

REFLECTIONS ON A CONVERSATION WITH COLIN DRUMMOND, A FOUNDER OF THE AZAB

by Hugh Kellett



Colin Drummond

It is 44 years since the inaugural running of the Azores and Back race and I am having a pint with one of its founders in the RCYC bar, the relaxed and witty Colin Drummond. In his hand is a well-thumbed iPad, in his head some ever-current memories of the race to the fabled islands, and in his eye the Drummond twinkle.

I had come to learn more about the AZAB and try to identify the secrets of its success and lasting appeal.

The Azores! The official date of their discovery is 1427 by a Portuguese explorer, one Diogo de Silves. From an early age the islands' very name conjured up for me images of exotic mystery and swashbuckling adventure, in fact ever since an ancient and well-meaning schoolmaster made me recite aloud the famous Tennyson poem, *The Revenge*:

*At Flores, in the Azores Sir Richard Grenville lay,
And a pinnace, like a flutter'd bird, came flying from far away;
"Spanish ships of war at sea! we have sighted fifty-three!"*



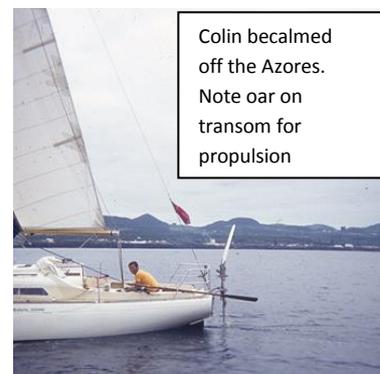
Early map of the Azores

The poem recounts the heroically stubborn actions of the *Revenge's* gallant but ill-fated captain Sir Richard Grenville and her crew, many of whom already lay wounded and dying before this final action. Deserted by the rest of the small British fleet, the company of the *Revenge* decide, on their own, to challenge the might of a vastly superior armada and go down fighting, in their words to "fall into the hands of God, not into the hands of Spain". And fall into the hands of God they duly did, blasting away in a mighty gale that sunk many of the Spanish as well.

So, Reason 1 perhaps for the appeal of the race: the destination itself, The Azores! What's not to dream about?

An irony of the gale that wrecked the *Revenge*, I learn, is that the breezes around the Azores are often particularly light, and many an AZAB entrant has found him/herself frustratingly becalmed at a crucial point near the finish and in need of a bit of rowing practice. See Colin's own oar at the ready in 1975 on *Sleuth Hound*, right.

Back in the club Colin sips on his beer as we reflect on the early planning stages back in the early 70s. There had been talk in the yachting press of creating a single-handed ocean race that might constitute an alternative to the OSTAR, a little shorter than the latter with Corinthian competitors in mind, and "smaller" boats, in contrast to the well-sponsored and comparatively longer boats that increasingly made up the OSTAR.

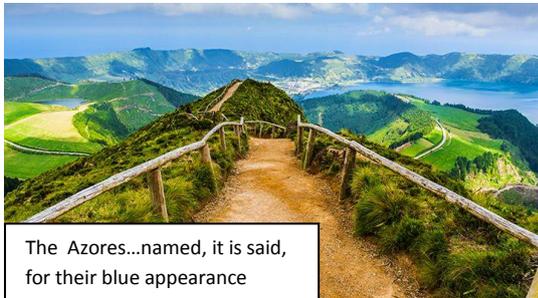


Colin becalmed off the Azores. Note oar on transom for propulsion

Without wishing in any way to underestimate the seriousness, endeavour and sheer bravery of sailing half way across an ocean and back, I detected that the original idea for such a race might have had a certain touch of “those magnificent men in their flying machines” about it (and which I believe still exists today to an extent), an appeal to the gentleman/lady sailor who wished to pit their wits in a sporting challenge, and with an emphasis on lower rather than higher tech. The Corinthian spirit is a clear and enduring differentiator of the race: competitors, particularly those who have raced the AZAB before, openly offer help, tips and advice to newcomers, and help everyone “join in”, surely an admirable trait all but lost to the professional world.

Colin met with Chris Smith, Spud Spedding and Andrew Bray, then Deputy Editor of *Yachting Monthly*, who sportingly sponsored the first event, and the course was decided for a race that wouldn't be much shorter than the OSTAR, but would start and finish in the same place, proposed as Falmouth, and Colin put the idea of hosting it to the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club.

Of course there was no suitable buoy to send the race round in the Atlantic, and I can almost



The Azores...named, it is said, for their blue appearance

imagine Colin and his associates, perhaps by candlelight, poring over a chart after a few drinks, with a pair of compasses set at about 1250 nautical miles, and discovering, just as Diogo de Silves had done 545 years previously, the islands in the blue. Bingo, the Azores!



