

The Oceans are immense...the story of a Long Voyage.

Our voyage in 1966 in our little thirty foot trimaran Edward Bear continued on Westward from Penang, across the Bay of Bengal, towards Colombo in Ceylon. This voyage started very late in the season, the last of the N.E. Monsoon winds were faltering...we were in the grip of the Doldrums. We took 29 days to cover just 1350 nautical miles towards the setting sun, which disappeared dead ahead, and rose again dead astern without fail, or even unscheduled delay.

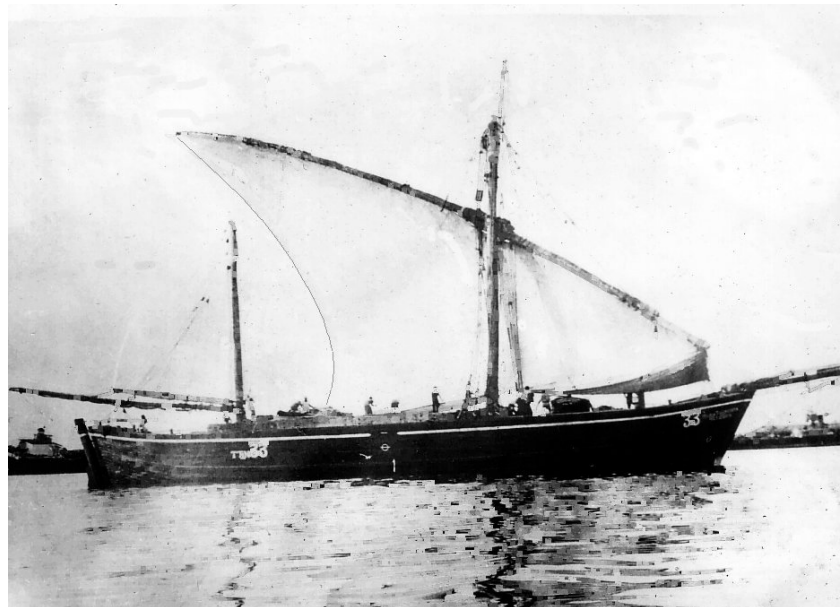
Edward Bear under sail in Auckland Harbour, 1964.



For about 26 consecutive days, once past the Nicobars, we saw no land, no shipping, no sign of human life. The ocean was a big place...any dry land impossibly distant. We did listen to BBC News on a tiny radio where reception required the antenna wire to be clipped to our backstay, wrapped three times around the radio, with the end grounded in the sea. The urbane tones of the BBC purported to claim that the world at large still carried on in its feckless ways, but I began to suspect that these bulletins were just an automatic, prerecorded hoax, and that the human race and dry land had ceased to exist.

Our arrival finally in the Port of Colombo reopened our eyes to humanity in all its rich colours. As we sailed between the seawalls of the entrance, a huge Indian cargo Lateener sailed slowly in behind us. The crew were already furling the huge lateen sail along the massive spar by the time I could row my dinghy over to point my camera at such a beautiful anachronism. And I never have seen anything so grand on the sea since! Such marvelous fabrics of man have disappeared, along with other native fleets, under a mindless avalanche of Progress, while I have sat idly by, planning to record their passing, and doing very little.

Indian Lateen-rigged cargo ship in Colombo.



We had various adventures in Ceylon, but this story concerns our subsequent voyage thence. We sailed from Colombo bound for Gan, just one of the many islands of Addu Atoll, at the very Southern end of the chain of Maldivian atolls, a distance of just 517 nautical miles, a mere jaunt compared to our earlier ocean crossings....see Map.

By now the Monsoon had truly blown its last...this was late May, the interim month between NE and SW Monsoons...a period of calms and variable winds. After five days we had sailed and drifted barely half way to Gan.

That afternoon the sky to the SW darkened suddenly, and a long black wall of roiling cloud rolled towards us. It hit with blistering winds and shredded the small stormsail we rushed to rig in place of our usual canvas. The speed of the wind was hard to gauge, but within a few hours it had whipped up Force 10 seas, large cresting waves that regularly broke in surges of white water. The SW Monsoon had begun with a vengeance! There was no possibility of setting any canvas, and our pathetic attempt at rigging a sea anchor was washed away by the breakers. With little choice we battened down, and hunkered in our little cabin. Most of the time life was bearable, but whenever a crest broke directly over our little craft there was first a rumbling roar of an avalanche, and then we were shaken around like corks. Sleep was impossible, and our nerves were becoming frazzled, but our little ship stood up to it, without our greatest fear being enacted, that of being caught beam on and capsized by a breaking wave.

One odd incident occurred during all the crashing and banging of the storm. I woke from a heavy sleep feeling decidedly disoriented, and needing fresh air. I slid the hatch open, and put my head out in the shrieking wind and rain. I then felt even more strange, unsteady, and heavily bemused, almost amused to the point of giggling at the commotion outside. I wobbled back into the cabin to be hit by the dense atmosphere inside...our cabin smelled like the inside of a keg of rum! I checked our "rum-store", at the foot of my bunk, where we had stowed two flagons of Royal Navy rum, Nelson's Blood, that kind souls in the RN had given us during our stay in HMS Terror, the Navy base in Singapore. Both flagons were broken, and their contents were still washing back and forth the length of my bunk, my mattress was soaked in the stuff! My shipmates were annoyed that I had not shared our last source of comfort with them.

For perhaps twelve hours the Force 10 winds continued, and then abated somewhat to Force 8, for two days, although the sea-state remained wild. During all this time the wind and breaking seas were blowing us ENE, rather back in the direction of Penang!

