her with a E mark and awaiting the arrival of my crew. This included Jeff Holden (a former Merchant Navy engineering ficer), Tony Jones (a retired naval architect) and our first Berthon apprentice, Jack Gunstone-Smith (a third-year shipwright). We also took an apprentice, Matt Hamilton from the NZ PB manufacturer Circa Marine.

RIDERS OF THE STORM: MARCH 24

Initially our start date was delayed due to bad weather so we took *Grey Wolf* over to the Great Barrier Island, which gave Matt and Jack a chance to practise taking watches, and for me, the opportunity to conduct safety briefings. Here we witnessed the first breathtaking sunset of our voyage, accented by a friendly school of dolphins blowing under the bows.

We finally set off, having cleared customs at Marsden Point the previous day. The wide blue ocean stretched out before us and we were immersed in a new world of sea and sky, with nothing

else in sight. Jack took a while getting used to the pitch of *Grey Wolf* and suffered with seasickness, but once acclimatised we settled quickly into a routine. The rotating watch system (two hours on, six hours off) meant we all slept when we could and grabbed lunch when we were hungry. Dinner was a more organised affair where we'd discuss the events of the day and take it in turns to cook.

The night watches this far out to sea were very special; the stars are incredibly bright and flying fish would land on our decks in the dark hours. En route to Tahiti is an island called Mangaia, surrounded by coral reefs. We made up our minds to stop on the way past and take a swim.

However, 150 miles off Mangaia we were hit by a tropical storm. Winds of up to 62mph made for a frothy sea and the Force 10 gale forced us to divert to the Cook Islands. We ran north to an island called Rorotonga, but another storm had developed close by and hit us just outside the harbour. Our barometer readings dropped through the floor before bounding up and down like a heart-rate monitor.

Four-metre waves shunted us and rain fell thick through daunting flashes of lightning; it was too dangerous to go in by night, so we motored up and down the coast until first light.

Once conditions calmed, Jack and Matt rented a soft-top BMW and disappeared inland to explore, while the rest of us indulged in a little rest and relaxation. After 36 hours we were ready to head for Tahiti. Our paper charts were updated and once again we were motoring merrily through the warm Pacific.

Matt managed to catch a wahoo on the fishing line, which was promptly served up for dinner and we received information that a quake measuring 8.2 had struck near Panama, generating a tsunami. Thankfully it rolled passed us unnoticed.



Final goodbye to New Zealand



Meeting the locals in Mangonui



Wildlife joined us at various points

Tahiti soon appeared on the horizon and we berthed safely in Papeete, where angelfish weaved lazily around the boat. The crew was sad to say goodbye to Jack, but keen to welcome our new apprentice, second-year marine electrician, Ben Percy.

PARADISE FOUND: APRIL 03

While on dry land we installed a new Simrad radar and MFD, as the Furuno NavNet radar/plotter had a software glitch. To everyone's frustration the equipment turned out to be faulty, so we were stuck in Tahiti until a new scanner could be delivered from New Zealand.

I took the crew for a tour round the island to lift their spirits. Tahiti is nothing short of stunning, with striking mountain ranges framing every sunrise, huge surf rolling up the beaches and little streams tumbling down from silvery waterfalls. There's even a natural blowhole on one side of the island, near Papenoo.

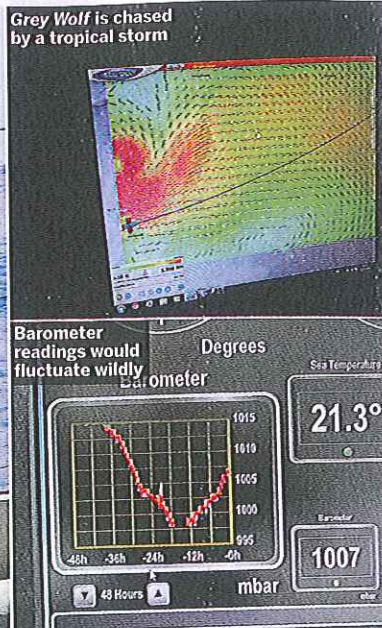
Days rolled by and still no Simrad. It's true that this was only a back-up in case the Furuno navigation dropped out, but it was well worth waiting for. There was not much to be done until it arrived so we headed over to the island of Moorea, which we spotted from the marina.

