

A modern odyssey in the Mediterranean

Looking ahead to retirement, Jim Wallace set about buying a boat in Croatia and making a 2,000-mile voyage with her back to England

With retirement looming, I decided to buy a boat. That was the easy part. I then had to decide what to buy and to find one I liked. I wanted something that could give me safe and comfortable long-distance sailing for some time to come. I settled for a Slocum 43, which seemed to have most of the attributes that I wanted.

After a long search, I bought *Right Choice* in Croatia. I love the Croatian coast as a sailing ground, but keeping her there would seriously limit the amount of time I could spend on board as well as ruling out short trips. So began the planning of a delivery cruise to England via Gibraltar, which would consume much of my time for a year.

I planned to leave Punat, on Krk Island in Northern Croatia, where *Right Choice* was lying, in June and arrive in Southampton in mid-September. I



The deal is completed as Jim shakes hands on his new purchase



A much-needed service of the winches was one of the jobs to be done before setting sail

managed to get time off work for the whole trip with the exception of August, so I asked a good friend and professional skipper, Peter Ratcliffe, to skipper the boat for the period I couldn't be there. The comprehensive pre-purchase survey had highlighted two areas requiring urgent attention: replacement of the standing rigging and provision of serviceable safety equipment, of which there was very little. I arranged for the rigging to be replaced



The re-worked propeller shaft and shiny new feathering propeller were fitted and ready

and fitted out full safety gear. With that, she was ready to sail.

For the planning, I started with a map of Europe and drew on the most direct route from Croatia to England. I modified the tracks to minimise the long legs and divide the passage into manageable stages for crew changes, also making the legs interesting rather than just long slogs. I estimated the lengths of the legs in days and added a day or so to each to allow for unforeseen weather, boat or people issues. To make the logistics easier I divided the trip into roughly week-long blocks, ideally starting and finishing near airports.

I was sure that I would need a crew of between three and six people at a time to achieve the proposed schedule. There would have to be a few long legs of at least 24 hours' sailing, so being able to get rest was important. I contacted 75 sailing friends, of whom I ended up with 25 crewing for me at various points, having travelled from the UK, as well as Australia and the USA. I needed a way to provide regular progress updates to joining crew and I decided to create a blog, updating it as often as I could. It turned out to be popular reading, with many readers from those who couldn't make the trip.

In early June *Right Choice* was re-launched and I was satisfied to find that, after much work on the propeller shaft, cutlass bearing, stuffing box and the addition of a new, larger feathering propeller, it all worked, didn't leak, and the thrust was noticeably greater and smoother than before. We ran through functional checks on all the boat's systems and found, to my dismay, that the refrigeration compressor would not cool the holding plate and would need re-gassing. We hurriedly contacted a local supplier who re-gassed the system.

The first part of the voyage was to Korcula, an old and pretty port, where I would keep the boat for a few weeks prior to our departure for Italy. My crew on this leg included the previous owners. I had invited them along, because they still had an attachment to the boat after ➤

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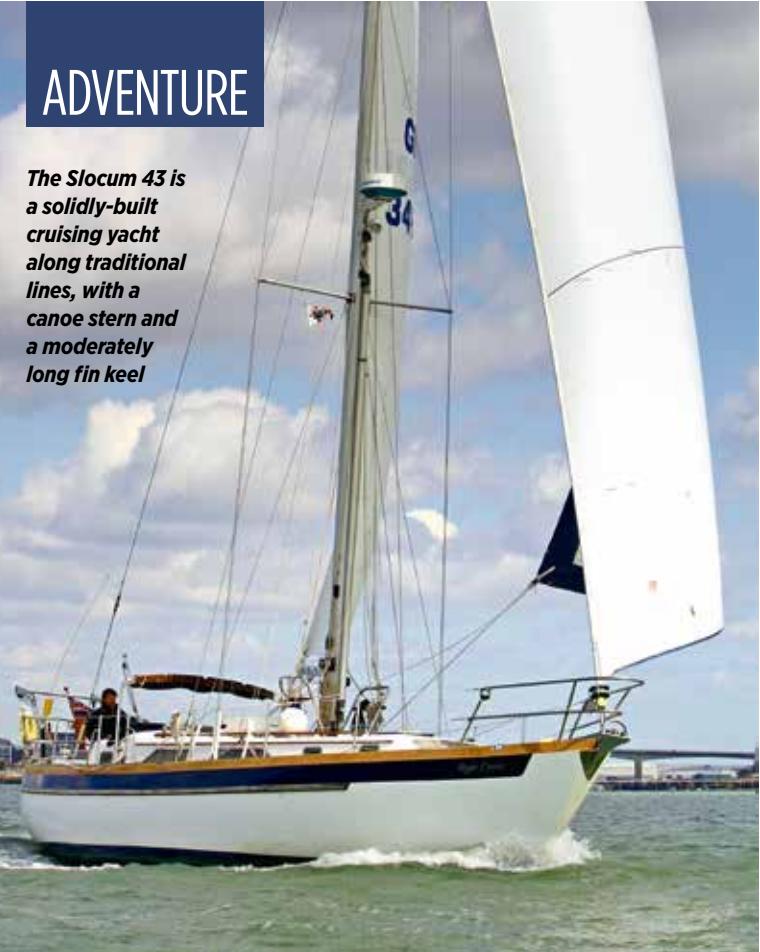


