

Sailing from Croatia to the Caribbean

By Rob McLean



Celebrating Mallorca arrival

WHAT DO THESE INDIVIDUALS HAVE IN COMMON:

- A medical doctor working in family medicine in Orillia, Ontario, Canada.
- One of the world's leading experts on growing strawberries from California, USA.
- A former North American railroad executive living in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.
- A retired nursing professor and small business CEO, currently based in Cobourg, Ontario, Canada.
- A former accountant and international management consultant, enjoying a second career teaching offshore sailing.

The thread that binds is a love of sailing and spirit of adventure, which led all five of us to Split, Croatia in October 2022.

We were joining the first leg of a unique sailing expedition that was in part delivery of a catamaran across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic to join the Barefoot Yacht Charters (www.barefootyachts.com) fleet in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, in part an opportunity to learn the knowledge and skills required for certification as an offshore sailor, and in part a chance to experience cruising in the Mediterranean. The expedition was organized by Barefoot Offshore Sailing School (<https://www.barefootoffshore.com>), sister company to Barefoot Yacht Charters, and I was the skipper and instructor for the trip.

The Mediterranean is arguably the cradle of sailing as we know it today. The Phoenicians and Greeks invented the sailing galley, featuring one or more banks of oars, combined with sails that could be used when the wind was abaft the beam. The Greeks and Romans further perfected this design, adapted for both trade and conflict. Through the centuries, a wide variety of rigs emerged deploying various types of lug sails, sprit sails and lateens. The naval wars of the Napoleonic era involved ships that combined square sails with fore-and-aft staysails and boomed sails. Today, Alicante in the Med is the headquarters for one of the iconic around the world sailing events featuring ultra-modern sailing yachts capable of speeds greater than 25 knots.

The Mediterranean region has also been a hotbed of innovation in navigation. Arabic desert wanderers named most of the stars we use for celestial navigation. Mediterranean sailors ventured beyond the pillars of Hercules. Some explored down the coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, establishing trade routes to India and south-east Asia. Others went north to the shores of Great Britain. Others sailed west, making landfall in what we now know as the Bahamas. While the history of Polynesian navigation is equally impressive, the techniques we use in celestial navigation today have their roots in Mediterranean-based experimentation.

Our diverse crew bonded through the experience of provisioning a boat in a place where most of the food labels are in languages that none of us could read. We trusted the photos on the cans and boxes, combined with occasional references to ingredients we recognized. While there were a few surprises later, for the most part we enjoyed high quality food at a cost that was much less than equivalent supplies purchased in North America or Europe.



Overnight in Cagliari



Practicing maneuvers at Isola di Lipari



Planning Cagliari departure

SAILING FROM CROATIA TO THE CARIBBEAN

The catamaran we joined was BlueRay, a Bali 4.1, built in 2018 that had been in charter service in Croatia for a few years. We were impressed with the maintenance and housekeeping provided by the charter management company overseeing the transfer of the yacht to its new owners. BlueRay appeared to be in excellent shape. The engine bilges were immaculate, which for me is one of the litmus tests for boat maintenance. If the people servicing the engines care enough to make sure there is no oil residue remaining after an oil change, it is a great indication of the standard of care demonstrated overall.

We ended up leaving Split a few days late due to the complexities of a change of ownership from Croatia to the USA, combined with the associated documentation required for insurance, export, and reprogramming the VHF for a new MMSI. Much of this will be simpler in the future now that Croatia has joined the Schengen zone and has adopted the Euro, which happened on January 1, 2023. I took advantage of the delay to provide initial lessons on offshore safety and celestial navigation. I am certified as an Advanced and Offshore instructor by both ASA and Sail Canada, which provides an opportunity to support students interested in certification under both systems.

We left Split in calm conditions, motoring through parts of the spectacular archipelago that has enabled Croatia to become one of the top cruising grounds in the world, with over 3,000 charter boats operating in the region. In general, the Med seems to offer not enough wind, or too much wind. In our case, we experienced more of the former than the latter, and learned firsthand why so many of the early Mediterranean vessels had large banks of oars.

Everyone was excited to experience their initial night watches, keeping a lookout for other vessels. This was vital as the AIS equipment we planned to install was not available in Croatia. As skipper and instructor, I was on call 24/7 and slept in the salon to be available at a moment's notice. Everyone else was on watch for four hours at a time. With four people in the watch schedule that meant that the next watch was in 12 hours. That provided for lots of time for sleep, meals, lessons, and keeping company with whoever was on watch. It also meant that each watch was at a different time of day or night, providing the opportunity to experience sunsets, sunrises, and everything in between over the course of several days.





City view of Cagliari in Italy

SAILING FROM CROATIA TO THE CARIBBEAN

Our first stop was in Brindisi, Italy to top up fuel and water supplies and check into the Schengen zone. Brindisi is an industrial port with a huge breakwater, but with easy access to the fuel dock at the marina. As with many European ports, the Brindisi marina offers a concierge service that helps with customs formalities. As it happens, I had visited Brindisi as a hitch-hiking 19 year old, so it was interesting to dredge up the memories of my earlier visit in much different circumstances.

