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The crew of Quetzal enjoyed the water during a windless ocean crossing earlier this year.

Sailing on a flat Atlantic Ocean

Becalmed during an ocean passage

Usually, an Atlantic crossing turns into an adventure filled with some rough weather, lots of heavy wind, and even some angry, frothy, churning seas washing over the deck.

Throw into this two-week odyssey a passing cold front or severe storm, maybe some major equipment failures onboard, and an injury or crew mishap of some sort while at sea, and you've got the makings of a good yarn, perhaps even a great seafaring book.

Well, not this time. Not for this sailor. At least, not during this ocean crossing.

David Patriarche, who sails a Hunter 34 from the Whitby Marina, booked a two-week sail with author and former delivery skipper John Kretschmer (At the Mercy of the Sea, a true account of three sailors caught in Hurricane Lenny in 1999), who sells passages and teaches blue-water cruising aboard his Kaufman 47 ft. sailboat called Quetzal.

Patriarche first took sailing lessons in

1976 in Whitby and has owned a few boats with his wife, Joanne. The couple have two adult boys and have chartered extensively with family and friends in Europe (Croatia, Greece, France and elsewhere) and in the Caribbean.



David Patriarche at the helm.

He wanted to get some blue-water experience, so he signed up for an Atlantic passage with Kretschmer to learn celestial navigation and sailing on a large ocean.

He joined with six other paying guests to sail in late January from Cape Verde, located off the African coast, to Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, with Kretschmer, who grew up in Michigan and sailed the Great Lakes

before gaining fame by rounding Cape Horn at the tender age of about 24.

The plan was for a spirited downwind sail pushed along by the easterly traditional trade winds and an ocean current of under a knot, on a straight-line run from the volcanic archipelago of Cape Verde along a latitude of 16 degrees North to Guadeloupe.

The sailing trip was supposed to take 14 days, cover 3,863 nm., with an average speed of about six knots. That was the plan. Well, Mother Nature had other plans.

The crew ended up pretty much becalmed sometimes a few days out of Cape Verde. The trip ended up taking 16 days and 4,210 nm. because a weather router kept pushing them south off their intended route in a desperate search to find some wind.

They wound up making landfall in Martinique, 189 km. to the south of Guadeloupe, their intended destination. They missed the island of Dominica, which lies between these other two Caribbean islands.

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The crew reached shore with only drips of fuel in the tank, without fresh food but still with some canned food supplies.

Along the way, they didn't have to don foulies because there was little nasty weather on this journey. Instead, they donned swimming trunks and went for a dip mid-ocean in a giant sea of flat water, even while the boat bobbed to and fro with all the canvas up.

Kretschmer has logged more than 300,000 off-shore sailing miles and has done more than 26 trans-Atlantic crossings. He charges between \$4,800-\$8,000 USD. for a week on a "training passage" aboard his 47 ft. yacht. He also does courses while at various stops.

Many of Kretschmer's eight books detail passages he's done with others, and Patriarche says he read the skipper's latest book hoping that he got a mention after doing a blustery passage with him across the Atlantic a few years ago, but was left out of the book.

The standard joke amongst the paying crew onboard was that you had to do something miraculous or ridiculous while on a passage to get a mention in one of the books, like falling overboard, breaking a bone or nearly dying, jokes Patriarche.

One of Kretschmer's books, at the Mercy of the Sea, has been optioned by a movie studio. He has just released a new book entitled Sailing to the Edge of Time that details his sailing.

Some years ago, Kretschmer transitioned from delivery captain -- sailing other people's boats across oceans and hiring crew to help him with watches and sailing -- to charging people to sail

A flat ocean added days to this Atlantic crossing.

onboard his own yacht while teaching about blue-water sailing.

"It's a crazy life and when you read his books you understand how crazy it is," says Patriarche. "He's had boats that when he's pulled into a dock, the boat sank right there.

"He's found no end to people who want to sail with him...so, instead of hiring people he started charging people."

Eventually, Patriarche is planning a longer cruise with his family in 2021 when they will spend the winter island hopping in the Caribbean from St. Martin to Grenada.

For this future Caribbean adventure, he's thinking of purchasing a yacht outright or chartering with the option of buying the boat outright after the trip, if they like it.

Patriarche, who works in the insurance industry, says he was told to take lots of photos during his recent Atlantic trip, his second with Kretschmer.

