

# Live Your Dream

By Emmanuelle Buecher-Hall

***Merlin* is a 44' Dean catamaran launched in April 2008. Six months later, the French-South African crew and their three young children embarked on a 20,000 nautical mile sail which took them from Cape Town to Brisbane. This is their story.**

Once upon a time I had a dream; I wanted to go sailing, far away, leaving the land out of sight. Since I was living inland, this dream was mostly born from inspiring readings (Moitessier, Slocum, Tabarly). When I was a teenager, I learnt to sail and tried to practice my navigation skills at least a few weeks every summer. However, I was still hoping to set sail and explore new horizons one day.

In 1998, I moved to Cape Town, and met Gregory. One day, after he had spent another long stressful day at his new business, I asked him if he wanted to go cruising. He thought it was a great idea. Soon all our decisions were dedicated to realizing this project. We had questions and had to try to find the answers. They came slowly, helping us to get closer to our dream.

We didn't really plan it that way but in August 2006, we became the owners of a semi-complete hull, deck and bulkhead Dean 44. We had to transform this empty hull into a cruising catamaran that would become home for our family of five for a few years. Gerfried Nebe and his great team transformed this fibre glass shell into a comfy, secure and fast floating home.

This building process gave us extra time to sort out things, like selling our business, a house and the too many extras that we all accumulate in our daily life. Most of all, it offered us the opportunity to build 'our' boat, one which would suit a family with three young kids, a skipper with a racing background who wanted a simple but efficient boat and a second mate for whom a good sized and well-equipped galley was essential.

In April 2008, very early one morning, we launched *Merlin* in Hout Bay. Seeing

*Merlin* on that big truck, then lifted by a crane and then touching the water slowly was our first set of strong emotions. Very soon, we moved on board, quickly filling up all our lockers and adapting to a smaller space and a simpler life.

It took us another six months to finish everything, do some test sails in Table Bay and to Dassen Island, have our medical box ready, have school books sent to us etc.

In November 2008, our hearts pounding with intense feelings, we said goodbye to family and friends and cast off. We left the same day as the Volvo

Race and Table Bay, full of boats, offered us a great show before we headed north-west towards St Helena. Table Mountain disappeared slowly over the horizon while we were enjoying our first sunset at sea.

When we set sail, Cléa, Félix and Victor, our three kids, were two-and-a-half, six and eight years old. Going cruising and exploring the world was a dream for us, the parents - but we also wanted to live it with our kids. We wanted to discover together what the world has to offer: new cultures, new places, new habits, new smells, new landscapes, new plants and animals, new friends and new horizons. Now, we embarked our three children on a journey of discoveries and our dream became a real family adventure.

It took us few days to 'acclimatise' our stomachs and find our sea legs. After the first 500 miles, the seas and wind

