

A year in the life of *Seafever of Cuan*: France to Argentina

Trevor Lusty



When the Commodore kindly mentions in his quarterly missive how much he is looking forward to reading the forthcoming log of your recent cruise, that comfortable feeling of resting on your laurels quietly gives way to the realisation that you have just been given homework!

In October 2007 I was underway from Saint Quay Portrieux, Northern Brittany to Port Des Minimes Marina, La Rochelle, aboard my recently acquired Amel Super Maramu. After over-wintering in France, by June 2008 the skipper, first mate and ship's dog were ready.

The gods served us well, with light to moderate northeast winds, which allowed us to depart La Rochelle, cross Biscay, and over the next three weeks enjoy cruising past the Picos Europas mountain range, and visit many of the fishing ports along the Atlantic coast of Spain; Ribadesella, Gijon, Cuderillo, providing overnight accommodation and the new Marina at Ribadeo giving respite for a few days while the winds had freshened from the northeast producing a nasty rolling swell with some small breaking waves on top, rounded off with very poor visibility.

After leaving Ribadeo perhaps a little sooner than was wise, the still unsettled sea prompted an unplanned stop in Viveiro, in a well-sheltered marina adjacent to the town centre.

The fishing town of Cedeira provided a safe anchorage the following evening, before heading on to La Coruna, where we arrived on the last day of June,



Camamu, Brazil.

On the Rio Grande, Brazil. 500 miles from La Rochelle and a little more comfortable with our new boat, in time to see the European Cup Soccer cup final, which was won by Spain. The party and fireworks around La Coruna didn't stop for the next three days. A gentle northeast force 3 and 1200 rpm from the Yanmar, saw us depart La Coruna in the early morning, leaving the Tower of Hercules to stern, and eventually dropping anchor ten miles behind Cape Finisterre in a sheltered bay by 19.30 on 1st July.

Over the next week, the wind swung to the southwest, bringing a mixture of weather, restricting progress, but allowing us to motor on to Portasin, where the marina facilities were excellent, only to be bettered by the chic new marina in Sanxenxo further along the coast. The downside of Sanxenxo being the disco music, which played every night until 05.30 in the morning.

The next planned stop at the provincial town of Villa Garcia with its extensive market suddenly seemed more urgent and attractive!

On arrival at Villa Garcia we tied up adjacent to

Alan Rountree (ICC), who regaled us with his various experiences on sailing to, and around, the Azores, perhaps knowingly planting some travel seeds that were to germinate in the weeks ahead.

Two days later we departed Villa Garcia, the wind having all but vanished, the Yanmar providing gentle and quiet motoring through the Rias, as we gradually made progress towards Bayona.

Just west of Villa Garcia we spotted an idyllic anchorage, on the inside of dozens of mussel beds, in a bay on the small island of Islote Jidiro, where we had good holding in sand for the next two days.

Fifteen miles further south we arrived at Bayona, famous for the return of *Pinta* sent back from America to announce the discovery of the new world by Columbus, and more recently, the destination of many Irish summer cruises. The town offers many cafes, restaurants and good provisioning in the local shops and supermarkets. Each day started with a scenic walk along the coastal path around the old fort overlooking the town and the Atlantic, finishing with a quick swim, then breakfast taken in one of the many local cafes.

Our conversation with Alan Rountree (ICC) had now bloomed into our thinking that the Azores would give us a good idea as to whether we really could cope with a Trans-Atlantic crossing and, if we felt comfortable after trying for the Azores, then our thoughts were, that Brazil might offer some exciting and relatively unexplored cruising.

It was at this point, that we were introduced to the 'Rallye des Iles du Soleil'. The original concept for this event had been the brainchild of French sailor George Burrens, who in 1989 offered to lead fifteen other French boats to cruise in company across the Atlantic to the east coast of Brazil, exploring the major towns and cities then heading north, eventually entering the Amazon Delta and motoring along the river for one thousand kilometres, thus giving the participants the experience and confidence to sail on their own back to France, or continue further afield.

