

AZAB



*This 2400 mile ocean regatta takes place every four years and gives single and double-handed yachts the chance to race to the beautiful island of São Miguel in the Azores and back to Falmouth. This year, three Contessa 32s took part; **Katisha**, sailed by James Moore and Phil Pryor, **Spirit of Taranto**, sailed by Stuart Crass and Kris Burnett and **Saffier**, sailed by Govert Ramselaar.*

JAMES AND PHIL have raced *Katisha* from her homeport Plymouth in many offshore races including a couple of Fastnets and several Yachting Monthly Triangles. *Katisha* and her team are also well practised at double-handed offshore racing and preparation prior to the start largely consisted of James trying to make sense of the satellite phone and Wifi system while Phil perused the local discount store for baking utensils (you'll read why later).

Stuart and Kris have been dreaming about the AZAB for years but have never before had the right boat or the time available to do it. Stuart solved the boat problem by buying *Spirit of Taranto*, an ex Fleet Air Arm Contessa 32. Plenty of upgrades were required to get the boat ready for a long distance event and although many of the jobs were done during the winter of 2018, some of the minor items were still

Above: the stunning landscape of São Miguel, Azores.

James Moore and
Phil Pryor putting
Katisha through
her paces.



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in progress as Stuart sailed from his homeport of Amble in Northumberland to Falmouth for the start. Govert was also entering the AZAB as his first long distance offshore race meaning various upgrades and modifications were done on *Saffier*. Mostly these were completed at his homeport Medemblik in the Netherlands but he too was working hard in Falmouth to be ready on time.

Yachts have to meet OSR category 1 safety regulations and appointments with the AZAB scrutiny committee had been sent out the week beforehand and every boat had a very thorough inspection with a marine surveyor. The Contessas passed the test and after several pre-race social events their sailors too were ready to go.

The first gun went at midday on 1st June and we were happy to be away, clear of the spectator boats and finally able to concentrate on just sailing the boat. In fairly light airs the Contessas remained in a line for quite some time and it became apparent that we were all similarly matched. This was going to be a close race.

The wind built during the first evening until by midnight we were beating into 25 knots and steep seas. Good Contessa weather but not very comfortable and over a sustained period hard work and very wet. The weather was far from predictable despite the ability to download accurate forecasts. We found ourselves bouncing between light airs and full gales almost daily with the one constant being the Contessa and an unshakeable confidence in her.

On *Spirit of Taranto* the menu plan which Kris had carefully prepared went out of the window and was replaced with more concentrated nutrition: chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks.

After a day or two the wind veered slightly and allowed us to ease off a little although before long another weather



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Azores ahoy!

system was upon us this time bringing a steady F7. It was now a north westerly and on the quarter. Well reefed and with the wind pilot engaged (all three Contessas were fitted out with a wind vane steering system), the boats did not need very much help from us at all.

Day seven saw the Contessas over seven hundred miles away from Falmouth barrelling along in a north westerly F5 and bright sunshine. On *Katisha* day seven also marked a special occasion. Not long after James got his head down for his afternoon snooze, Phil left Carly the wind vane, (because it's so vane – gerrit) in charge of a cockpit full of drying cushions and set about the task of baking a cake. It turned out rather better than he expected given the conditions. Happy birthday Skipper!

Day eight became a memorable one on *Katisha* but perhaps for the wrong reasons. James and Phil had just settled into their regular night watch keeping pattern when the radio crackled into life: "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Sailing Vessel *Boogie Nights*, *Boogie Nights*, *Boogie Nights*.... DISMASTED"!! The transmission was weak and not repeated. James and Phil realised that the Mayday would have been issued on a hand held VHF, their main aerial now swinging uselessly several metres below the surface. They did not hesitate or think twice, despite knowing they would sacrifice their position in the race (*Katisha* was up amongst the class IIIs, 3rd in class IV and gaining on 2nd). It took about half an hour to beat back up to the stricken yacht. The crew of *Boogie Nights* were incredibly professional and soon had the rig cut away, the hull swept and the engine running. Subsequent mounting of the emergency VHF aerial improved communications and gave them a limited AIS signature too. *Katisha* continued to shadow *Boogie Nights* for a further 12

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Running repairs on board *Katisha*.



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10-day spinnaker
run home.
This was not to be.