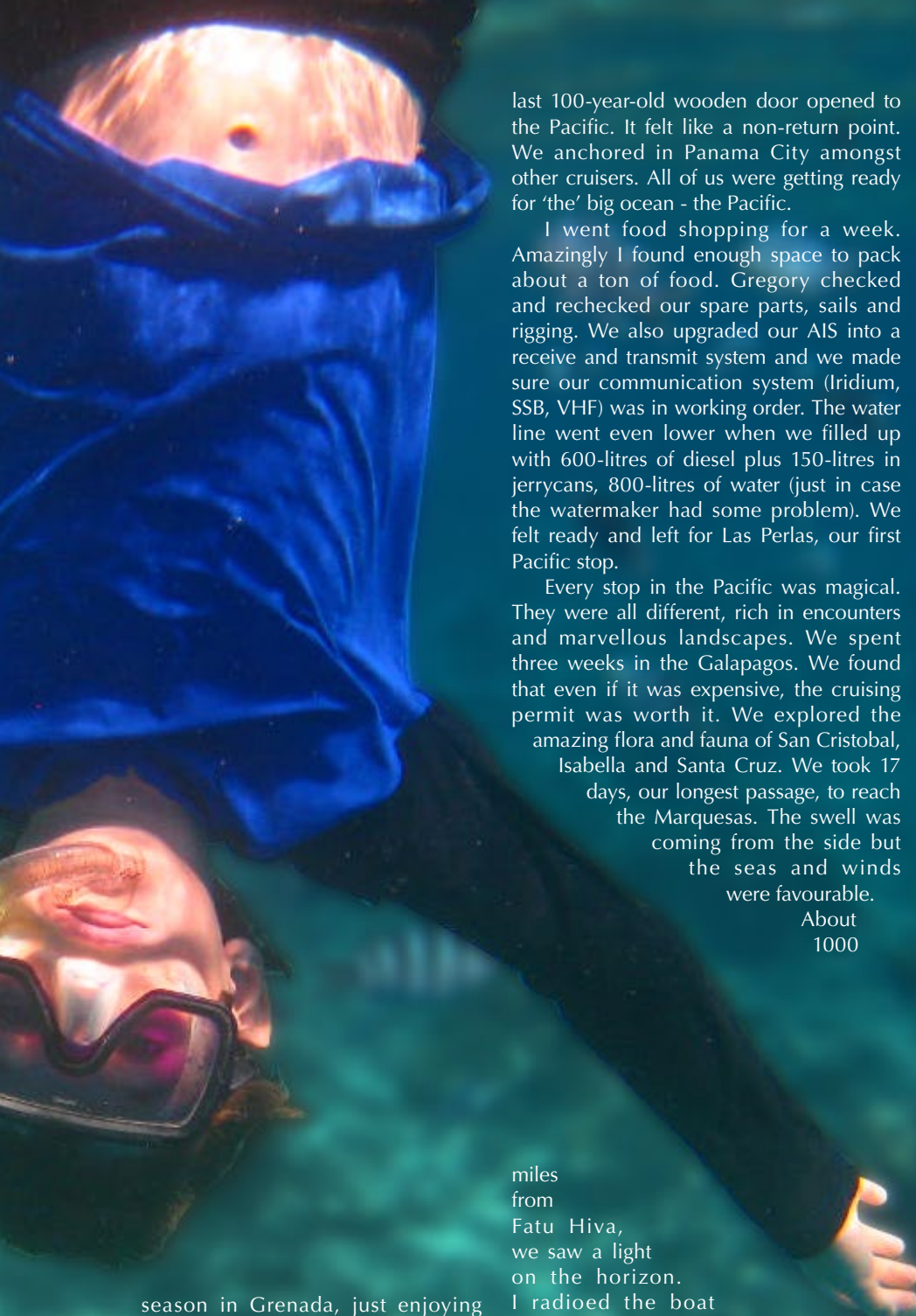
calmed down. We were then like kids playing with their new toys at Christmas. We were living 'for real' what we had talked about for five years.

After nine days, we arrived in St Helena, anchored in James Bay and enjoyed our first 'green flash' while savouring a bottle of Groot Constantia, apparently the wine that Napoleon drank when he was here. It was our first experience of clearance with foreign customs, first discoveries in an unknown environment, first special encounters, and first sailing friends. This first stop was intense and too short.

Our route was classic: St Helena, Ascension then Fortaleza. We left Brazil before New Year for the Caribbean. The seas were high, but regular and *Merlin*, pushed by a good wind, arrived in Tobago after nine days.

We easily adapted to our new cruising life. I was supervising three hours of home schooling every morning while Gregory was doing some boat maintenance, shopping or admin (clearances can take more than half a day sometimes!). The afternoons were dedicated to land discoveries or water/beach games. We sailed up and down between Trinidad and St Marten and spent our first cyclone





last 100-year-old wooden door opened to the Pacific. It felt like a non-return point. We anchored in Panama City amongst other cruisers. All of us were getting ready for 'the' big ocean - the Pacific.

I went food shopping for a week. Amazingly I found enough space to pack about a ton of food. Gregory checked and rechecked our spare parts, sails and rigging. We also upgraded our AIS into a receive and transmit system and we made sure our communication system (Iridium, SSB, VHF) was in working order. The water line went even lower when we filled up with 600-litres of diesel plus 150-litres in jerrycans, 800-litres of water (just in case the watermaker had some problem). We felt ready and left for Las Perlas, our first Pacific stop.

Every stop in the Pacific was magical. They were all different, rich in encounters and marvellous landscapes. We spent three weeks in the Galapagos. We found that even if it was expensive, the cruising permit was worth it. We explored the amazing flora and fauna of San Cristobal, Isabella and Santa Cruz. We took 17 days, our longest passage, to reach the Marquesas. The swell was coming from the side but the seas and winds were favourable.

About  
1000

miles  
from  
Fatu Hiva,  
we saw a light  
on the horizon.

I radioed the boat early in the morning and recognised a South African accent. There, in the middle of nowhere, was another South African family sailing on their catamaran, *Stealaway*. They came from Gordon's Bay. Who said that the world was big?

