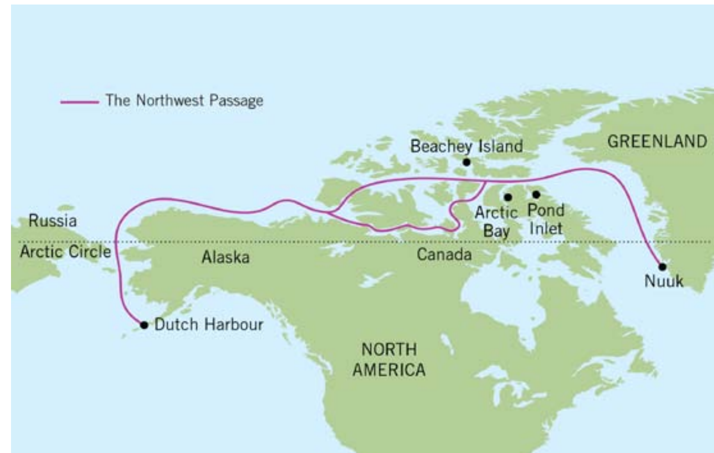
2.

The Northwest Passage

Sailing above the Arctic Circle was everything we'd hoped it would be: challenging, frightening, beautiful, fulfilling. We'd been hypnotised and dazzled by the stark landscapes, the whales and polar bears, the never-ending daylight. The Passage remains one of the most remote and difficult voyages on the planet, yet it is also a place that seems forever changed.

Herb McCormick



All my previous boats started their maiden voyage in London, and the new Aventura was no exception. A short delivery trip across the English Channel from the boatyard in Cherbourg took us up the River Thames into the heart of London. At the appointed time on 31 May 2014, we locked out of Limehouse Basin and passed into the Pool of London through the iconic Tower Bridge that was raised especially for us.

Sailing along the Thames is akin to leafing through a book of English history. Close to us on the north shore, the remains of the Roman defence walls of ancient Londinium were overlooked by the Tower of London. It was built in the 11th century by William the Conqueror, who invaded England from Normandy in 1066. Nearly one millennium later, my own Norman-built Aventura was hoisting her sails for a second passage through Tower Bridge. The last time I had made that request was at the start of the previous Aventura's voyage to Antarctica as part of the Millennium Odyssey. This time I was heading in the opposite direction, bound for the Northwest Passage.

As the favourable tide took us fast downstream, we passed Greenwich, the attractive London suburb bisected by the Zero Meridian, which gave its name to Greenwich Mean Time, on which all time zones are based. It was from here that the explorer Martin Frobisher had set off in 1576 on the first unsuccessful voyage to find a high-latitude shortcut from the Atlantic to the Pacific through the mythical Northwest Passage. In the history of maritime exploration no other part of the world has proved to be more difficult and has taken longer to conquer than the Northwest Passage. Since Roald Amundsen's successful transit in 1903-1906, a total of only 86 sailing boats (as of 2015) have been able to follow his example and transit this challenging waterway unassisted. To put it in perspective: for every sailor who has successfully completed a transit of the Northwest Passage, 15 climbers have scaled the highest mountain summit in the world.

The reason is quite simple: in spite of all the advances in boat design, technology and means of navigation, the challenges faced by those sailing in the High Arctic have remained basically the same. Climate

4.

A passion for the sea

Growing up in Romania

A young boy is sitting in the corner of a train compartment with his nose pressed to the window. With a loud screech the train slows down and starts negotiating a long bend. Suddenly a voice shouts excitedly: 'The sea, the sea! Look.... the sea!'
And there in front of us was a vast expanse of blue-grey water stretching to the far horizon. This first glimpse was the start of an abiding fascination with the sea that has lived with me to this day.

I am the little boy, the year is 1949, I am nine years old and on my way to a state-run vacation colony. A holiday by the sea seemed a dream after the traumatic events I had been through. I could not believe my luck.

Just a few weeks earlier I had been staying with my father in a small village in southern Transylvania where he was working on a roadbuilding site. One day, against his express orders, I had swum across the Olt, one of Romania's swiftest rivers, probably to impress my friends. When my father came to fetch me and saw my little head bobbing in the middle of that brown water, he could barely control his anger. Without a word, he yanked me home and gave me a good hiding, the first and last I ever got from him.

