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Passing the Baton on the Bay of Biscay

A cruiser becomes a “real” sailor as he crosses this infamous stretch of sea. BY LEON SCHULZ

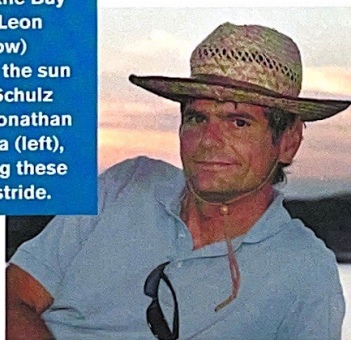
I WAS CLIMBING UP THE companionway of *Regina*, our Hallberg-Rassy 40, when I caught a glimpse of a huge Atlantic wave rolling toward us from astern. We were doing nearly 10 knots. Our stern rose; the spray was rushing below us, and *Regina* was flying over it.

I hadn't been able to catch much sleep. To cross the notorious Bay of Biscay for the first time was just too much. This wasn't only because I couldn't lie still in my bunk, since the boat was rolling heavily. The constant sound of giggling and laughter made me wonder what was so funny up in the cockpit. My wife, Karolina, and our two children, Jessica, 11, and Jonathan, 9, seemed to be having a great time up there.

By now we all had good



Karolina Schulz (right, above) steers *Regina* through rolling waves on the Bay of Biscay. Leon (right, below) relaxes as the sun sets. The Schulz children, Jonathan and Jessica (left), take sailing these waters in stride.



before the predicted gale winds.

GRIB weather files indicated that it should blow steadily from the northwest at 20 to 25 knots. Toward the morning, it should decrease to about 15 knots, so we decided to keep the main and genoa as they were and to continue the joyride over the Atlantic waves.

The Bay of Biscay had occupied our minds, producing a mixture of threat and thrill. Our picture of Biscay was heavily influenced by numerous stories about its danger and storms, particularly in autumn and winter. Its reputation made my wife and I both feel a bit frightened, despite the fact that it was late July.

We'd had butterflies in our stomachs two other times on this trip. The first time had been when we were casting off from our hometown of Ystad, Sweden. The second time had been just as we were to cross the North Sea. The Biscay stretch would be our longest leg to date. Not many of the sailors we knew had crossed it.

sea legs, which was a wonderful relief. In addition to growing accustomed to the motion, each of us was beginning to feel more secure on the boat. We've found that fear provokes seasickness.

The waves had increased in size while I was lying in my bunk trying to find some rest before my night watch. Maybe we should take in some of the main, especially now, since it was getting dark. On the other hand, we needed the speed to get to A Coruña, Spain,

Karolina and I had studied carefully all the weather forecasts for the areas we'd cross on our way from Kinsale, Ireland, to A Coruña. The more than 500 nautical miles would take some four days and nights to cover. It was a grand and scary thought.

Jessica and Karolina went to sleep shortly after dinner. At least Jessica did. I don't think Karolina found too much sleep in her excitement.

Jonathan and I were now alone on watch. It had become totally dark. This was an even stranger feeling, rushing along at eight and a half to nine knots and not being able to see the waves under us or around us, though we could feel them and hear them.

Suddenly, there was a big bang, and a huge wave from the side slammed against the hull, continued over the deck, and crashed into the windscreen. What force water can have!

"Did you get wet?" I heard Karolina's voice from below, obviously still not asleep.

"No, no, I'm fine," I answered. A swirling noise followed from the water on deck as it found its way into the scuppers



The 500 nautical miles from Kinsale, Ireland, to A Coruña, Spain, was the longest stretch the Schulz family had ever done.

and back to where it belonged.

There was no moon, so the stars really had a chance to shine. There

weren't many vessels around, and the few we did spot on the radar were trawlers. These boats can drive you nuts because their skippers often don't follow any rules other than to follow the fish they see on their sonars.

"Jonathan," I asked, "don't you want to go to sleep?"