After more than two weeks at sea, the anchorage was serene in Fatu Hiva. Most of the locals were very friendly and happy to trade their fruit for something interesting. After visiting five islands of the Marquesas, where the lush mountains just dropped into the deep blue sea, we left for the Tuamotus, flat atolls where you entered only through the pass after being sure of your tides. The outgoing current can be more than eight knots and the strong eddies can be quite intimidating. You have 78 awesome atolls to choose from. Our

decision was based on the position of the atoll, the level of difficulty to enter the pass and where our friends were. There, we drift-dived with the entering current, following the black and white tip sharks. We had the feeling of being in a rich aquarium.

In Tahiti, we enjoyed what this big Polynesian island had to offer and we refilled the food lockers. We got stuck with a windlass problem in Bora Bora for two weeks, but enjoyed the hospitality during their 14th of July festival.

As we had a good weather window, we decided not to stop at the Cook Islands, and sailed straight to Niue. We were surprised by the beauty of this tiny island (the biggest raised coral atoll in the world) and the warmth of its inhabitants. We have never seen water as clear. We were on a mooring buoy and could see the bottom 40-metres below Merlin.

We were very attentive during our crossing to Tonga as a 57' catamaran capsized two days earlier in a sudden storm. In Tonga, we sailed from island to island in search of the good spots to see the whales. We woke up one morning between two whales who were 'singing' to each other. In our hulls, it sounded like a great symphony.

After a rather long clearance process in Fiji, we really appreciated the locals, the multiple islands and the underwater treasures. We swam and touched the manta rays, we had long white sand beaches just for us. Victor's birthday party resulted in a gathering of the kids' boats and an underwater treasure hunt for our 'coins of the world'.

We only did a quick stop in Vanuatu mainly to visit the active volcano. Wow, what an experience to see flying incandescent lava just a few metres in front of one.

It is difficult to summarise in few words all our stops and the experiences of such a trip. But today, we can say we lived our dream and lived it fully. For anyone who has the same dreams we can only say: just do it! Go and live them fully, you won't have any regrets.

### Coping With The Children

Going sailing always involves lots of preparation and serious planning. When you have three very young crew members this is even more important. Safety on board, schooling and health were some of the issues that were high on the priority list.

### Safety

We were very serious about safety issues when sailing, at anchor, and even while building the boat. It is so easy today to buy a lot of instruments or safety gadgets, especially for new cruisers who don't know what to expect 'out there'.

season in Grenada, just enjoying simple pleasures with fellow cruisers. We met really good friends and it was just too easy to find an excuse to have a drink or a braai. The Caribbean Islands are a great playground for new cruisers. The sailing legs are never too long, too harsh or too demanding. The Chris Doyle Cruising Guides helped us to discover the islands with different cultures, great markets, good walks and beautiful snorkelling or diving spots.

In November 2009, we headed west again: the Venezuelan Islands, the ABC Islands, Colombia, and the amazing San Blas. In February 2010, we had an eventful passage of the Panama Canal. We got ready with our long lines, our extra line handlers and our dozen 'tyre-fenders'. It takes two days to go through the two series of locks. We were quite proud when the





The dolphins came out to welcome us arrive in Cartagena.



Clea enjoying herself on board while anchored off Fraser Island in Australia.



Merlin under full sail.



Felix helping with work up the mast.

However, we found everything we bought was useful. On our list were:

- an EPIRB (compulsory);
- an AIS. We loved it so much that we upgraded ours in Panama so we could also transmit;
- a Sea Me. It receives radar signal and transmits a bigger signal than you really are. It picks up ships sometimes more than 50nm away;
- a sat phone. So useful to keep family and friends informed of our progress via e-mails, and to receive the weather forecast as often as we needed;
- 'life tags' from Raymarine with an ACR strobe attached. We used this conscientiously during our night watches and when on deck for some manoeuvres in rougher weather.

The kids are familiar with each of these instruments and are able to use them. Technical instruments offer a peace of mind but you can't rely only on them, and we explained to the children what we were expecting them to do in case of a serious problem.

On board, we have some simple but important safety rules which can vary if we are

under way or anchored. The kids know that there is no way of escaping these regulations. Here are some of them.

We were lucky to meet Thomas Coville during one of his stops in Cape Town and he became a hero to the children. He told them: "Always a hand for yourself and a hand for the boat." This was our first rule and we had to apply it while at a marina as well as under way. Said by a hero, it sounds so logical!

