

A CHANGE OF COURSE

THE MISSING CENTIMETRE

by Leon Schulz



Introduced by
Tom Cunliffe

How a tiny alteration of course can change your life forever! Leon Schulz and his family were planning a short hop along the coast of Portugal when, on a whim, they decided to go to Madeira instead – and so began a great new adventure



I first met Leon Schulz at a book signing in London. I was offering textbooks, but Schulz had a dream to sell. Thousands of coastal sailors nurse a deep-set ambition that one day they will cut loose and go cruising – for a year at least. Succeeding in this aim is not unusual. Some even write books about their sabbatical, but few, if any, produce work so calculated to inspire others as Schulz.

The Missing Centimetre – beautifully produced and still available from www.reginasailing.com – tells of how he, his wife, Karolina, and his two young children did what so many others have done. With a book, however, it's not what you do, but how you tell it. The difference lies in Schulz's ability to communicate the driving force behind what must always be a bold decision, then to use modern media to bring it to us all.

In this delightful extract, he talks about the phenomenon of

'dock rot' and considers the mindset that leads to ripping up the job contract, ditching security and taking a chance in the fast lane.

What follows is about the ramifications of a small change in course. The Schulz family's course was altered long-term by their choice to go sailing for a year. So impressed was Schulz by the effect on his own life that he has given up his career as an engineer and now teaches sailing on an HR46.

I met this tall, well-organised Swede again in Scotland last summer with a crew of happy Scandinavian students. When he isn't teaching, he helps others restore neglected high-quality yachts so they can fulfil their own dreams without breaking every bank in the western world.

If this passage inspires you, punch *The Missing Centimetre* into Google and watch the movie on Youtube. You won't be disappointed. (See panel right for details of a new edition of the book.)



The Missing Centimetre is available from www.reginasailing.com

NEW EDITION
Delius Klasing Verlag, autumn 2015, entitled *Sabbatical at Sea*.
sales@antique-acc.com

“It started with Karolina thinking aloud. ‘What would happen if we steered a bit more to the west?’ She pointed vaguely at the horizon beyond the starboard guardrails. ‘That’s the way to Madeira, isn’t it?’

We were on a 25-mile leg from Cascais heading south along the Portuguese coast. It was 13 September and a fine, clear day with just the right amount of wind from just the right direction. Our plan had been to find a change of scene, having been in Cascais for a fortnight. After such a long time in a marina, *Regina*'s movements at sea felt unusual. It is a shame how quickly you lose your sea legs.

But there was a fantastic feeling of freedom as, once again, we hoisted the sails and felt the water rushing by. Cascais, which is close to Lisbon and amply supplied with restaurants and things to do and see, is a perfectly pleasant place to spend time. But we had still begun to feel a slight sensation of ‘harbour rot’.

Harbour rot is not uncommon among cruisers who have tied up for a length of time. One gets used to harbour life, forgets about the wonderful movements of voyaging, gets lazy and slow to the extent that leaving port becomes constantly postponed.

Fear is a little bit of it, too. We have met sailors who have stayed in the same port for years. The infection is particularly common in the Canaries. The Atlantic lies next. Sailors badly afflicted by harbour rot say they will leave later; but some never do.

Harbour rot is not the same as feeling settled, unhurried and without the need to move on for its own sake. Sailors who stay because they have found their dream destination are happy people. Sailors who have caught harbour rot do actually want to continue, but don't dare to let go. Stuck in planning and preparation, some even get the disease in their own home port and never go anywhere.

Luckily, our touch of harbour rot in Cascais was very minor. But to avoid its growing inside us, we planned to sail just a few hours to a nice anchorage a little way south. It was wonderful to be out in the fresh air under a blue sky accompanied by the northerly winds that are typical of this part of Portugal in summer. Conditions could not have been better.

‘Why don't we do it?’ Karolina asked again. ‘Do what?’ I replied, still daydreaming. ‘Alter course.’

‘Karolina, please, we planned to sail for four hours, and now you're talking about sailing for four days and nights instead.’

‘Why not?’ said Karolina. ‘The conditions are great, the weather forecast for the next five days is ideal. We've topped up with food and water. Why don't we sail to Madeira?’

I saw she had a point. If you know that a leg of four or five days lies ahead, nerves begin to build. At least, they do for me. By altering course right now and heading straight for Madeira, we could avoid that pre-casting-off anxiety. And after all, Madeira is part of Portugal. It's really just another island off the coast, isn't it? We had told our insurance company we might be heading offshore and, though I tried, I could think of no reason why we couldn't go

to Madeira. I got the satphone working and sent off a couple of emails outlining our plans. Then, as Karolina had suggested, we changed course to 225°. What a feeling!

I had been dreaming for years about leaving continental Europe, but never really believed I would do it. I had read the pilot books; imagined how it would feel to set out into the big ocean. And now, we'd done it simply by adjusting the autopilot. It was so easy.