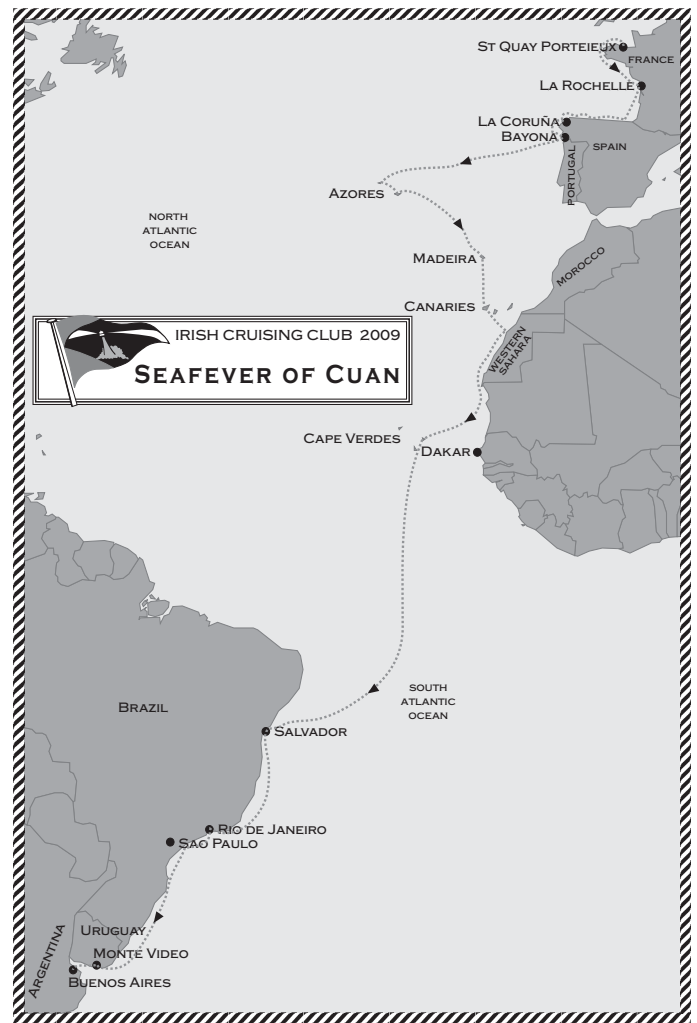
Today the 'Rallye' is owned and organised by the two Patricks, Messieurs Nagels and Hebel, who, with their extensive commercial background – which includes helping to organise the football world cup – bring a more professional structure and form to the event.

Another phone call, this time from Bayona to France, secured a place for *Sea Fever of Cuan* on the basis that, while the entry list was officially closed, the inclusion of the first Irish entry was too attractive to turn down. There were no further formalities or financial requests; we were taken at our word and would be included in the Rallye, just as long as we turned up in Madeira in October.

And so, on Saturday 2nd August, at midday after a week of preparation, we departed Bayona for Terceira in the Azores, and our adventure began for real.

For the first day, the high pressure system that we had waited for served us well, with a northeast 3 to 4 allowing us to make 171 miles in the first twenty-four hours. The pressure system then split in two, and we were left trying to lay due west in a northwest force 4 to 5. This reduced progress for the next two days to runs of 135 miles and 145 miles, with the wind then backing to southwest and eventually falling away, resulting in the Yanmar being required to complete the remainder of the trip, gliding along on a calm dark blue orb, arriving in Angro do Heroismo Marina on the island of Terceira at 02.00 hours, six and a half days and 874 miles later.

The pet lovers among you will be wondering, what about that poor dog? Well during his stay in Bayona, Oscar had taken on the persona of the George Clooney of the canine world, regularly posing for photographs on demand and generally



attracting much attention wherever he went. The question everyone wants answered is the bathroom problem. When you put enough into the tank it will eventually have to come out and sure enough, after three days at sea, Oscar adopted a tripod configuration at the base of the main mast and found instant relief. For more serious matters, the following day, he took up position at the pulpit rail eyeing us with derision until we disappeared below decks, and upon our return Oscar was back in his bed alongside the helm in the cockpit, business completed; that remained the procedure for the next year, whenever he was offshore for more than three days.

For the next week we enjoyed the stunning beauty of Terceira, seeking out and enjoying the company of genial English-speaking taxi drivers, who were both passionate and informative about their island. For the remainder of our time in the Azores we continued to use taxis for both transport and sources of local information and good restaurants.

Next stop was a 50-mile day-trip to Velas, on the island of Sao Jorge, where the recently appointed harbourmaster, Jose, insisted that he was going to make our 53-foot ketch fit into his rather tiny marina. A taxi trip to the eastern tip of Sao Jorge positioned us for a five-hour walk along the north coast, surrounded by acres of hydrangeas, where we were stunned by the unspoilt natural beauty of the island.