Moving on board six months before setting sail was a good move. We surrounded *Merlin* with strong nets (volleyball nets custom made for our rails). Cléa was then just over two years old and was very curious, exploring every level and corner of the deck. During the voyage we found these nets very useful not only for the kids, but also to catch falling tools, towels or toys.

We do not go in and out through the hatches. The main door allows us to control who is in or out.

The kids know really well how to use the VHF and the SSB. They can make an emergency call or simply call their friends to arrange some play time. They could play ashore with the portable VHF and could contact us when they

needed a lift back on board.

A catamaran has the advantage of not heeling while sailing, but this can give a false sense of safety. Under way, our main rule with the kids is 'wear your lifejacket when you are out of the cockpit'. We bought them some inflatable lifejackets the same as ours, not too uncomfortable, bulky or hot. We try to set the example and at times we wore our lifejacket too when the conditions weren't perfect. From time to time, the kids have to hook themselves to the lifeline which goes all around *Merlin*. If the weather is really rough, then they do not go outside. Before we left Cape Town and while cruising, we practised the man overboard manoeuvres. The boys had different roles and one adult was always excluded. They understood what to do and, most of all, the necessity to act quickly.

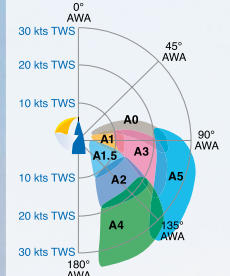
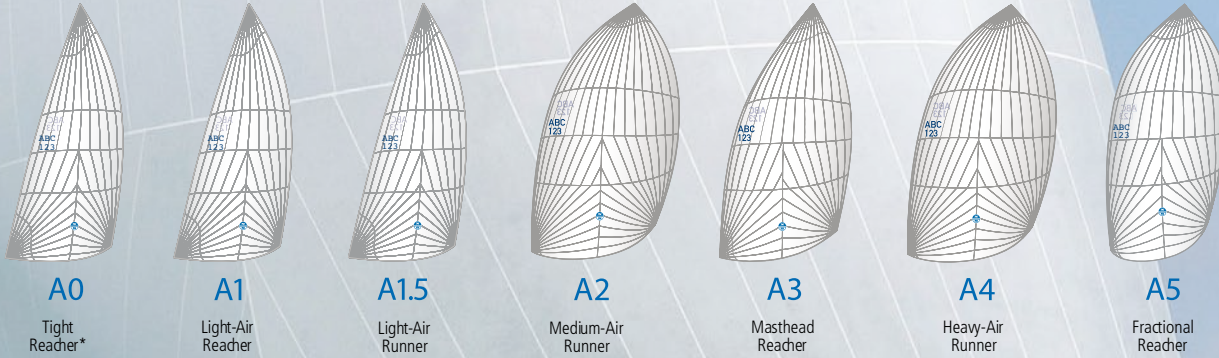
Usually people are more careful while sailing but accidents also happen at anchor, as we are less attentive to the movements of the boat or even the surroundings. One evening, we were having drinks on another boat when we heard a splash and then Cléa calling for us. She was just three and had fallen in the water while trying to climb back into our dinghy.