By the mouth of the bay the coral forms a natural breakwater, protecting it from bigger seas. Reef snorkelling was

Encountering tropical storms, Force 10 gales and four-metre waves



Grey Wolf is chased by a tropical storm



great fun there; the vibrant colours of the fish were mesmerising. Not for the first time I wished I had longer to make the journey. Perhaps I'll make a two-year voyage when the FPB 78 is ready!

Apparently the reason behind the delay was a public holiday over Easter. The parts eventually made it to us though and we embarked on the longest leg of our journey – the 22-day passage to the Panama Canal. Our actual navigation and position

didn't pose any serious problems in the age of GPS. The interesting parts were tactics and strategy, which we discussed together. It was great to have a mix of ages on board and we found ourselves in a state of constant Kiwi/Brit banter.

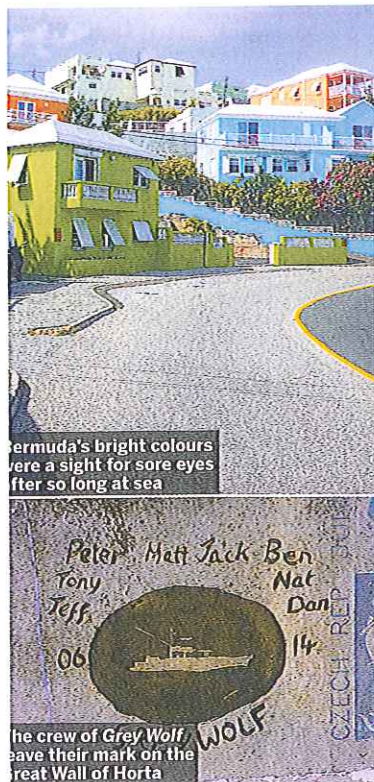
Before long we were alone again on our blue planet. One day we crossed paths with a couple of ocean turtles and spontaneously drifted before leaping in for a swim. Soon we found ourselves surrounded by dolphins! We

spent a day splashing around with them in the middle of the Pacific, the nearest land over 700 miles away. It's fascinating when you realise how shallow some parts of the ocean are. Our depth-sounder recorded peaks of just 9m surrounded by pits of 4,500m – this is where volcanoes are located just under the surface.

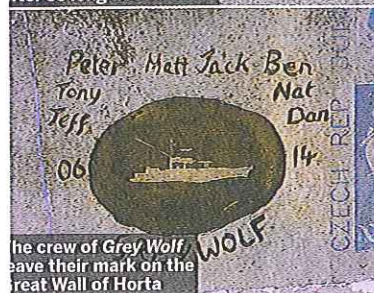
The days started to roll into one another and each hundred miles began to appear longer than the last.

Gazing out on blue seas and blue sky





Bermuda's bright colours were a sight for sore eyes after so long at sea



The crew of Grey Wolf leave their mark on the Great Wall of Horta



Navigating the Panama Canal, May 21, 2014

his crossing was too lengthy and it could have been more enjoyable to break it up – I was looking forward to sitting foot on dry land in the future.

ARRY ON UP THE CANAL: MAY 21

There was another report of an earthquake off the coast of Panama, but again this didn't concern us greatly. We pretty much had the ocean to ourselves and at times would go for days without seeing another boat, which was unnerving. If anything were to go wrong, we'd have been alone.

The closer we got to Panama the more boats we saw and I began to breathe easy once again. I was a little

concerned when we passed a 70m tuna boat hauling its net off our starboard side. Fishing isn't regulated this far out and a helicopter was showing them where to drop nets.

