In June 2013 Matt Scott, 27; Giulia Tyzack, 29; and Igor Gotlibovych, 27, all three recent PhD graduates bought Auriga, a 30’ Albin Ballad sailing yacht. In August 2014 Igor and Matt set sail reaching Rio de Janeiro, via Cape Verde, in January 2015. After a crew change, Giulia and Matt returned to Britain in July 2015 after spending March in the Caribbean.

Written by Matt Scott

We met each other through the Cambridge University Yacht Club which we were involved with throughout our time at university, volunteering on the committee, working as sailing instructors and maintaining the club yachts. Between us we went on a variety of cruising expeditions with the club throughout Europe, including the Canaries, Portugal, Norway and Scotland.

With full time education finally coming to an end in the summer of 2014 we undertook to buy a small yacht as cheaply as possible and refit her for ocean sailing, expanding our experiences beyond European waters. To this end in July 2013 we purchased Auriga, an Albin Ballad - hull number 171, built in 1973 – in Andalusia, Spain, for only £4000.

For three students to buy a yacht for only £4000 and outfit her for a year of long distance cruising while finishing PhDs was task enough but it has been everything that has followed that has been our test, and that has made the journey so rewarding.

As a short summary: we recommissioned Auriga as rapidly as possible, having to fly to Spain for each weekend of work, we had her put back in the water after only 3 weekends. Recruiting friends as crew the three of us split our time and our limited holiday allowance to bring our acquisition back to Ipswich over the course of the summer.

During the following winter, and for Igor and myself full time from March 2014, we carried out a complete overhaul of Auriga, focussing on what we believed necessary to make her seaworthy. All the work was carried out ourselves and during this project we have learnt as much about maintenance as sailing. We focussed on building a boat that was a simple as possible, favouring mechanical systems over electronic where possible.

Without going into too many details but to give an idea for the lengths we went to: we reinforced with GRP all internal bulkheads, which on Albin Ballads provide both structural stiffening and anchor the chainplates. We installed an inner forestay, with a new reinforced forward bulkhead required to take the load of the deck fitting. All the electronics (on Auriga consisting only of lights, VHF, GPS, log and depth sounder) and wiring were replaced, and a wind turbine installed. The galley and chart table were found to be rotten throughout, so were removed and rebuilt, and the gas system replaced. For the headsails hanks were preferred to the existing luff foil, and all the luffs were restitched and hanks installed. Every deck fitting was removed and resealed. Anyone who has worked on yachts knows the challenges that pile on top of even the smallest job.

All told we budgeted £4000 for maintenance, and in the end spent about £10,000. We believe we have refitted the boat for a cheaply as possible; every expenditure being necessary to make a boat we could have confidence in at sea. Looking back our initial budget was naïve, but the reality provided a useful lesson in project management!

Bear in mind, we didn't start this voyage of ours because we wanted a challenge. We were lured, like most sailors, by the call of the oceans, the sense of freedom, the promise of beautiful beaches and exotic countries, and, most powerfully by our shared joy of sailing. But this is an adventure, and we have certainly faced some challenges.
Since leaving Britain in August, a disappointing two months behind our proposed schedule, we were further held up when the engine suffered a catastrophic failure and had to be replaced in La Coruna, holding us up for another six weeks.

During a year at sea we have seen some heavy weather including: a night spent hove-to in gales off Rio de Janeiro, too fatigued to keep a good watch after the previous 36 hours of strong head winds. A small knockdown in an all too predictable acceleration zone while passing Fogo, Cape Verde's “Island of fire”, and then taking shelter from the wind behind the erupting volcano. Guessing wrongly at an ominous cloud in the doldrums, we kept the spinnaker up. We broached heavily in a 35 knot gust in the following squall and I watched helplessly as a favourite pair of shoes, minutes earlier drying in the sun, floated away.

Frequently the calms are more trying than the storms, placing wear on the yachts as she rolls helplessly in the swell. I will remember these times, however, not for the frustration but for the wildlife, including whales, dolphins and turtles we watched floating by as we sat stationary.

For the most part, however, we have had a relatively straightforward journey, with some interesting ocean passages, and were often rewarded for our hard work with some very favourable weather. For example, we covered 900 miles under spinnaker en route to Cape Verde in only 8 days. I have taken the opportunity on these long fair-weather passages to learn, and practice astro-navigation.

We have mostly had an extremely positive relationship with the people, locals or fellow travellers, we have met on our journey. I have personally enjoyed the challenge of victualling the yacht in remote ports, and getting ready for the Atlantic crossing in Cape Verde was a favourite. Shopping for the passage in small corner shops, and loading 300 litres of water onto the yacht at anchor was helped a long way by the fisherman I befriended, rescuing him in our dingy after his friends left him anchored in the bay, rowing away with his oars. As always, the more you get involved in the local culture the easier it is to get things done.

However, it is always important to consider security. Anchored in the bay of Guanabara (Rio de Janeiro), our boat was boarded and our tender stolen. As well as requiring a new tender (insurance was unavailable for a boat of Auriga's age leaving European waters) we elected to continue our stay in Rio in a marina, being concerned about future robberies.

Breakages have been mercifully few, for a 41 year-old yacht, and this has given us faith in our self-reliance and “fix-it” skills but no boat at sea is without her exciting flaws. On one passage a cockpit drain pipe detached from the through-hull fitting, and I woke for my watch and swung my legs out of my berth into a saloon ankle deep in water. The old sails, too expensive to replace, have a bad habit of tearing at inopportune moments.

Now back on dry land I am beginning to grapple with the task of looking back over our amazing year. We have completed a tour through two hemispheres, nine countries, thousands of miles, and countless dreams. In the days that followed our arrival home we received a heart-warming welcome; we hugged family, and partied with friends we left behind nearly a year ago. Almost every one of them asked what it was like to be back. I admit I struggled with mixed emotions to find the right answer. I believe that the feeling finality has not yet hit. I can't be sure whether that is because being back has been quite exciting in its own right, or because somehow 11 months cramped on a 30-ft boat hasn't dampened our spirit for voyaging far and wide, and we are planning the next trip already.