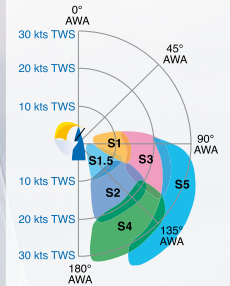
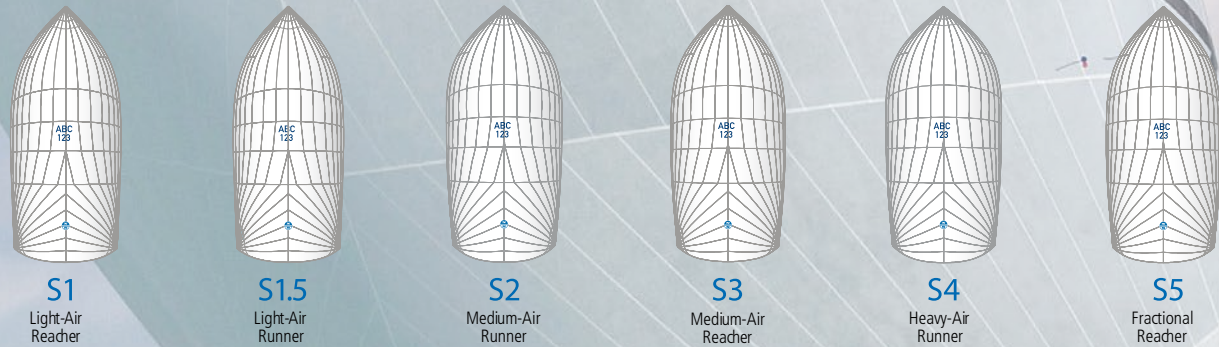
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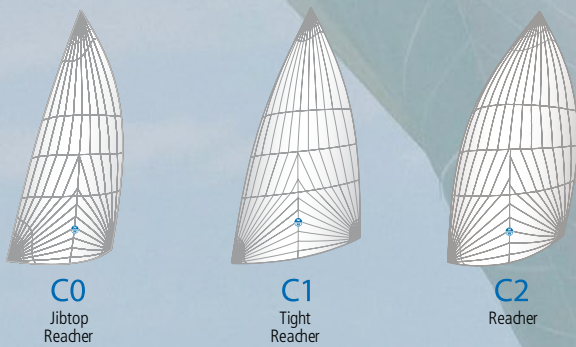
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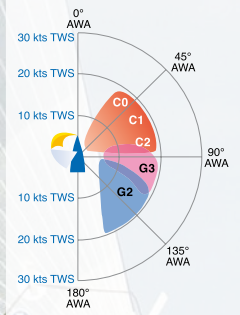
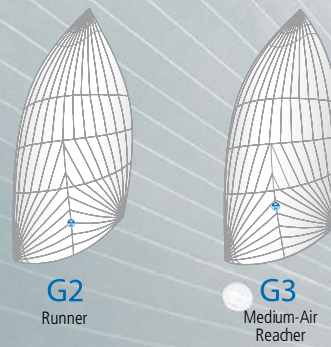
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The sheer beauty of Fatu Hiva, the southernmost island of the Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia.



Early in our first passage from Cape Town while sailing towards St Helena Island.

Luckily, she knew how to keep her head out of the water and float. This was a wake-up call and we were much more careful when the kids were boarding our dinghy or another boat. The water games have another rule while we are at anchor. When the children want to go and explore with their kayaks or our sailing dinghy, they have to wear their sailing lifejackets, despite them being very good swimmers. Again, we also wear them when we join them on a kayak exploration.

Marinas can be dangerous. When we moved on board, Cl  a was just two and happy to run around without any apprehension of moving pontoons. She always walked with one of us on the jetty and had to wear her lifejacket a few times when it was too slippery. Despite all our attention, our three children have fallen in

the water from a marina dock. Every time, they shouted loudly, but without panicking. They are all good swimmers and grabbed whatever they could.

### Health

Health is always a concern. For example, two of our kids were seriously prone to seasickness when we left and I was worried about dehydration. We used all kinds of remedies, from natural ones to the more classic and chemical ones, as well as lots of rehydrating drinks. In the end the kids got used to sea sickness and got it less and less. They could manage with a bucket next to them, even continuing their daily games, knowing they had to have a few sips of water (or flat Coke) regularly.

Before we left, we all had shots (tetanus, polio, MMR, yellow fever, hepatitis A and B, typhoid fever). It is better to be safe than sorry. Some of these injections are compulsory for some countries.

Gregory and I went on a new First Aid course. I did a more specific course entitled 'Ship Captain Medical Course' which included five days of theory and class practice. Best of all was the few hours in the emergency unit of a public hospital on a Friday night to practice, in a real situation, my newly acquired knowledge. I then knew I could do things that I wouldn't do normally.

In our medical box I had what looked like an endless list of medicines. I drew it from comparing sailing blogs, travelling websites and medical books. I gave this four-page list to our GP to get his opinion. His first thoughts were that it would be far too much to buy and have on board! Finally, he came on board and together, knowing where we would go and most of all knowing our medical history, we drew up a new list, much shorter (so cheaper too!). Whenever possible we used wide range medicine and medicine which could be used for kids with an appropriate dosage. Our medical box, stored in a high locker, consists of three plastic boxes where everything is packed in Ziploc bags. There is a brief note listing what is in the bag. A summary sheet was inserted on the top of the box for a quick screening.

We also have medical dictionaries and a good medical guide designed by a French

doctor especially for sailors doing offshore races (Guide de la m  decine    distance J.-Y. Chauve). In France there is a free service offered to sailors and cruisers by a general hospital ([www.chu-toulouse.fr/centre-de-consultation-medicale](http://www.chu-toulouse.fr/centre-de-consultation-medicale)).

On the phone (another good reason to have a sat phone) they will try their best to diagnose the problem and help you with the medicines you have on board. It is nice to know there is someone somewhere, ready to listen and guide you.