The finish line for the first leg of the race was agreed as Ponta Delgada on the island of Sao Miguel, as was the idea of building in a stopover on the beautiful islands.

So Reasons 2, 3 and 4 become clear: the Corinthian appeal of the race, the fact that you end up where you started, and the opportunity for rest and recreation at the midway point. It all seems very obvious in retrospect, but then great ideas often are.

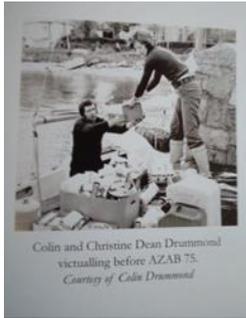
Colin has now pulled out some bundles of documents and opened some photographs on his tablet.

The date is 1975, the inaugural AZAB.

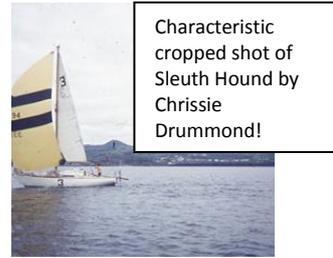


The first item that catches my eye is the official programme, priced at a massive 10p, (but that was when 10p could buy you a meal for two with change to spare). It has a charm of its own, hand type-set no doubt, with an air of quaintness and authenticity that is often lost these days in a world of instant identikit computer graphics.

It was truly a different age in other ways: there was no GPS of course and competitors had to find their way by sextant and chronometer. No trackers, so loved ones were left in the dark. Colin had no VHF radio. As he says it was a case of “Bye darling, I’ll ring you when I get there!”



In the pictures on the tablet Colin himself has black hair and a serious set of Burt Reynolds sideboards. I watch him as he goes through the gallery reeling off names of boats and local characters. The pictures have their own special character: some are cropped or cut off in a rather strange but consistent manner - apparently the somewhat *avant garde* trademark of Chrissie, his wife, who never quite mastered the view-finder.



Some of the pictures show the clear passage of time in terms of style of boat and style of hair. Others reveal the colonial harbour front of Ponta Delgada (the destination port) now much changed though still with obvious charm. At the time of the first AZAB there was no marina, no local yachts, ergo no chandler, sailmaker or repair place. One picture reveals Clare Francis holding a trophy - a very tempting looking bottle of champagne.



I was taken, however, by one particular shot of a distinctively characterful bearded face that exactly fitted my image of what men in the Azores should look like, somewhere between Oliver Reed, Frank Zappa and Sir Francis Drake, with a touch of a young Anthony Quinn thrown in for luck.



This face I learnt belonged to Octavio da Souza, a local character in Ponta Delgada 1975, and a welcoming figure and friend to countless AZABers over the years. Opposite him is a young boy with long dark hair, his son Marco. Sadly I learn that Octavio is no more, but that Marco is now Senhor Fixit in the port having started

a boat repair and maintenance business in 1981, that still provides a personal service for the sailors who return home to the Azores every four years, like swallows across the ocean.



Marco is not alone in his hospitality. It is clear that the whole island - local shops, taxi drivers, bus tour operators, boat owners, fishermen - provide a heartfelt welcome, and often free services, and the whole fleet is similarly afforded memorable hospitality by the Clube Naval of Ponta Delgada, and the local admiral who regularly rolls out a naval ship for the occasion.

So reason 5 presents itself: Hands across the water.

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Back in the Royal Cornwall, Colin and I contemplate another drink as we go over the past; but the present is already upon



us... people are coming in and out of the club and saying hi to Colin and patting him on the back. It is under a month until the departure of the 2019 AZAB and the atmosphere of anticipation is picking up. There is a hive of activity behind the scenes at the club to make sure the race and all the shore-side social programme in Falmouth go off smoothly and enjoyably.

There are close to 50 boats entered this year from over 12 nations. Some are seasoned AZABers and others new to the game. The youngest competitor is 15. One entrant has recently completed the ultimate single-handed challenge, the 2018 Golden Globe, taking the runner up slot. Fathers and sons, fathers and daughters. Husbands and wives. Oldies and youngsters. The whole world is here and they're lining up to race.

And what's abidingly evident is that while the boats and the technology have moved on since the pioneering early days I've just been learning about, the spirit of the AZAB, that spirit I had come to try to identify, palpably endures.

"Do you think you've got enough to go on?" says Colin to me as we pay our bill to leave.

"Try and stop me," say I.

Hugh Kellett May 2019

Further insights into this great race can be found in Andrew Pool's witty and erudite book ***The History of the Royal Cornwall Yacht Club*** - a must read for all members!

The AZAB 2019 is sponsored by MailASail Satellite Communications