That same night, shortly after midnight, we were woken up by loud bangs on the door and, when my father opened it, a group of policemen burst into the room and, in front of me and my equally terrified sister Doina, took him away. Over 100,000 political undesirables, so-called unreliable members of the ancient regime, were seized that night. Each was sentenced to 15 years hard labour at the Danube-Black Sea Canal, one of Stalin's death camps, which was abandoned immediately after that tyrant's death in 1953. That night raid was the first nationwide dragnet carried out by the communists after they had taken over power in Romania, expelled King Michael and imposed a ruthless dictatorship that was to last half a century.

The River Olt

My father and other survivors were freed shortly after Stalin's death. With his health ruined and weighing only 40 kg, my father was unable to climb the stairs to our first floor flat and had to be carried by a neighbour. Although he recovered some of the lost weight, his mind and body remained scarred by those experiences to his dying day.

My father's fate has been a constant inspiration for me, but in a strangely negative way, as all my life I have done my best not to follow his example. One of the first lessons along this steep learning curve happened when my uncle came to take us home the day after my father's arrest. As we stood on the platform waiting for the train, he suddenly turned and said: 'Never pee against the wind.' I may not have understood the real meaning then, but now, a lifetime later, I realised that I have followed that simple advice all my life, trying to navigate the best course through life and, later, across the oceans.

My uncle followed his own advice to the letter: as a social democrat he did what many others in his situation decided to do and joined the communist party. He never went to prison, always had a well-paid job, lived happily into retirement and died in his sleep aged 88.

The voyage of Aventura

In the early 1970s, when I started looking for a suitable boat for our planned voyage, I knew next to nothing about boats, offshore sailing and what such a voyage would actually entail. So I read voraciously every book I could lay my hands on, from Joshua Slocum to Eric Hiscock, Francis Chichester to Bernard Moitessier, and countless others. Those famous sailing pioneers' well-written tales were not only fascinating but also full of excellent advice. As I ploughed through those books, I made notes and listed essential features to look out for. Later I rearranged the list in order of priorities. I also compiled a separate list of things to avoid.

In those days the choice of a suitable boat for a long voyage was quite limited. On top of that I had my own serious limitation: I did not have enough money for a completed boat, not even for a used one. So very soon I realised that the only solution was to buy the best hull I could afford and do the fitting out myself. By that stage I had not even been able to decide between a monohull and a catamaran. I was attracted by the spaciousness of a catamaran and I approached a couple of British manufacturers building fibreglass catamarans, but both refused to sell me a bare hull. I also considered a Wharram catamaran, whose plans were available as a home-build kit, but I didn't have the confidence to build a complete boat.

The voyage of Aventura 1975–1981

With catamarans out, the choice became somewhat easier and eventually I decided on a Van de Stadt design, the 36-foot Trintella IIIA. The builders, Tylers, were based close to London, and when I visited the yard I was impressed by the high standard of their work and also the friendly and helpful attitude of their staff. Tylers built only hulls, leaving the fitting out to outside contractors, so I immediately placed an order.

Over the years Aventura proved to have been the best choice I could have made at that time. She was rigged as a ketch, a decision heavily influenced by the desire for manageable sails in the absence, in those days, of furling gears. She was easy to sail, especially for a beginner, and in spite of her modest size, she had an aft cabin, which made it comfortable for a family of four. Her main quality was that her hull was very strongly built. I found this out when we ran aground on a reef in the Turks and Caicos Islands and spent several hours pounding hard on a coral head. When we eventually came off and I had a look with a mask at the keel and hull I was amazed that there was no serious damage except for a few superficial scratches. Amazed maybe, but not surprised, because while fitting

The voyage of Aventura II 1987-1992

Aventura I was sold in 1982 and for several years I was boatless. Like any sailor, I must have been thinking about my next boat, but however hard I try I cannot remember the reason why I decided to design and build a new boat at that point in my life. What I remember distinctly is that with Doina and Ivan settled down and at or about to enter university, and Gwenda quite happy with our shorebound life, a new voyage was not on my books. Or not yet.