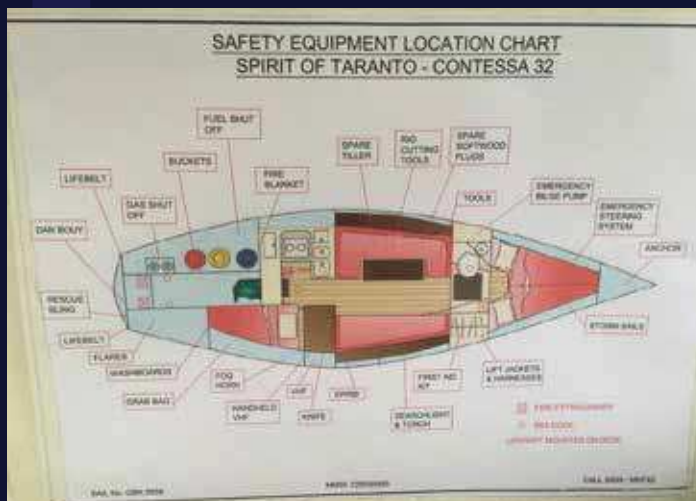
hours, coordinating with Falmouth MRCC and Ponta Delgada rescue via satellite phone and organising a fuel drop for them from a diverted container ship (an interesting manoeuvre and great seamanship displayed by the skippers of both vessels).

The final couple of days brought some lighter and calmer weather. The temperature seemed to rise quite suddenly and the sea, now inky blue, was full of Portuguese men o' war, regular schools of dolphins and even the odd turtle. Sailing single-handed, Govert napped during the night time and took deep sleep after sunrise. To his own surprise, he felt remarkably fit when he arrived in Ponta Delgada.

Katisha finished after a little over eleven days and after redress was placed 3rd in class. *Spirit of Taranto* finished in perfect conditions after 10 days and 7 hours and was placed 6th in class. *Saffier* came in after 10 days and 13 hours and was placed 8th in class. It was only after the finish they discovered that 10 boats had retired, mostly on the first night due to equipment failure.

Then followed a wonderful week on the Island of São Miguel, enjoying the hospitality of the Clube Naval de Ponta Delgada and getting to know the other competitors at various social events in a vibrant pontoon community spirit. A chance to rest, recuperate and repair, although there was little work to do to on the three Contessas. For *Katisha* the main repair was to the genoa furling line which parted twice on the way down requiring the crew to go forward both times in dreadful conditions to wind the furler in by hand. On *Spirit of Taranto* and *Saffier* bolts of the wind vane steering system needed to be tightened and secured. Given the minor repairs, one can say the Contessas did very well.

The boats were back on the start line on the 18th June. Everyone agreed that the first leg was a little harsh and that we



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Race entry requires clear labelling of the location of all emergency and safety equipment.

all thoroughly deserved a straightforward 10-day spinnaker run home. This was not to be.

Although overall this leg was more off the wind it was characterised by long periods of virtually no wind at all. The fleet immediately split into two distinct groups – those going around the eastern end of São Miguel and those going around the western end. Having drifted over the start line progress was painfully slow and 36 hours later São Miguel was still in sight. There did follow decent progress and some spinnaker work. After the wind filled conditions once again alternated between utterly becalmed and a shrieking gale. The weather provided highs and lows in many ways. Double and occasionally triple rainbows were a wonder to behold.

Some 12 days after leaving Ponta Delgada, the Contessas finished at Falmouth. *Spirit of Taranto* finished 4th in class, *Kastisha* 5th and *Saffier* 6th. They were welcomed back with pasties and beer.

After the finish, James and Phil sailed home and headed back to Plymouth. Stuart and Kris decided to take the scenic route home so after a couple of days of recovery and socialising headed for the Scillies and returned to Northumberland via Ireland and Orkney. Govert left *Saffier* in Falmouth, went home and came back later with his family for a holiday before sailing *Saffier* back to the Netherlands.

The AZAB 2019 was an amazing experience. Weather wise, it was one of the most challenging races in recent history. It tested us in so many ways and we all rose to the challenge. The best experience was the people we met and the Corinthian spirit of the race. The next AZAB will be held in 2023. As Phil stated: "If I'm not sat in a room of sleeping elderly folk, drinking from a sippy cup and watching daytime TV then sign me up for the next one. It was a blast." 🍷



Grateful thanks for this report compiled by Govert Ramselaar. Still smiling!