The first crew of five assembled in Croatia before departure. From L-R: Bill, Jeri, Jim, Linda and Pete



Right Choice begins her journey at anchor off Krk Town in Croatia

The Slocum 43 is a solidly-built cruising yacht along traditional lines, with a canoe stern and a moderately long fin keel



22 years of ownership and also because there was so much I needed to learn about *Right Choice*'s systems and layout that their presence would be invaluable. Joe and Ildi Gonda are both 80 years old and still pretty sprightly. Joe went up the mast to do maintenance three times in a week without being asked.

We spent a busy two days in Korcula, early in July, preparing for our departure and on the day there was a fresh wind blowing us on to the end of a tight cul de sac of boats promising to make life difficult. *Right Choice*, like most longer-keeled boats, needs to go astern for a boat length or two to get steerage. I needed the combined effect of maximum spring effort on the boat and the tug service of a harbourmaster's RIB to get the stern pointing in a more-or-less safe direction down the tight corridor of boats

The old Roman garrison town of Cefalu, Sicily



with their nervous owners watching the manoeuvre with interest. I gunned the engine in astern and slowly we gained enough steerage to negotiate the slalom through the crowded trot to the relieved applause of the bystanders. We left Croatia bound for Bari in Italy.

Following a very uncomfortable overnight passage we arrived around midday, and were only briefly held up with entry formalities at our berth in the new marina, before we could head into the old town for a pleasant traditional meal.

Searching for shelter

From Bari, we coast hopped via Otranto to Crotone, on the south coast, for our first crew change. Nearing Crotone, after a windy and wild overnight passage past Taranto, we were looking forward to some respite, but the harbour we were heading for was almost completely open to the prevailing wind and we didn't want to join the boats inside bouncing up and down. Instead we pressed on into the bay, which is ringed by mountains that we hoped would give us some shelter. As we closed the beach of the bay we surveyed the chart

for a suitable anchorage and, aside from occasional rocks, the prospects were good. The wind was still over 30 knots as we edged closer to the beach and I asked for regular depth readings. I could see the band of wind coming to an end ahead with much smoother water beyond. I was in the process of saying this to the crew when the boat lurched as her keel hit a rock. Of course the depth had registered as being safe right up to the point we hit the rock. If only the sounder was forward looking!

I assessed the situation; the boat was stopped but still afloat, surrounded by rocks. We tried heeling her with our weight to reduce the draught, but at 15 tonnes, the amount we could heel *Right Choice* was insufficient to make a difference. Peter volunteered to get into the water with snorkel and mask and surveyed the underwater situation as we considered our options, rueing the lack of tide in that part of the Mediterranean. My thoughts turned to outside assistance just as Peter shouted excitedly that he had spotted an escape route through the rocks. I quickly turned the boat with a burst of power in the direction Peter indicated and was very relieved to escape just as a coastguard vessel arrived to offer assistance. Thankfully the damage done to the encapsulated keel, skeg and rudder was superficial. A more modern boat might have fared much worse.

The worst watches were those with no wind – not only did we have to hand steer, but the compass lighting was poor and steering a steady course called for using a star or other slow-moving reference.



ABOVE: Even the skipper has to cook sometimes

The steering compass became more of an issue as the trip went on; not only was the lighting poor, but the compass card was sticking badly, inducing a substantial course error. We needed to effect a repair.

The compass assembly was taken apart and we discovered that far from being suspended in a frictionless spirit, the compass card was swimming in neat diesel, which was slowly dissolving the markings and sediment was preventing free rotation. The assembly was cleaned and the alcohol store raided for neat spirit to replace the diesel, but it remained far from perfect and was added to the growing list of repairs and replacements scheduled for the winter in the UK.

Paying the price in Messina

The passage through the Strait of Messina, between Sicily and Calabria, was interesting. Taking the inshore route on the Sicilian side and making VHF voice position reports (which were not mandated for a pleasure vessel of *Right Choice*'s size, but nevertheless welcomed) when entering and leaving the designated zone made life easy, and we stopped for two nights in Messina, at the Marina Del Nettuno. This is an unusual marina.

We were shown to a visitor's berth inside the outermost arm of the pontoons. Unfortunately this berth provided little protection from commercial traffic and their large wakes. The reason for this? The depth in our berth was 87ft. It turns out that the whole marina is floating because of the depth. We paid handsomely for our stay; €125 per night, plus €25 per night for electricity. It seems that berthing charges in Italy are by no means fixed and on almost every occasion there was room for negotiation, especially when cash payments were being made.