Coming into Panama was really interesting as we'd all been expecting a ramshackle old town and were surprised to find a developed city with enormous skyscrapers. Meanwhile the canal itself felt a bit like steaming through a tropical forest.

It was very hot and humid and there was a lot of form-filling to be done, but thankfully a pilot boarded and guided us through, which took the pressure off. Some boats were a very tight squeeze

with mere inches to spare. There was plenty of wildlife to see on the canal too, such as the gangly pelicans, which made a mess of Grey Wolf.

On leaving the canal we were quickly out of the steamy Spanish Main and into turquoise Caribbean waters. On May 27, Nathan Smith (a first-year marine engineer) replaced Ben for the passage to Bermuda.

Things immediately took a turn for the worse and I became feverish. A terrible headache and high temperature kept me below deck. The north end of the canal is renowned for malaria mosquitoes and I'd been bitten five or six times.

Off the north coast of Jamaica we radioed the Falmouth Coastguard for medical advice. They didn't waste any time putting us through to a hospital consultant who prescribed a course of the antimalaria drug Malarone. After a few days, I was back to full strength.

SMOOTH OPERATORS: JUNE 09

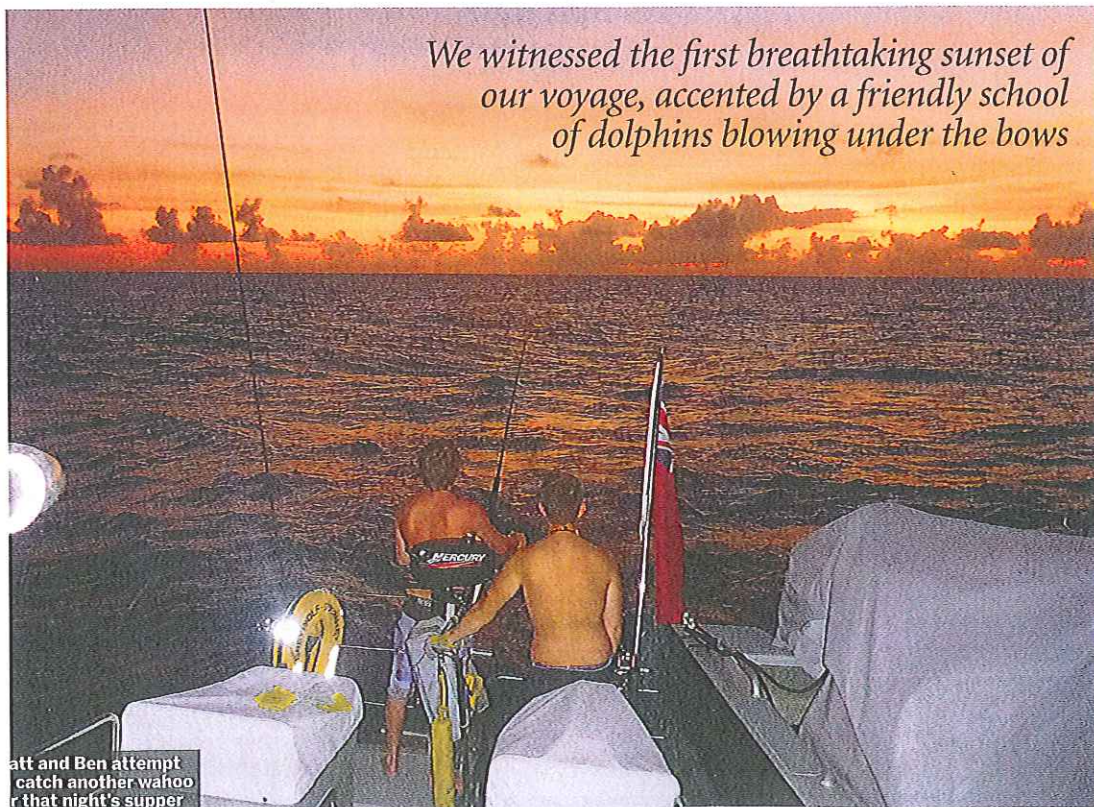
We passed the idyllic Montego Bay at about 8.5 knots (speed over ground, with the current) but had to change our passage plan in light of heavy weather. A faint looming lighthouse signalled our arrival in Bermuda and as we drew closer more lights popped up until the whole island was reflected in the sea.