In 1986 I had launched the ARC transatlantic rally, whose instant success kept me fully occupied, so much so that, reluctantly, I decided to resign from the BBC as I felt that I might have chanced upon a more rewarding occupation. Although my plans for another long voyage were undefined, being in close contact with so many sailors and their boats, I felt that the design of long-distance cruising boats had hardly advanced in the years since I had left on my previous voyage.

The new Aventura saw the light of day in the middle of England, about as far from the sea as one could be on an island. The small boatyard was located close to Stratford-upon-Avon of Shakespeare fame. After her launch in 1987, Aventura II spent the first two years on a relaxed European shakedown cruise from England

Start of ARC 1989

Regardless of length, all OVNIs shared a number of basic elements: hardchined, flat bottomed, with an integral centreboard and folding rudder. That meant that with both rudder and centreboard up they drew very little. For a 43-footer, Aventura drew one metre with the board up, and 2.40 metres with the board down. With a displacement of 9.5 tons, the sailing performance of the OVNI 43 was very good.

The voyage of Aventura III 1998-2010

Aventura II would have been the perfect boat for our first round-the-world voyage: strong, safe, comfortable, spacious, easy to handle, capable of having its draft reduced to one metre, and equipped with a diving compressor. In other words, everything I could have wished for in 1974, but a dozen years later, when I

conceived Aventura II, I should have looked into the future, not the past, and this was a mistake I was determined to avoid when I came to decide on the main features of Aventura III. In contrast to Aventura II, for which I did not have a specific voyage in mind, by 1996 I knew exactly what I wanted: a boat that would take me on a new world voyage, starting with a foray to Antarctica.

Aventura III was launched in western France in April 1997 and the initial plan for its maiden voyage was

a summer cruise to the Norwegian Arctic outpost of Svalbard (Spitsbergen). The usual delays and teething problems put paid to that ambitious plan, although we did make it to Norway, albeit its very southern part. That shortened Scandinavian cruise proved that the new Aventura was indeed the boat that I wanted, and allowed me to confidently draw up an even more ambitious schedule.

In summer 1998 Aventura left London as part of the Millennium Odyssey, a global event that would carry around the world a symbolic flame as a message of goodwill for the new millennium. In Lisbon she joined up with the slowly growing fleet, which eventually would reach a total of 40 boats. From Lisbon we sailed to Madeira and the Canaries, where the fleet split in two, as in order to cover as much of the world as possible I had devised two very different routes: a warm

Voyage planning

Voyage planning is common sense.
International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea

My interest in voyage planning goes back even further than my interest in sailing. As a young boy I often leafed through an old atlas, imagining all those places where one day I would land from my own boat. Dreamily, I would trace with my finger a route across an ocean that would take me to a tiny dot of an island: Abemama or Nuku Hiva or some other such beautifully enticing name. I could not have been much older than eight when I started writing an adventure book in which I set off with my closest friends on a world voyage in a boat with the English name of Friend Ship.