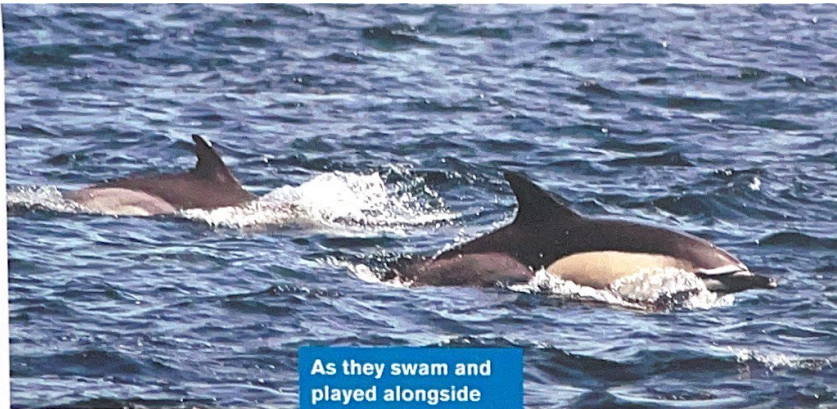
"No," he said. "I'm looking at all the countless stars above. Daddy, all these stars, are they also turning around other stars, just as we travel around the sun?"

Sharing the world with my 9-year-old son on an oceangoing boat was beyond my imagination. We talked about the stars we saw and the vessels we couldn't see on the radar. We discussed radar range and frequencies and why VHF can't be heard behind high islands. At midnight, Jonathan turned in, sleeping in the saloon with his life jacket on, ready for his next watch.

The night belonged to me now. These first hours after midnight were still quite chilly. *Regina* was pushing on quickly, and I could hear and feel each wave passing under us. I was a happy man.

The idea of the courage it took to change our lives by 180 degrees was once again going through my mind. Funny, I thought, 180 degrees is exactly the current compass heading, so for sure we'd done this 180-degree turn literally. This was the most exciting thing I'd ever done in my life. And the best thing was that I was sharing it with my wife and our children.

On the morning of the second day at sea, the winds had eased, just as predict-



As they swam and played alongside the boat, lively dolphins entertained the crew of *Regina*.

ed. Once more, I climbed down the companionway, but this time I was able to

catch some short hours of sleep. The waves had decreased in power and size, and we were only making six to seven knots.

Suddenly, I heard water breaking close by. I turned my head, and I could see dolphins approaching from all angles. We all went on the foredeck to watch them play and jump. One dolphin even breathed right on Jonathan as he leaned over the side of the boat, getting him wet. "I got a kiss!" he shouted. We could almost touch their bodies while they all fought for the prime position of riding our bow wave. Watching dolphins is the best reward for little sleep in a rolling home.

On our third day at sea, I suddenly felt

less tired and more relaxed, having more energy to concentrate on enjoying the sailing itself.

We were all gathered in the cockpit for dinner when I noticed a sailboat approaching from the southwest. We hadn't seen much traffic at all, and no other sailboats for a long time. Then the VHF called for attention: "Sailing vessel, this is *Stella Maris*, over."

I grabbed the microphone and pressed the transmit button. "*Stella Maris*, this is Swedish sailing yacht *Regina*."

When sailing in our home waters, we'd never call up another boat just to say hello. But here, in the middle of Biscay, it was different. I felt transformed. I now spoke with *Stella Maris* with a feeling of affiliation. We eagerly wanted to

know who these sailors were, where they came from, where they were headed, and whether they'd encountered any problems along the way. I became aware that the voice from *Stella Maris* addressed me as if I were a bluewater sailor and no longer the dreamer I'd been before, walking the docksides of Ystad with a wistful smile. I suddenly felt associated with my idols from countless sailing books.

We learned that *Stella Maris* was heading home to Kiel, Germany, after a five-year circumnavigation. They took it for granted that we, too, were out on a grand tour. They asked about our plans, and they spoke about Tahiti, Bora-Bora, and Rarotonga as if they were islands of an archipelago close by.

We felt that we'd been passed the baton, in the middle of Biscay, on our way out into unknown adventures.

Deep inside me, I felt that I was now one of them. We'd become true bluewater sailors—right here, on the Bay of Biscay.

Leon and Karolina Schulz ran a marine-marketing company in Sweden for 14 years. In 2005, they sold their house and company to go cruising with their children for a year. They currently live in Vienna, Austria.