As we rely mainly on ourselves, we might be more cautious on board. While sailing we are in a nearly bug-free environment and so less prone to catch odd viruses. We haven't been really sick since we left and we have used only two sets of antibiotics in four years for the five of us (Victor had a high fever for more than 48 hours and Cl  a had what I thought was tonsillitis). We met a doctor who was delivering a boat from Cape Town to France and e-mailed him few times when we had more specific questions or weren't sure about medical issues. So no bad illnesses, but we broke three toes. This could have been avoided, but we have funny chairs on board and the feet stick out too much, ready to catch bare feet. We also have a little basket which is available easily and has first aid essentials. The kids know what's for what and can self-treat their cuts or bumps. In this basket there is a good antibacterial cream (highly recommended as it takes much longer to heal properly in a damp and salty environment), a good antihistamine cream for these persistent bites, some arnica for the bumps and some 'burnshield' gel for burns.

Following the trade winds means lots of sun. *Merlin* has a cockpit nearly fully covered so when we are on board we are quite well protected. When we play in the water, go snorkelling or go to the beach, we always wear skin rash tops and hats and put on loads of sun cream. There is always a tub at the door, ready to be used. The children put their hats on and use plenty of cream without being reminded all the time. It really became a habit.

### Education

As I taught myself (mainly sciences for high school kids), I was designated to be in charge of the schooling on board. I did not want to create my own curriculum so a corresponding



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Victor and an Iguana during our stop at the Galapagos Islands.



We had this entire beach to ourselves when on the Las Aves Archipelago in the Caribbean Sea which is part of Venezuela.

schooling system made sense. The 'CNED' is a well-known and approved corresponding French system which has been in place for more than 50 years. As our kids are bilingual and started school at the French School in Cape Town it was logical to switch to this system. Cl  a didn't do any schooling the first year; she was mainly busy colouring, cutting magazines, pasting

pictures and doing puzzles. However, from the second year, my mornings were quite busy, tutoring three kids, each at a different level. We generally did school in the morning, from 08h00 to 11h00. The boys had to do four subjects and if they were fast enough, could finish around 10h00. Having other kids around the anchorage was really good motivation for all of them as

they were eager to go and play together on the beach or on one of the boats straight after school.

Usually, we didn't work on weekends and had regular breaks as holidays were important for all. Victor and F  lix learnt really quickly to work independently and I was mainly there to answer questions and guide them through their work. The system we used is quite academic and strict. Many subjects are taught (even arts or music) and tests must be done on a regular basis and sent back to France about every three weeks where they are evaluated. The feedback was sent to my mother who then scanned them and sent them back to us.

It wasn't always easy as we had to stay sometimes longer than planned at one spot. We might, for example, be expecting school books, or the kids had to finish some evaluations which had to be posted because no post would be available for a couple of weeks. With a little organization and good planning this system worked well. It would be lying to say that teaching my own kids was easy and stress-free. I had to be very clear with the children that during the school time, I was wearing the teacher's hat and they had to behave as if they were at school. We had some tension and fights but they never lead to mutiny.

Education is far more than just theoretical learning. On a boat, kids learn so much on a daily basis that people should not worry too much. They learn about history, geography, languages, and it is easy to introduce new concepts. Learning is such a natural behaviour and can be lots of fun in all these different places.

However, having fun was a big part of our cruising life too. We decided to go sailing with our kids as we wanted to see them grow and develop, to interact with them and experience all these new discoveries together. For us their age was just the right age. Cl  a was maybe too young when we left to really remember everything, but she grew up with a free spirit and a strong sense of curiosity. After school, we were discovering the places where we were, visiting museums, walking in forests or streets, playing on the beach or trying all kind of water sports. Our three children are now very confident swimmers. You can't have better conditions to dive than in clear warm Pacific waters with lots of sea life. Greg (who was a dive instructor) took the opportunity to teach Victor and F  lix. The kids also found hundreds of different ways to have fun on board.

### The Present Situation

The voyage is now over as we need to fill the kitty again. We are still living on *Merlin*, which is, unfortunately, for sale. The kids started in an Australian school a year ago and they had no major problems integrating to a different schooling system (in English). They are rich in hundreds of experiences. They know that the world is vast and diverse, that there will always be friends and fun somewhere. As a family we became 'The Merlins'. We all like our new 'surname'.

The children often speak of their cruising experience, doing some presentations at school; and they are dreaming of, one day, doing the Indian Ocean. So, I guess, we didn't go too wrong embarking them on our dream. ⚓



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