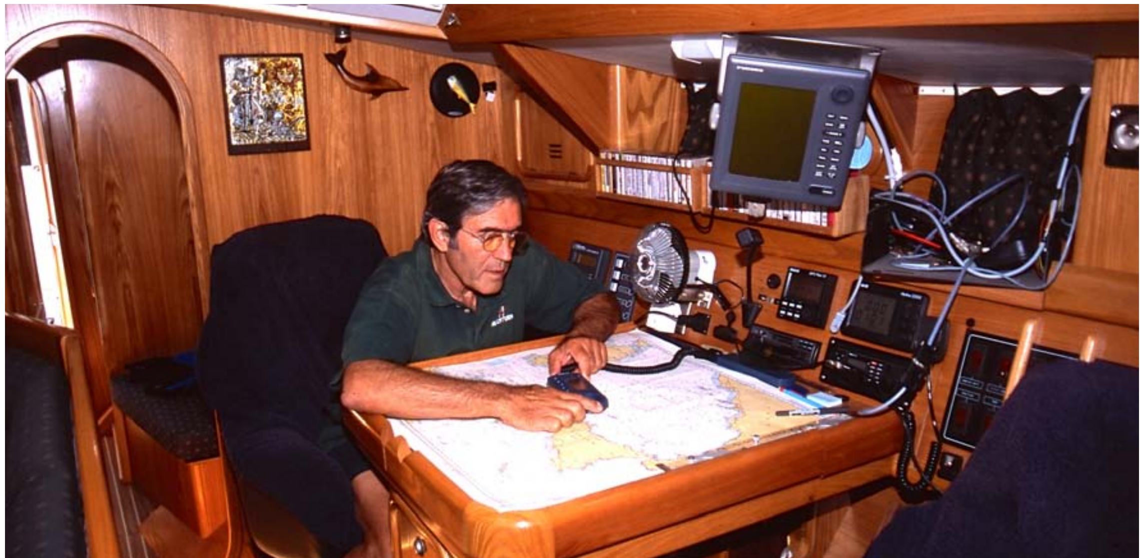
My practical interest in ocean routing was born during our first round-the-world voyage when I realised, mainly from the books of previous travellers, just how important it was for the overall safety of a voyage to plan the best route possible. Immediately after our return in 1981, I started working on what was to become World Cruising Routes. My research work took me from the British Library to the Maritime Museum in Greenwich, right on the zero meridian, where I was given permission to study the original logs of many ships that roamed the oceans in the early 19th century. I was even allowed to look at Captain Cook's original logs, and I can still feel the thrill of seeing the neat writing of the man whom I regard as the greatest navigator of all time.

My own voyaging, and the lessons learned from all those captains, as well as the writings of some of my near contemporaries such as Erick Hiscock, have formed the basis of my attitude to routing. Put simply, it is to always do your best to be in the right place at the right time and, conversely, to avoid at all cost being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I have no doubt that this is the reason why in all these years of ocean sailing I have never been in really serious trouble. There may be a contradiction here between my willingness to take risks in my earlier shorebound life and this cautious attitude when sailing. As I have become more experienced, I have occasionally taken some calculated risks. Some recent examples are the decision to leave Fiji for New Zealand early in the season on Aventura III, or setting off the following year for New Caledonia when the safe season had barely started. On the other hand, the marathon that my son Ivan and I sailed from Antarctica to Alaska had been carefully planned to coincide with the safest seasons, and was consequently accomplished without any mishap.

World Cruising Routes

When I started planning my first voyage in the early 1970s there was only one book dealing specifically with ocean routing, the British Admiralty Ocean

Plotting the noon position



10.

Weather and weather routing

The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.

William A. Ward

I might as well start with a confession. In spite of all the years I have spent at sea, for a long time my knowledge of weather forecasting was quite rudimentary. It all changed when I started sailing to high-latitude destinations such as Antarctica, Patagonia or Alaska, where being able to assess impending conditions was much more important than when sailing in the tropics during the safe season.

I still look at the sky and clouds, see that some are white and others grey, some large, some small, some fluffy, some ragged at the edges, trying to guess what they may be telling me.

Could this be an extraterrestrial craft about to land?

The distinctive trade-wind clouds are obvious and so are the tropical squalls, which announce themselves so clearly that even a child could recognise their arrival. Furthermore, having spent so much time observing the sea and sky at close quarters, I seem to have developed a sixth sense and cannot explain why most of the time I surmise what is going to happen. Usually I can guess how much power an approaching squall will pack, if we are going to be in for a real blow, or even smell if rain is coming. This sense-based approach to weather is backed by an overcautious attitude, which means that I always prefer to reef early, reduce sail if a squall is approaching, make all necessary preparations at the first sign of impending bad weather or leave an anchorage at short notice if I deem it unsafe. Put simply, over the years I have learned never to take anything for granted and not to allow wishful thinking to override common sense. So my approach to weather is pragmatic: in other words, I take it as it comes. In fact, fatalistic is a better definition. I may not leave a marina or safe harbour if there is a gale blowing outside, but if a strong wind is likely to continue and is blowing from the right direction, I prefer to go.

Weather tactics vary in different parts of the world. Basically, in temperate zones what really matters is the direction of the wind, so if winds are predicted from an unfavourable direction one has little choice but to wait. This is why I stressed that if the direction is right, I prefer to go even if the actual strength may not be entirely to my liking.