The rest of Sicily that we saw – mainly the north-west coast – was delightful and we all would have relished more time there to enjoy the cruising. After 48 hours of motoring, we were all fed up with the noise and hoping for a breath of



Stripping the binnacle compass down to find it had been filled with corrosive diesel fuel



We made several trips up the mast – some for fun and some for maintenance



We moored bows-to in Krk to stock up with supplies

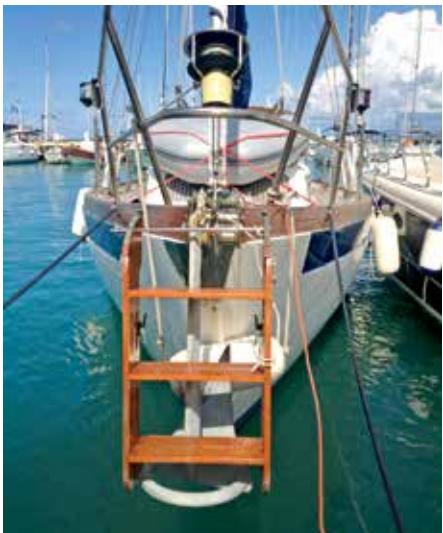


CHART: MAXINE HEATH

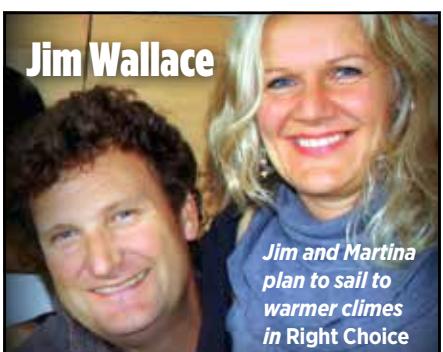




The crew take the opportunity to relax on deck in light wind, but it was not all plain sailing



A bow ladder solved the problem of getting on and off Right Choice in the Med



Jim and Martina plan to sail to warmer climes in Right Choice

Jim is an airline captain who has sailed since childhood. He has sailed over 15,000 miles, cruising and racing boats from dinghies to 67ft yachts. *Right Choice* is his second boat, which he keeps in Southampton. He has now retired and plans to sail the boat far and wide with his wife Martina.

wind, so we could sail or at least use the windvane self-steering. It didn't happen, so we arrived on the east side of Gibraltar at night, timing our passage south of the rock to coincide with slack water.

Having safely negotiated the shipping channel we rounded Europa Point at dawn and made our way for an eagerly-anticipated arrival at the Marina Bay marina in Ocean Village.

We cleared customs and immigration with a short form and a couple of phone calls from the marina office, which took five minutes. I can recommend Gibraltar as a stopover going either way. The facilities are excellent as are the connections, and the marina fees very reasonable.

August was a nail-biting time: *Right Choice* would be sailed without me, from Gibraltar to A Coruña. This is not recommended in August due to adverse winds and currents, onshore swells and the chance of fog.

After battling the elements round Cape St Vincent for many hours in a storm and making very little progress, Peter, my stand-in skipper, decided wisely to shelter until the blow had abated, which took a few days. His spirits a little low, he called to give me the bad news; compass erratic, crew revolting, storm continuing, little prospect of getting the boat even as far north as Lisbon by the end of the month, let alone A Coruña as planned. For the first time I began to doubt whether the boat would make it to the UK as planned. I started to think of alternatives, even wintering the boat in Gibraltar and starting again next spring.

My friends Kay and Pete came to the rescue. They were anticipating meeting the boat in Lisbon, but made their way south to meet her in Portimão instead. Their arrival lifted crew spirits and seemed to have a positive effect on the weather too; the forecast no longer had 'gale' in it and the voyage continued, with persistent headwinds, around the cape and up the Portuguese coast. I keenly awaited position reports and plotted progress, changing my travel plans with every step towards a new stopover. With a day to spare I was sent a photo of a very welcome sight: *Right Choice* berthed in A Coruña.

Crossing Biscay was always, potentially, the most difficult leg. The forecast was for north-east winds, Force 6-8 with big swells, so we prepared boat and crew as best we could. This was the reason I had bought this kind of boat in the first place, to cope with rough weather if necessary. We had a crew of six organised in three watches. We encountered winds over 30 knots almost immediately after departure and they continued for 48 hours before abating a little. We were reliant on the windvane to steer and were eternally grateful for it. None of us was getting much sleep and most of us felt sick. The galley was hardly used for 48 hours.

With the wind direction as it was, we couldn't make our planned landfall on the French coast under sail, so opted to head for Brest instead. As we closed the coast at dawn we found ourselves in thick fog, which was challenging, but we arrived, weather-beaten and happy, to enjoy a French respite. Some relieved crew jumped ship happily to regain their land legs.

We had a good time in France before calling into Guernsey, then setting off for the last leg to Blighty. We managed to arrive at Shamrock Quay in Southampton close to the time and date I had published nine months earlier, having since sailed 2,745 miles and overcome many challenges. *Right Choice* was home. ▲



The crew start to look happy again as they arrive in Brest after a rough crossing of Biscay