

the call of the sea

A French-South African family of five went sailing the high seas for two years. EMMANUELLE BUECHER-HALL shares the highlights of their ocean voyage.

PHOTOGRAPHS: EMMANUELLE BUECHER-HALL



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I started sailing when I was a teenager. I couldn't stop dreaming of one day crossing an ocean. Maybe I really wanted to see for myself what was beyond that horizon. Life swirled and my attraction for the sea just grew bigger and bigger. Then I landed in Cape Town for an 18-month research project, and met Gregory, who became my husband. A few years later we were a family of five. One day I asked: "How about going sailing around the world?" The answer was unsurprisingly simple: "Yes, sure, let's do it!" Gregory has a very solid sailing background and mine seemed good enough. Our daily life acquired a stimulating new goal.

launching a dream

It took us five years to get ready. Gregory's business had to be turned around before it could be sold and, of course, we had to find a boat that could take our family on the high seas. After seeing a little ad in a newspaper for an empty catamaran hull, we decided to add an extra challenge and build our dream boat, with the help of a professional team. It took us 18 months to complete *Merlin*. We sold our house, worked out our sailing routes, upgraded our skipper tickets, trained for medical emergencies and started homeschooling.

During that time, we met people who couldn't understand our choice of taking such an extended break in our careers, of unschooling our children and leaving the conventional life. They called us crazy or irresponsible. On the other hand, our families were very encouraging and supportive. We had amazing friends who listened to our ideas and helped us in our preparations. When we threw the lines in November 2008, we were ready mentally and technically. With a big smile on our faces and knots in our stomachs, we headed west, watching Table Mountain slowly disappear behind us. We were living our dream and our first ocean was waiting. At the time of departure, Victor was eight, Félix six and Cléa two-and-a-half years old.

sea nomads

We slipped very easily into our nomadic life. We quickly found a new rhythm, sailing from one place to another, entering new countries and discovering island after island, meeting new friends, discovering new customs, tasting new fruit and listening to new languages.

During a passage, a sailing boat never stops. You do not anchor in the middle of the ocean and all go to bed at night. So when our sailing passages were longer than a day, Gregory and I were doing three-hour watches. There was always someone awake checking on sails, monitoring the wind, scanning the horizon for other boats and being with the children.

The children had a normal routine. Whatever the conditions or the day of the week, they started school after breakfast. At the start of our adventure, Cléa was too young to do school work so she was kept busy cutting out magazines, colouring and reading. Being French, I decided to use a well-known French schooling correspondence system for Victor and Félix. I had my teacher hat on for a few hours every day while the boys worked on their maths and French. After these core topics, we switched between history, geography, ➤

At sea, our afternoons were spent playing games, fishing, watching movies or documentaries and, of course, reading.



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sciences, music and arts. Every month, we had to post some tests to France, which evaluated their learning progress. After a bumpy start, especially for Victor, who didn't want to leave his friends behind, we found our pace. The children understood the necessity of spending a few hours each day doing their school work. They quickly became very independent students and were proud of their own achievements.

At sea, our afternoons were spent playing games, fishing, watching movies or documentaries and, of course, reading. Our longest passage, from the Galapagos to the Marquesas (in French Polynesia), took 17 days. It was 17 days of ocean all around us, of being by ourselves and of having to be self-sufficient. We had great weather conditions, were sailing quite fast and the passage did not seem boring. Like other sea passages, we had time to dream, time to snuggle with each other, time to laugh, time to dance to very loud music, time to speak to each other, time to admire every sunset and sunrise, and time to appreciate that we were together, and happy. These were very precious family times.

young explorers

When we were at anchor, the children still did their schooling every morning. However, if other "boat kids" were around, their motivation was quadrupled. They would wake up early, prepare their own breakfast and start studying before we were even awake. Most of the time, school was over by 10am. All the children from the



same anchorage, no matter their age or nationality, played together on one of the boats, on the beach or in the water.

For the parents, mornings were dedicated to boat maintenance, cleaning and other "boat" chores. As Cléa still wasn't old enough for school, she helped her dad fix what needed to be looked after and was the perfect helper, knowing all the tools' names. We would also do our shopping in the morning, which could be quite an expedition in remote locations without a car. In the afternoons, we would generally explore the surroundings on land or under water. Being on a tight budget, we mostly used the available public transport, which was a great way of meeting interesting characters. We also walked a lot from one place to another and used our bicycles.

We made a point of exploring at our own pace, being curious, and chatting with the locals. We went on lots of hikes in tropical forests, swam near amazing waterfalls and walked along deserted beaches. We wore our masks, snorkels and fins as often as possible, exploring the reef and surrounding corals. Cléa started



▲ School work was not neglected





▲ Elation as we arrive in Australia after two years of sailing

following us with her mask, snorkel and fins, holding a noodle, but she quickly became a more adventurous swimmer. The boys had the freedom to use their kayaks to visit their friends on other boats, much the same way onshore children use their bikes.

clearest waters, have whales follow us at sunset and tasted the sweetest fruit. The children played soccer with local children, who spoke many different languages. They could safely explore deserted beaches and start a bonfire. They enjoyed walking,

We learnt that life is not about your possessions, but about who you are and what you do.

settling down, sort of

After crossing two oceans and exploring the world for two years, our sailing kitty was getting light, so we decided to stop in Australia. Four years later, we are still in Brisbane and living a simple life aboard Merlin. After a couple of years of unconventional childhoods, Victor, Félix and Cléa are back at school and doing well. They adapted swiftly to their new environment and made lots of friends.

When you travel by boat, you are travelling with your home. There is no packing and unpacking, and you always sleep in the same bed, which can offer a sense of security to young children. We also found that travelling as a family was slower, but still simple and very rewarding. Local families can relate to you and we made contacts easily.

These two years have given us the opportunity to see breathtaking sceneries, from uninhabited islands to active volcanos. We have had the chance to swim with sharks and manta rays in the

swimming and diving. We learnt that life is not about your possessions, but about who you are and what you do. Most of all, we had the chance to live all these moments together, as a family.

Today, we are all less fussy and complicated and are more indulgent, tolerant and curious. We have given our children a sense of adventure. We hope that they will keep discovering that our world is astonishing. They know that doors can be opened and dreams can be lived. ☐

** If you would like to share the Buecher-Hall's journey with your children, Emmanuelle has also written a children's book, Merlin's Voyage, which is available on Amazon.*



▲ Victor and his kayak



▲ Visiting Prony Bay on New Caledonia



▲ Victor and Cléa spotting rays in Bora Bora



▲ Cléa fishing

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