The situation is very different when sailing in the tropics, where what really matters is the strength of the wind because the direction, especially in trade-wind areas, is normally more constant and predictable. So I know that a spell of reinforced trade winds blowing at around 30 knots will eventually diminish their strength to the more pleasant 15-20 knots. If I am not in a hurry, I prefer to wait.

Strangely enough, on passage I find it much more interesting if I do not know what to expect. As I mentioned in the chapter dealing with routing, I have always followed the dictum of attempting not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This usually means planning a voyage that avoids known bad-weather areas or seasons, particularly tropical cyclone seasons. With a few exceptions, I have managed to avoid really bad weather, and have coped with what came my way. I must add that I had complete confidence in all my boats, and knew that I could trust them to take me safely out of trouble, as they have done on many occasions.

18.

Dealing with emergencies

The art of the sailor is to leave nothing to chance.
Annie van de Wiele

I have been in a number of emergency situations and have been able to deal with all of them successfully. Fitting out the first Aventura myself taught me to be self-sufficient, and ever since then I have attempted to do all that is necessary to be prepared for the worst. One golden rule that I have learned is not to panic. It is indeed crucial in an emergency situation to keep calm, take time to properly assess the situation, draw up a plan of action and then act.

Some of the incidents mentioned in previous chapters highlighted two other essential points: the ability to deal with an emergency when it happens, and to put anything right that has broken, or at least find a temporary solution. Once again, I am going to start by describing some of my own emergencies.

South Indian Ocean, September 2003

While on passage from Reunion to South Africa, sailing on Aventura III with my friend Antti, we encountered bad weather off the southern tip of Madagascar, where sudden changes in weather can cause very rough seas. During my night watch, with the wind steady at 35 knots and our speed never going below 9 knots, with occasional higher bursts as the boat surfed down the high following seas, the pattern of the waves changed and the swell started to look menacing. I had seen higher waves in the Southern Ocean while returning from Antarctica to Cape Horn, but was not expecting to see anything as bad in what I believed should be more benign waters. Earlier that evening there had been a warning on Inmarsat C that a ship had seen one or several large logs afloat in that area.

The threat of colliding with one of those logs was at the back of my mind as I was savouring the thrill of seeing 12.5 knots on the speedometer while surfing down a big wave when, above the hiss and rumble, I heard a louder noise. The boat pulled out of its slide and settled on its haunches, and I heard a louder noise coming from the direction of the steering. Almost instantly, the movement of the boat changed, and I suspected that the autopilot had gone off. I grabbed the wheel and it felt heavy and unresponsive. I lifted the cockpit grating and shone the flashlight onto the steering mechanism and saw that the 12mm bolt joining the hydraulic autopilot ram to the rudder quadrant had sheared. As the steering also appeared to be faulty, I decided to heave to and called Antti. I lowered the centreboard, as it had been raised while we were broadreaching. As we were sailing under reefed mainsail and staysail, I hauled in both sheets and turned into the wind, the steering feeling unusually heavy. Hove to with the wheel lashed to windward, Aventura was closereaching slowly into the large swell.

I found a replacement bolt and replaced the broken one, brought the boat back on course, still wondering why it was so hard to steer, and re-engaged the pilot. Only then did it occur to me to check the rudder hydraulics. I tried to pump down the rudder but it felt dead, thus confirming my suspicion that this was probably the cause of our troubles. If the valve controlling the rudder or centreboard was not left in the open position, and one or the other hit something, the resulting pressure blows a sacrificial copper disk that opens the hydraulic circuit. As I had spare disks taped to the hydraulic pump in a plastic bag for this eventuality,

20.

Crew and watches

The ideal crew would be a fairly laid-back character, who can keep it together under pressure, can fix most things and, of course, be a good cook.

Steve Spink

That sounds like quite a tall order, although Steve, who sailed as captain on one of the Millennium Odyssey yachts, and as crew in two previous round-the-world rallies, has all those rare qualities.