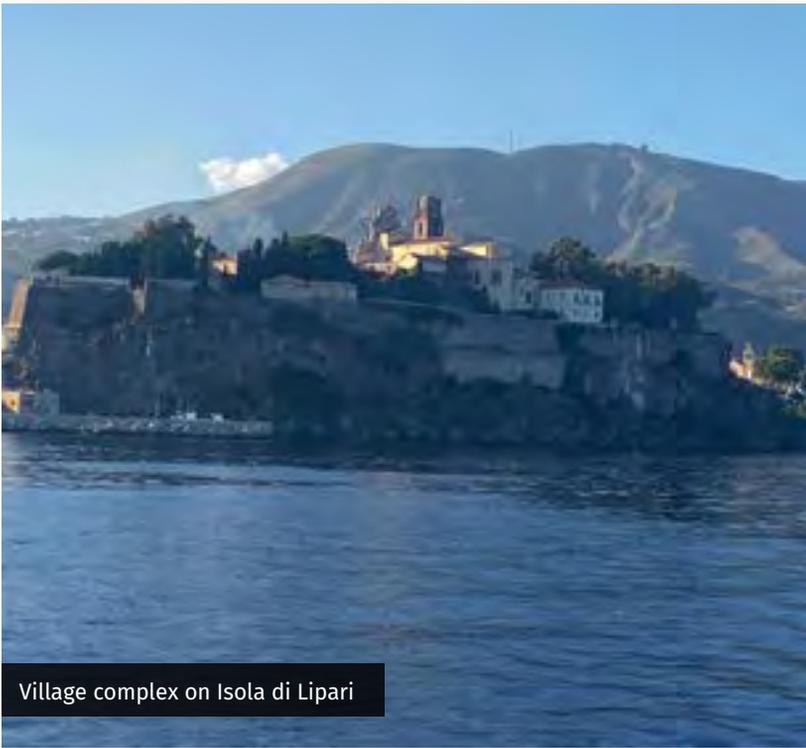
We then carried on around the heel, sole and toe of the Italian mainland, expecting to refuel again in Messina. However, the fuel dock we approached in Messina showed no sign of acknowledging our presence, so we carried on through the famous Strait of Messina. I had noticed on our digital charts the potential for refueling on Isola di Lipari, one of the seven Aeolian Islands located about 30 miles northwest of Messina. When we got there, we were glad we hadn't refueled in Messina. Lipari and its neighboring islands were gorgeous; rugged but with striking buildings, and an obviously active steam vent on the Isola di Volcano, immediately to the south of Lipari. Given the delay in our departure from Split, we couldn't stay long, but an overnight stay in the Aeolians will definitely be on the agenda for our next visit, scheduled for the fall of 2023.

We considered overnighing in Palermo on Sicily, but since we were already 25 miles north, we decided instead to head straight for Cagliari on the southern coast of Sardinia. The approach was breathtaking. Like many old Mediterranean cities, Cagliari is built on a fairly steep hillside. From a distance, one sees rows of stone and whitewashed buildings stretching from the sea to the sky. After locating our marina and securing the boat, we all beelined for the city, and spent the rest of the day exploring remnants of 5,000 years of history, spanning multiple civilizations. Topping up provisions with local produce and wine, we enjoyed dinner at a famous restaurant that has its facade on the street, but the dining area in a cave stretching into the hill behind. Making our way back to the boat in the dark, we enjoyed the liveliness of the streets. While our evening was over, for the locals it was just getting started. Sardinia is technically part of Italy, but Cagliari lived up to its reputation as a place that reflects Italian culture as well as unique aspects of its Sardinian heritage.

Leaving Cagliari we had a decent wind, which provided an opportunity for practicing some sailing evolutions while still in the lee of Sardinia, before heading out on the final 300 miles in this leg of



Cagliari Harbour view



Village complex on Isola di Lipari



Croatian provisions

the expedition. The last few days were spent just like the ones that came before: on watch or asleep, preparing and enjoying meals, practicing sailing maneuvers, receiving lessons and coaching, taking and reducing sun and star sights, and when ready, writing the exams necessary for certification under ASA or Sail Canada standards.

Our destination for this leg was Palma on the island of Mallorca. Mallorca is the largest of the Balearic Islands. While now part of Spain, these islands have been fought over and controlled by many different civilizations over the past few thousand years. Modern Palma is now recognized as a sailing mecca, hosting many thousands of charters, cruising, and racing boats among dozens of marinas. As with so many other places in the Mediterranean, a walk-through town offers the best of modern architecture, combined with ancient and medieval structures.

After a final few days of sight-seeking, two of the crew prepared to head home to the USA and Canada, while two remained for the second leg, joined by another Canadian. Stay tuned for our account of our second leg from Mallorca to Madeira, in a future issue of *Lats & Atts*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A sailor since the age of four, Rob McLean (<http://robmclean.ca/sailingresume.html>) enjoyed a career as an accountant and international management consultant before becoming a cruising instructor in 2015. He acquired his first cruising boat in the 1980s, and has accumulated more than 35,000 miles since then, 15,000 of these being offshore. Rob is the only person certified by both ASA and Sail Canada as an Offshore Instructor, and is both a Sail Canada Senior Instructor Evaluator and ASA Master Instructor, as well as the co-founder of the leading source of online sailing education in Canada, LearnToCruiseOnline.ca. He is the lead instructor for Barefoot Offshore Sailing School, the largest and most active sailing school in the Southern Caribbean, and sister company to Barefoot Yacht Charters in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Rob will be leading another sailing adventure from Croatia to St. Vincent in the fall of 2023.