His first ocean journey was a hair-raising slog in October 2015 from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia to St. Martin in the Caribbean. The Atlantic was so nasty late in the season they were forced to tuck into Shelburne, Nova Scotia, to dodge the remnants of a hurricane and 40-knot wind gusts.

Patriarche's bed and long johns were soaking wet, with water constantly sloshing around below deck because of waves crashing on the deck. The boat has a low freeboard. "It is a wet boat. You feel like you are sailing a submarine half of the time."

He even got seasick on this trip in rough seas -- and he never gets sick. After the rough passage, Patriarche made a promise that he wouldn't repeat

this experience anytime soon. But skipper Kretschmer told him that sailing passages are a bit like child birth, and people forget about the negatives and return for more after a while.

That was the case with Patriarche. But his latest trip on the Atlantic in late January and early February was different. There was very little wind and flat seas this time around.

He did get lots of photos on his recent Atlantic sojourn, but they were mostly sunset shots, since there wasn't much weather to really spice things up along the way.

When he got home, he found he had

many sunset shots with different sail configurations in the foreground. They gave their all to keep the boat moving along and to conserve fuel. In one shot, the sails were set wing-and-wing, and in another, sails were poled out.

"I got lots of photos of sunsets, but we saw no whales and only six birds," Patriarche says "The only difference with my sunset shots is the sail is here and the sail is there.

"In the first couple of days we had some wind, but it only lasted for a couple of days," says Patriarche, in a recent presentation on his trip in Whitby to other sailors. On the way, the crew spotted very little wildlife, other than a few birds.

The trip was supposed to last about 14 days, with the sailboat going an average of six knots, according to pilot charts, which are summaries of typical weather patterns for particular parts of the world, gleaned from decades of actual wind and current data.

But the Bermuda-Azores high-pressure system had sunk south to cover some of their route from Cape Verde. This high-pressure system is commonly known as the doldrums or Horse Latitudes, named because of the common practice in the 1800s of ship crews tossing horses overboard to shed weight and possibly pick up some boat speed.

Patriarche and the rest of the crew didn't have any horses to toss overboard. They decided that if the boat speed dropped below four knots, they would turn on the motor. They did a lot of motoring, and arrived in St. Martin with just drops of fuel in the tank, and the jerry cans on the deck dry as a bone.

The crew had to push it a little during the journey because, with a



Prevailing winds and currents off the coast of West Africa, 10 degrees N to 35 degrees N, during November. Based on information from the Atlantic Pilots Atlas.

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change in the final destination, flights were missed and hotel bookings came and went.

Lots of motoring wasn't overly fun, says Patriarche. "We tried to sleep next to the engine room and it was a pain in the ass. I've got to tell you, it was the longest of the longest trips. I think I read seven books."

Patriarche says the crew started out thinking that the 47 ft. boat was spacious, but the boat seemed to shrink along the way. "Every day, the boat gets a little smaller. You start out with a 47 and end up with a 30 footer," he says.

They used a windvane for self steering, which was added at a cost of about \$7,000 U.S. to the boat after years and many miles using just an autohelm. The skipper found that the autohelm sucked a lot of power, but

steers the boat straighter.

Besides saving power, the windvane can be used as an emergency tiller. Also onboard was a watermaker at a cost of \$5,300, which meant an almost endless supply of drinking water. All cabins were used by the six crew and skipper, and settees were taken as well.

During the trip, they fished and landed some mahi-mahi, which was cut up into filets and enjoyed. They also saw very little traffic while crossing the ocean, but did pass a Portuguese fishing boat which was away from port for a couple of months at a time.

They made radio contact and traded two bottles of booze for a huge, 60-lb slab of swordfish, already cut up and ready for market.

"We figured the street value was \$600,

for two bottles of booze. We got off light," says Patriarche. "I'm not a fish person but I would eat that every day."

They ran into many patches of sargassum, a brown-colored seaweed that floats on the water, and can get tangled with the rudder and propeller. The skipper had to occasionally dive to free the long strands of seaweed from the boat.

The crew was mainly made up of Americans from many different walks of life, and they all got along great onboard, says Patriarche. Some of them have sailed with Kretschmer before. Patriarche says he's finished with big trips on the ocean, for now, but he is helping to organize a visit by Kretschmer to Toronto, where he will sign books and talk about his sailing. Plans are for a visit to Whitby and a Toronto location.

The crew aboard Quetzal, a Kaufman 47.



A 60-lb sword fish was a valuable trade for 2 bottles of booze.



Sunset shots prevailed when little wind provided even less action for photographs.