The crew of Taratoo

Fabio Colapinto, who sailed his own yacht in the same event, and who has had more than his fair share of crew problems in his long sailing life, was of the firm opinion that 'nothing can spoil the pleasure of a voyage more than problems with your crew'. Fabio echoed my own feelings, as I believe that more voyages have been abandoned because of crew problems than by the wrong choice of boat, gear failure or financial difficulties. This conclusion is based in part on my personal experience, but mostly drawn from countless examples that I have come across as the organiser of cruising rallies. Even allowing for the fact that I was dealing with very large numbers of people, the proportion of boats that experienced crew problems was much higher than I would have expected.

The scenario is simple: you invest all your energy and probably much of your savings in the boat of your dreams, and finally set off on your planned voyage. Unless you are sailing with your family, you are likely to be accompanied both by people you know well and others that you know less well. But however well acquainted you may be with your crew, you know them from another dimension: a comfortable life ashore. The sea is different, an alien and occasionally dangerous medium where a person's true character may quickly reveal itself as selfish, anxious, stubborn, lazy, mean, greedy, inconsiderate or humourless, not to speak of the physical or psychological problems that might manifest themselves. On top of that, they may have irritating habits: being noisy or untidy; eating messily; not washing; not sharing cooking, washing up and other tasks; smoking; drinking too much or, worse, being addicted to drugs. There may also be problems with discipline, sleeping on watch and being generally unreliable. However skilful and tolerant the captain may be in trying to make allowances for a difficult crewmember, the situation is often impossible. If all this sounds like a description of the crew from hell, I should point out that there are also many crews who exhibit none of these faults and are a pleasure to have on board.

Types of crew

I will look at crew first from a general point of view, and then examine the same subject from both my own experience and that acquired as an event organiser. Getting crew for a long voyage is certainly not a simple matter, as I know too well from the various rallies. Basically, there are five types of crew:

Sharing crew: these are often friends who join a boat for a shorter or longer period. Normally they are expected to contribute towards their living expenses and do a fair share of the work.

34.

Cruising rallies

The most significant decision for us was to join a rally. Had we not joined America 500, there would have been no Atlantic crossing for us in 1992. Without that experience, and without the Millennium Odyssey, there would have been no round-the-world voyage for us either. Without those rallies the friendships amongst the whole fleet, which will last for many years, would have never developed. The shared accomplishments will live in each of us forever.

Don Babson

The launch of the first transatlantic rally in 1986 is one of the main achievements of my life. The immediate success of the annual ARC inspired similar rallies all over the world and I am credited with having conceived the format of such offshore cruising rallies. One of the main advantages of cruising rallies, whether across an ocean or around the world, is that the organisers take care of formalities, docking, weather and routing information, also transits of the Panama and Suez Canals. There is also the safety in numbers factor, and being able to get help or advice in an emergency from fellow participants. Another advantage is that there is a fixed schedule, which imposes a certain discipline. As some of the participants are business people, retired or close to retirement, they appreciate this aspect and also the fact that they can delegate responsibility, what they normally did in their professional lives.

The Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC)

Start of the first ARC November 1986

From the very beginning, one of the primary aims of the ARC was to provide a framework of safety and support to sailors who lacked offshore experience, and this continues to be one of its main attractions. There have been many changes in the 30 years since I stopped my involvement with the ARC, and not all for the better. What I find most objectionable is that what started as an event for cruising sailors has been allowed to become a convenient backdrop for racing boats, their owners boasting to have been successful in the largest transocean event in the world.

Round-the-world rallies

Symbolic historic events or anniversaries have a special fascination for me, so when I started organising international sailing events I had a readymade vehicle to promote and celebrate some of the most significant

dates of our times. The success of the ARC served as an inspiration for the first round-the-world rally, something that had never been done before. Having briefly mentioned the idea to a number of ARC participants, by the late 1980s I knew that such a rally was feasible. This was instantly confirmed when the project was launched and the maximum number of participants (40 yachts over 40 feet) was quickly reached and a waiting list started. Being a

Epilogue

As the above title suggests, this book marks a turning point in my life. Having achieved my aim of a transit of the Northwest Passage and, with no plans for another voyage, I decided to sell Aventura, as I had promised Gwenda when she had agreed for me to have a boat built for this project. It was a sad and painful decision, but by way of compensation, her new owner is going to sail in the Arctic, so she will be in her element and doing what she had been conceived and built for.

The coral waxes, the palm grows, but man departs.
Tahitian saying