A further 20 miles west, and after a short sail from Sao Jorge, we arrived at the famous sailing town of Horta on the island of Faial, where we took up residence in the marina for a week, while we again enjoyed the island, swimming, painting the boat name on the harbour wall, becoming regulars in Peter's Bar and, for me the highlight, watching the bull running in the local streets.

The end of August, and time to start to head south again; Madeira and the trip to Brazil now becoming a reality. Three months and 1500 miles of sailing had now given us a belief in ourselves, in the boat, in Oscar, and a modest level of confidence that we could, and should, go further.

On passage between Horta and Ponta del Garda, São Miguel, we had our first experience with sperm whales. On a clear day you can see a mature sperm whale 'blow' when resurfacing from a distance of nine miles. When mummy whale wants to attract her calf's attention, she slaps her tail on the surface of the ocean, and every living thing in a five-mile circumference is left in no doubt that mummy is not happy. The marine authorities in the Azores are very helpful and informative, recommending that sailing vessels should use their engines when in the proximity of whales, and should not approach them directly, especially, when they have calves.

As many of our fellow members have now found out, Ponta del Gada is not typical of the Azores. The very essence of what brings yachtsmen to the Azores has been destroyed by the modernisation of the waterfront, and the new marina. Having been spoilt by the natural beauty of the outlying islands, we found it hard to settle in the capital. Another taxi tour confirmed the beauty of the interior of São Miguel, yet we were still keen to clear out, and set sail for Vila de Porto on the tiny southern-most island, Santa Maria.

The northern coast of this tiny island has an almost James Bond film-set quality to the topography, vibrant colours and hues of untended terraced vines contrasting with the greens and greys of the cliffs, as the now warm Atlantic blue ocean crashes in white foam along the shore.

Without our commitment to Madeira I doubt that we would have ever left the Azores. Common sense dictated that we should leave one month in hand in Madeira, as there was some major service work required to the boat, in view of the proposed voyage. Also, Madeira would be a last stop for family and friends to visit.

As we departed the shores of Santa Maria the ocean was teeming with large fish, yellow-fin tuna, blue marlin and sperm whales all providing us with entertainment and wonder. Murphy's Law has always dictated that as sure as you want to go east, then 'from so the wind shall blow'; thus, as ever, Mr Yanmar was required to deliver us the 500 miles to Madeira, which he did in three and a half days.

As we closed the shore of Madeira, we were approaching the southwest corner of the island at midnight. The wind was northeast force 2 due to veer south. Our destination was the Quinta de Lorde Marina, on the northeast side of the island. I decided to take the safe option and continue along the north shore of Madeira, effectively providing us with a calm lee shore during the night. Twenty-five miles away was an electrical storm tracking northeast, which I thought was of no consequence. The enemy of complacency never misses an opportunity, within minutes the storm veered, and we were now being driven in white rain onto what had become a weather shore. The wind, which never exceeded 35 knots, stripped the canvas off the cockpit, the genoa backed and we were hove-to and forereaching, unable to see the foot of the mainmast. Oscar hightailed it under my legs and once I collected my wits, I started to press all sorts of buttons and eventually tacked, more by good luck than grace. This drama continued for almost an hour until we finished up, somewhat closer to what was definitely a weather shore. We then resumed sailing, this time along the south coast in a gentle southwest force 3.

Daylight brought us safely into the well-run and very helpful Quinta do Lorde Marina, which, when all the development work is finished, must surely be a jewel for cruising sailors.

When you have multiple to-do lists, meetings to attend,

family to entertain, and a boat to prepare for a trans-Atlantic voyage, a month goes quickly by, and so, on Monday 18th October, we set sail from Madeira at 15.00 on the first leg of the 2008 'Rallye des Iles du Soleil' bound for Santa Cruz Tenerife. Gentle northeast to northwest winds allowed for an uneventful 350 mile passage to the Canaries, where we were hopeful that our new ship's computer which had melted in Madeira would have been repaired and delivered by DHL, to Tenerife.

We were confused when we arrived at Santa Cruz Marina at 06.00, as there were no other Rallye boats to be seen. At first we assumed we were in the wrong marina, then a phone call to the organisers revealed that we were the first boat to arrive. As the other boats arrived over the next two days we were amazed at the amount of damage to sails, standing and running rigging.

Four days was just enough to make preparations, collect the repaired computer and depart, as last boat. bound for Dakar in Africa. A northeast force 5 saw us lay west of south with a reefed main and poled genoa making nine knots.