Bermuda radio lined us up to enter St George's but some of the markers were unlit and we had a job finding them in the dark. A strong cross current didn't help and then our steering went (or at least I thought it had). Moving a 41-tonne boat in an unfamiliar harbour in pitch-black was asking for trouble. By then it was 3am, but customs were adamant we had to come in straight away. After a while, the control tower had to guide us in and just as we were tying up, the police arrived to find out why we weren't complying with regulations!

Once sorted, we put our feet up and relaxed with a slow beer while watching the sunrise. By morning we could truly appreciate the glittering water, leafy palm trees and intoxicating smell of Bermuda. The houses here are painted an assortment of candy colours, with clean white roofs serving to reflect the sunlight off them.

Once we'd all had time to unwind, we cracked on with the list of jobs. Jeff was keen to look at the sea strainer, raw-water cooling system on the generator and heat-exchanger anodes because we suffered from generator

We witnessed the first breathtaking sunset of our voyage, accented by a friendly school of dolphins blowing under the bows



Matt and Ben attempt to catch another wahoo for that night's supper

engine temperature alarms going off on passage. After the steering problems of the night before, I also wanted to check on the autopilot. Once we'd cleaned up and declared all was in order, we took to the roads with mopeds.

On June 5 our final apprentice, first-year marine electrician, Dan Pilcher arrived and we celebrated on some PWCs. Matt went freediving to clean the propeller and luckily noticed an anode was missing. He managed to hold his breath long enough to fit another, which was very helpful.

THE FINAL LEG: JUNE 14

Next stop was the Portuguese Azores and our ETA was in approximately eight days. The elements seemed determined to keep us from our destination and at one point we were actually heading in the opposite direction, trying to flee a storm. We did manage to set an FPB speed

record of 22 knots though. I insisted everyone wore lifejackets when out in rough seas and we had walkie-talkies and headsets so we could hear each other over the wind. To add to our troubles, we'd run out of beer.

Horta in the Azores is something of a Mecca for sailing boats. There's a huge breakwater called the Great Wall of Horta where passing sailors have marked their ship logos for generations. Tony prepared a mural for us, which we painted on the wall with our names.

It's a short five days from Horta to Guernsey and everyone was looking forward to getting home to see their loved ones. But first there was cleaning to do and a battery issue to consider. We noticed that once the generator had charged the batteries fully and was shut down, it took just 30 minutes for the voltage to drop and activate the alarms.

We did a cell-by-cell check and found one of the batteries had a fault, but this

Taking on fuel for the final leg in Bayona, Spain



Finally home, moored up in Havelet Bay, Guernsey



could be dealt with in Guernsey. One thing I'd been really impressed with is the John Deere engine. For three months we ran her almost non-stop and we didn't need to do a thing except change the oil and clean the air filter.

The last few days flew by and we arrived at St Peter Port in the early hours of June 24. We waited for morning and arrived at the port in time to meet our welcoming party for breakfast! After 12,600 nautical miles, we'd finally completed and made it through the long journey home.

I've definitely got the hang of Grey Wolf now, although we didn't do too much manoeuvring so I might need to practise that. What I love most about the FPB is the comfort you can expect, even in high seas. She glides into a Force 6 as if it were a Force 2.

The experience itself was nothing short of amazing and I couldn't have wished for a better journey. Hopefully when the FPB 78 is ready I can do it all again, but I'll take things slower next time. We only docked six times on the whole trip and I'd like to go to Hawaii and do the west coast of America.

What's next in store for Grey Wolf? I'm hoping to go down to the Med soon and next year I'm looking at Norway and Sweden. I can go anywhere, which is exactly what I always wanted, and have to hand it to Steve Dashew who designed a more than capable boat. **MBY**