In life, a small alteration in course can sometimes lead to big changes. We didn't even fully understand how we had got into this situation. We hadn't thought about it for very long. And now we were doing it and it was going to make a big difference. It is a lesson I now try to apply to the whole of my life. Chances have to be grabbed. Be it the offer of a new job, a new friendship, a new experience, a voyage, or the chance to take a sabbatical sailing year, think hard before you let such chances go by.

Darkness fell, but it was warm and we continued to make good progress towards Madeira. I had read about such nights hundreds of times, sitting at home in an armchair. And now here I was with the stars above, wearing just a T-shirt and shorts, reaching in a northerly Force 5, sailing at seven knots, heading for a tiny island out in the Atlantic. Sometimes dreams and reality are closer than you think.

As I sat in the cockpit watching the horizon and checking the instruments, I thought about my old self, sitting in my office in front of a computer screen. I remembered thinking how important all those tasks were. All the while, outside the office window, rain fell and cold winds blew. I thought about all the people still stuck in their offices when they would rather be cruising in the warm Portuguese Trades. Maybe you are among them?

Another thought struck me. Had I been disloyal by fleeing from that cage while my colleagues remained, still locked in? It was a depressing thought. But I don't think it is a charge that sticks. Karolina and I had worked hard for years and paid plenty of tax. We were paying for the trip ourselves and

had a tight budget to stick to. Still, it felt like wealth. There had been enough members of our family and close friends who had been struck by cancer, some leaving this Earth much too early. When you've lived through such experiences, you realise the importance of living for the day.

Bang! My thoughts were rudely interrupted. Something had hit the boat. What was it? The night was dark and I couldn't see much. The sound did not come from the hull; it was more like something had hit the coachroof. I went below to fetch a flashlight. I was quickly up again and shone the torch up the deck. What I saw made me smile: our first flying-fish on deck. A true bluewater sign. The poor thing was fighting for its life.



▲ Above: Jonathan and Jessica occupy themselves in the cosy cockpit



▲ Above: Land ahoy! The start of another adventure as *Regina* makes landfall. ◀ Left: Jonathan takes a sunsight



The first flying-fish is for the captain, I've heard, to be fried in butter for breakfast. This one was different. The fish was still alive and so was I. We stared at each other. Life and death are so close sometimes, and I had the life of this first flying-fish in my hands. I gave him a second chance and threw him back into the Atlantic.

I leaned back in *Regina*'s cosy cockpit. I was sleepy, notwithstanding all my philosophising, or perhaps that was what had made me drowsy. The radar confirmed my look-out: no traffic within 12 miles, as we sailed on towards the half moon.

The following morning greeted us with a beautiful bright sun, blue sky and blue sea. I had never seen such a blue. It was a deep, saturated blue. Now I knew why they called it 'bluewater' sailing.

During the second night we passed south of the latitude of Gibraltar, another thought that gave me a thrill. But still, our passage felt more like a sail out to a relatively nearby island rather than a long sea passage. Were we becoming blasé? Where was the anxiety we had felt in the North Sea, let alone while crossing Biscay? This leg would be as long as Biscay at around 500 miles, but it felt so different, so much less dramatic.

The reasons, I think, were various. The weather made a huge difference. The sea, the swell, the wind, the movement of the boat all felt so much more comfortable when the sun was shining and the wind was blowing gently from astern. Our old worries about running into weather fronts and low pressure systems, hoping they would speed up or slow down, was something we definitely didn't miss. Following the weather forecast had become a pleasure.

As well as better weather, we now had less traffic to worry about. Gone were all the twisting, turning, unpredictable fishing vessels. When a cargo vessel showed up, we almost welcomed the break from endless sea. With steady winds, sail changes were needed less often. In fact, we often went hours without having much to do. We could just enjoy the sea and the sky and the speed with which *Regina* was flying over the waves.

Taking turns sleeping, at night and during the day, the time passed quickly. Jessica and Karolina felt sick on the first and second days, but were better on the third. Jessica wrote emails to

friends while Jonathan read about planets and stars, fascinated by the fantastic night sky at sea.

On the third day, the wind dropped to the point where we either had to start the engine or dig out the light-wind gennaker in its long, tubular bag. The children had named the sail 'Nessie' after the similarly shaped monster in Loch Ness. I wasn't convinced we should bother. We'd only about six hours to go. It felt more like time for the fenders. We had to remind ourselves that six hours was more than a usual day's sailing back home. If we had been lucky enough to sail with the gennaker for such a long period of time back there, we would have thought it a great day.

So, out came Nessie in her long bag, and we enjoyed a wonderful afternoon ghosting along at six to seven knots. The sea was flat. Was this the mighty Atlantic? What a way to arrive in Madeira!

Jonathan saw it first. 'Land ahoy!' he shouted, excitedly pointing towards the horizon. It is hard to describe how I felt. Out of the sea, in the middle of nowhere, somewhere in the Atlantic, the tips of several high volcanic mountains peeked out of the sea. Even with the GPS it still felt like a miracle to find such a small island on such a huge ocean.

▼ Below: time to relax and enjoy life at anchor



◀ Left: *Regina*, the Schulz family's Hallberg-Rassy