The Rallye organisers had recommended a course between 40 and 60 miles from, and parallel to the West coast of Africa. However consulting an old British Admiralty pilot book, and Jimmy Cornell's world cruising guide, left us content to allow the wind to keep blowing us along with the genoa and balloonier until we were two hundred miles off shore. We were now well away from the shipping lanes and, more importantly, the thousands of pirogues (wooden canoes), that fish unmarked and unlit, up to thirty miles off the African coast.

A welcome security phone call from the organisers, to ensure that we were not running away or lost, confirmed our position and intended course,

818 miles and six days later we dropped anchor in the sylvan surroundings of Bernard Bay, Dakar, directly in front of the governor's residence, in delicious 36°C heat and warm water.

The advantage of being in an organised group is that all formalities just disappear, your ship's papers and passport are collected en-masse, and returned with the correct visas and stamps. Secondly, careful consideration has been given to personal and group security, and as we would later learn in Brazil, Rallye participants are well advised to pay strict attention.

The negative that became increasingly apparent, was the false sense of security that developed, as more crews felt there was safety in numbers, resulting in some very lax seamanship.

After almost two weeks at sea, Dakar was a maelstrom of noise, colour and smell that simply attacked your senses. The more gentle manners experienced with the inhabitants of the Azores and Madeira were replaced by overwhelming verbal onslaughts from the African street vendors. Personal space simply does not exist in Senegal; the slightest eye contact ensuring another retail encounter.

A one-week stay in Dakar was followed with a 60 mile passage south along the west coast of Africa, weaving in and out of thousands of fist-sized pieces of polystyrene acting as floats for lobster and crab pots.

Our objective was a visit to the Saloum river and the fishing town of Djifere. All boats were guided into the river, over shifting sand-bars by a local fisherman in a pirogue, where they were greeted by the sound of a thousand voices singing and chanting, as the women and children on the shore opened all kinds of shells and gutted fish which were then left in the sun to dry. The village had a single water standpipe, no electricity, or sanitation. The homes of the two thousand inhabitants were simple, low structures, of handmade clay bricks, without windows, or doors.

From Djifere we motored along the Saloum river for 15 miles to the small town Foundiougue which, with a hotel, a few



Itaparika, Brazil.

roadside shops, and one cafe, appeared to be the metropolis of the Saloum estuary.

Large prawns and fresh river fish were available from local fishermen for fifty euro-cents per kilo, and we were encouraged not to pay any more! Sunday morning saw an early start at 04.30 for a two-hour boat trip with a local fisherman, then another two hours by pony and cart across the savannah, including a stop for our driver to dig up some nuts to offer us for le petit déjeuner. Throughout this journey there was not a man-made structure in sight, until we arrived at a nameless village, where the pony drew up outside a large circular church, built from branches, mud and reeds. The priest dressed in garish green robes, conducted a service far removed from Sunday Mass, but presumably closer to voodoo! The theatrics paled against the voices of two hundred and fifty children singing in response to the church choir, which reduced many of us to tears.

From Foundiougue we were required to make our way back to Dakar, accompanied by pilot whales, basking sharks and shoals of flying fish, to allow all the boats to regroup and prepare for the three-day sail to the Cape Verdes archipelago.

As we were now starting to pick up the northeast trades, a gentle force 3 to 4 gave a very comfortable passage for the four hundred and sixty-three mile journey. We arrived and berthed in the new marina, all arrangements made by the Rallye organisers in Mindelo, for a two week stay in order to prepare for our Atlantic crossing.

During our time in the Cape Verdes I was asked to join a small flotilla of French boats that wanted to sail to, and overnight in, a 'safe anchorage' in a bay on the adjacent island of Santa Luzia. This anchorage turned out to be bombarded by

katabatic winds, and was the same bay in which a French sailor had been taken by a shark three years earlier. My French companions seemed to almost delight in overturning three dinghies in the surf. I headed straight back to Mindelo the next morning!

The Cape Verdes has long been on my list of places to visit – it is not somewhere I will need to return to! On reflection, I think that we enjoyed the Azores so much that all other Atlantic islands were doomed to come a poor second.

4th December 2008 at 15.30 saw our departure from Mindelo, course due south for the 1000 miles, bound for Salvador do Bahia, Brazil. Initially we had a fresh northeast force 5 for 170 miles, then the winds continued to lighten to northeast force 3 and stayed like that, until we found the Doldrums at N 05.49 W 25.01. The sail-plan was constant with genoa, main, staysail and mizzen. The engine was used on a random basis as the wind dictated, the thinking being it was better to burn diesel for propulsion at 3.5 litres per hour, rather than 2 litres per hour just for electrical charging and water-making.

On 12th December we paid our tributes to Neptune with champagne and Magnum chocolate ice-lollies, and in appreciation, he rewarded us with southeast winds, just as we were leaving the doldrums after three days and four hundred and fifty miles. Our course now altered to 225 true and the winds now force 4 allowed us to return to days of one hundred and seventy mile plus, with the record being 201.7 miles.

We had set our course two hundred miles above Salvador to allow the South Equatorial current to carry us into the Brazil Current, an old hand-drawn British Admiralty Pilot Atlas proving to know a lot more about currents than modern-day electronics.

Two days out of Brazil the wind lightened and veered northeast, which slowed progress slightly, yet we made our landfall, Fazenda Conceicao, on 17th December at 17.30. Our arrival in Salvador at 03.30 the next morning was greeted with some fireworks and a well-earned rum punch. Thirteen days, 2024 miles, 155 mile daily average since we had left Mindelo. One torn staysail and two bent shackles being the only damage.



Ferryman to Mass.

Christmas in Santiago de Iguape

Christmas was spent at the invitation of two French boats, at anchor at Santiago de Iguape at the head of the Paraguacu river. My chart plotter said we were 1100 metres up the side of a mountain but as ever, les Français were very relaxed!

As the end of January approached, with incipient departure for the Amazon delta, I was giving much thought to the many countries that we going to leave behind unexplored in South America. I approached Patrick Nagels one of the Rallye directors on this point and was warmly surprised at his encouragement for me to leave the Rallye for one year, sail south and rejoin in January 2010.

Therefore, on 20th January 2009, we cleared out of Salvador bound for Argentina, hoping to arrive there in May, and the beginning of winter in the Southern Hemisphere.

Brazil consists of fifty-two separate states combined under a Federal government. However from a sailing point of view, the arrival to, and departure from each state, is akin to a separate country, when it comes to formalities. There are at least three different authorities to report to, on entry and exit of each state, each one with its own interpretation of the rules.

Our passage south took us initially to the remote market town of Camamu, where fresh meat was hacked directly off the carcass and wrapped in palm leaves, the price being guessed at rather than calculated on a scale. Fresh fruit and vegetables are readily available, with the exception of apples and oranges, as the climate is too warm to grow them. Prices are from a bygone era, with typically, twenty limes costing euro-cents.

Further south the modern tourist towns of Morro Sao Paulo and Buzios, with designer shopping and cruise ships, provided a sharp contrast, with the consumerism and retailing that we now take for granted.

The provincial and busy town of Ilheus seemed a logical stop to refuel. We should have known better! First finding a fuel supplier, secondly arranging delivery and finally finding a bank that could provide cash to pay the supplier, took two days. We were to learn later that the fuel generally is so contaminated that diesel filters last a fraction of the manufacturer's recommended service period and dramatically shortens the life and quality of engine oil. Petrol contains twenty per cent ethanol, and should you leave your outboard unattended for more than forty-eight hours, then you will have an evaporated sugary mess in your carburettor and the engine will not start.

Brazil must be one of the last uncut gems in world cruising, but it comes at a price. Officialdom and the general utilities, that we so readily take for granted, all require lots and lots of patience. However you will be rewarded with thousands of miles of unspoilt beaches, empty anchorages and breathtaking scenery.

The wind and current served to propel us gently back to tranquillity, along a coast of white sand dunes and pine trees, to the wonderful unspoilt Albrohus Islands, where swimming with the lemon-tipped sharks, brightly-coloured fish and watching booby birds, with the compulsory guides, was a daily feature.

Without realising the time or distance, we glided into Rio de Janeiro, 650 miles from Salvador, to the Clube Naval in Charitas across the bay from Rio, to experience the true warmth and hospitality of Brazil.

Two weeks in Rio was ample time to see the city and its environs and enjoy the carnival. Equally challenging and tiring, was the jousting with the various immigration officials, who have little interest in visiting sailors, as all fees and taxes now have to be paid directly into a bank before the immigration people can stamp your papers, such are the levels of corruption.

As you travel further south in Brazil, the European influence becomes more apparent. The magnificent Ilha Grande, or Bay



Cape Verdes.

of Islands, is moderately dotted with very upmarket and secluded hotels, with private pontoons and anchorages. There are hundreds of idyllic anchorages in the many bays, where you are surrounded by countryside similar to south west Ireland, but with more trees and warmth.

The population becomes increasingly white and more European in extraction, together with over five hundred thousand Japanese. Interestingly, a stolen Brazilian passport is the most desirable on the black market as there is such a diverse cultural and racial mix.

A stop over at Angra dos Reis, the former hometown of racing driver Ayrton Senna, begins to prepare you for the extreme wealth that emerges as you approach Sao Paulo the capital of Brazil. The opulence of the motor vessels and marinas is on a grand scale. Sadly the camaraderie of the sea is not extended by these private organisations, and unless you are a member of a Brazilian Cruising Association you are definitely not welcome and generally will be turned away.

To return to our progress; in early April the wind had veered and stayed much in the southeast for the first two weeks. I was becoming increasingly nervous of the fabled southwest Pamperos winds that begin in autumn, coming off the land at sixty knots for one to two hours, then rapidly veering east southeast, driving the unwary onto a weather shore.

The second part of this wind is called the Carpentaria as carpenters were required to repair the resultant damage to vessels. As the wind increased to southwest force 7, I sought and was granted refuge in the commercial port of Rio Grande. The port control speaking excellent English helped me to navigate *Seafever* along the busy 14-mile estuary at midnight.

Rio Grande held another fear, the Recita Federal. This organisation is the Brazilian equivalent of Customs and Excise.

On trying to formally exit Brazil to continue on to Uruguay, these gentlemen presented the scenario to me, that my real intent had been to illegally import an expensive sailing boat into Brazil, without paying the necessary import duty, i.e. 100% of the value of the boat. Appreciating that as I was now leaving and I wouldn't be 'importing' the boat on this occasion however, a fine of fifteen thousand US dollars for incorrect paperwork, which their colleagues had issued, and frequently stamped, would be acceptable!

Three days of meetings in five different locations, now accompanied by an interpreter and supported by over thirty entry and exit stamps along the various states of Brazil, saw the Recita Federal eventually stamp my, and critically the boat's, papers and I was allowed to leave – without paying!

The current along the southern Brazilian coast towards Uruguay, is greatly affected by the wind, so a fresh north-easterly force 5 kept a steady boat speed of eight knots. The shipping traffic between Uruguay and Brazil demands a sharp lookout, especially at night, with many vessels displaying only the lights that they happened to have working.

Now sailing alone, thirty-six hours later, I tied up in the town of Piriapolis in Uruguay at the end of the river Plate.

The immigration authorities in Uruguay having little interest in crew or boat, decided it would be easier if I would take a bus to the local airport and have my passport stamped there. The immigration officials at the airport instructed me to join a line of passengers for a departing flight, resulting in my entry to the duty free lounge. It took fifteen minutes to convince the ground crew that I really didn't want to board a plane, as I had a taxi waiting outside and I simply wanted to go back to my boat!

The following day the *Carpenteria* arrived in Piriapolis with the force and sound of a locomotive, and for the next two days

continued to blow at thirty-five knots, resulting in extra shore lines and my being unable to leave the boat, for fear that a line should fail.

The river Plate is chocolate brown in colour, and is on average four metres deep, the main buoyed shipping channel is continually dredged, very busy, and sailing vessels are not particularly welcome.

Fortunately I had been joined in Uruguay by Dr Omar Schanez, a well-known and keen sailor and diving instructor from Buenos Aires (www.wetdoc.ar). Complete with current waypoints of the two hundred plus wrecks that litter the Plate, Omar piloted *Seafever* parallel to the channel, and avoided the more recent unmarked local hazards.

A brief stop for lunch at Colonia del Sacramento harbour, in the old walled town of Colonias in Uruguay, followed by a fetch in the afternoon across the river to Buenos Aires saw *Seafever* arrive at last, on schedule, in Argentina.

The boat was granted an eight-month visa, with the option to extend a further eight months. There are numerous marinas in the northern part of Buenos Aires, all accessed by river, many set in well-protected suburban areas. However access is very difficult, and dependent on a strong southeasterly wind to raise the water level a further two metres, to allow vessels to transit on from Buenos Aires. Fortunately Omar had arranged a hammerhead berth for the next six months, in the central and exclusive Puerto Madero Marina, in the heart of Buenos Aires.

Ten days and nights of sightseeing in one of the most wonderful cities in the world, and several failed attempts at tango dancing, concluded exactly one year of life aboard *Seafever of Cuan*, nine thousand miles, hundreds of human encounters, ten different countries and the experience of a lifetime.