On the third day of the storm the windspeed dropped a little more, and we were emboldened to set some sail...a much reefed mains'l and our smallest jib. We seemed to be making some ground to windward, towards our destination, except when a crest would break directly upwind, when we were then forced to bear away, ease sheets and fly along in the trough like only a multihull can in a strong beam wind, evading the worst of the white water. This was exhilarating sailing but I suspected that strong surface currents, induced by the wind, would be negating our attempts at progress to windward. With thick cloud cover I had no opportunity for any celestial navigation, the only way to fix our position.

The dawn of the fourth day came with a few patches of sky, through which I could recognize, and shoot, three bright stars. My calculated Cocked Hat of a position was shocking, we had been blown back several hundred miles to the East! It looked like it might now be difficult even to return to Colombo if the wind should remain so unfavourable. The thought of running downwind, all the way back to Penang, although quite feasible, was too much to contemplate after the efforts of our recent 29 day crossing.



The seas continued to break long after the wind had moderated.

I studied a small-scale chart of the entire Indian Ocean. Some 300 miles to our South we could expect to encounter the Northern fringes of the SE Trade Winds, which would certainly propel us Westward...but where to?...certainly the East Coast of Africa, 2,800 miles away, was too far to imagine! The Trades would necessarily take us well South of Gan....could we sail further West of its longitude, turn North again into the newly established SW Monsoon, and then sail downwind, Eastwards, to Gan?

This would take us more than a thousand miles out of our way, and involve no less than two crossings of the Doldrums, that band of calms and very light winds that separates the two great wind systems of the Indian Ocean. We might linger becalmed in the Doldrums for days or weeks, eating and drinking our meagre supplies. Our projected course South into the Trades pointed us straight towards a point in the ocean which has been described as the furthest from any land in all the oceans. While the Pacific might be much larger than the Indian Ocean, the former has so many island groups spread across its face, compared to its almost empty counterpart. My crazy plan would seem to propel us in the direction of the most isolated place on the globe! We were no shrinking, timorous novices at this game, we had already encompassed near half the world in our tiny ship, but from the perspective of our fragile little community, these further steps truly seemed a leap into an unknown fate.

I was confident of the ability of my sturdy little vessel to get us there...but would our food and water last another twenty five or thirty days?...certainly we would have to rely on rainsqualls, which were fairly common, to replenish our water. For reserve food we had dozens of cartons of US Army Combat Rations, a legacy of our stay in war-torn Viet Nam.. But would we mere mortals of the crew have the perseverance, the courage even, to press on for so long, continuously moving further from the safety of populated land? Once back in the heavy cloud of the Monsoon winds, would we sight sufficient heavenly bodies to enable me to find the low-lying Addu Atoll, where the highest points are the crowns of the coco-palms? If we were swept past Addu in another SW storm, we might end up back here again, having sailed full circle, with the only prospect of a 1,500 mile run downwind to Penang!...an extra ten days at least.

I put two alternatives to my crew: we could sail back to Penang now, a leisurely voyage of ten days, or we could attempt my ambitious plan. The response of all three was unanimous...press on. The prospect of arriving penniless back in Malaysia and looking for paid work while waiting out six months of unfavourable Monsoon would almost certainly have destroyed the will to continue thereafter.

We sailed fast to the South immediately, to arrive in recognizably Doldrum conditions within two days. In contrast to the last week, the sky was brilliantly clear. I was on watch at midnight in almost no wind and large, oily swells, when I noticed that a bright star that was visible while our ship was on the crest of one wave, had disappeared completely on the top of the next. Because the air was so clear, I had been able to witness the setting of a star into the sea!...a sight I have never again experienced. I quickly took a reasonably accurate GMT reading of the event.

Over the next four hours of my watch I timed three more stars that set into the sea in the West. By using the correction tables for zero altitude observations, I was able to calculate a rough and ready position fix...star navigation at midnight!, an impossibility under normal atmospheric conditions when the brightest of stars fades out when within five degrees of the horizon.

We found the band of Trade Winds, and turned West. The steady light winds pushed us towards the setting sun at roughly 80 miles per day. For seven days a school of Dorado followed us ever Westwards in the shade of our decks between the hulls. We tried to count them....some 17 to 20 was the general consensus. We tried to tempt them with baited hooks, and with towed lures...these being our attempt to model a flying fish, the Dorado's favourite food...all with no luck. In frustration, and in hunger for some variation in our diet, we tried shooting at them with our ancient 303 rifle. One shot, from directly above, where there is no angle of refraction to allow for, struck home, and the iridescent, green-blue torpedo-shape floated up showing its silver belly. One of our brave crew leapt in to retrieve the one-metre long fish, despite the fact that we were sailing along at two knots, faster than he could swim. We retrieved both fish and crewman and ate an enormous fish dinner. What we could not eat we salted and dried in strips in the sun.

On another occasion during a complete, glassy calm...we were on the fringe of the Doldrums still...the remaining Dorados abandoned us. Later we noticed a commotion a hundred metres away of green-blue backs. We paddled over in our dinghy, equipped with a harpoon we had fashioned by straightening a big shark-hook. Our band of Dorados were taking turns in leisurely attacks on some frantic small fry which were sheltering under the illusory protection of a wooden lid. Since our hitch-hiking predators had become accustomed to a boat floating above them, it proved easy to harpoon one. Another welcome feast...but there was a certain sadness in killing these beautiful animals, for they always passed through a rapid succession of brilliant colour changes during their death throes, including shimmering shades of gold...wherefrom they derive their Spanish name.

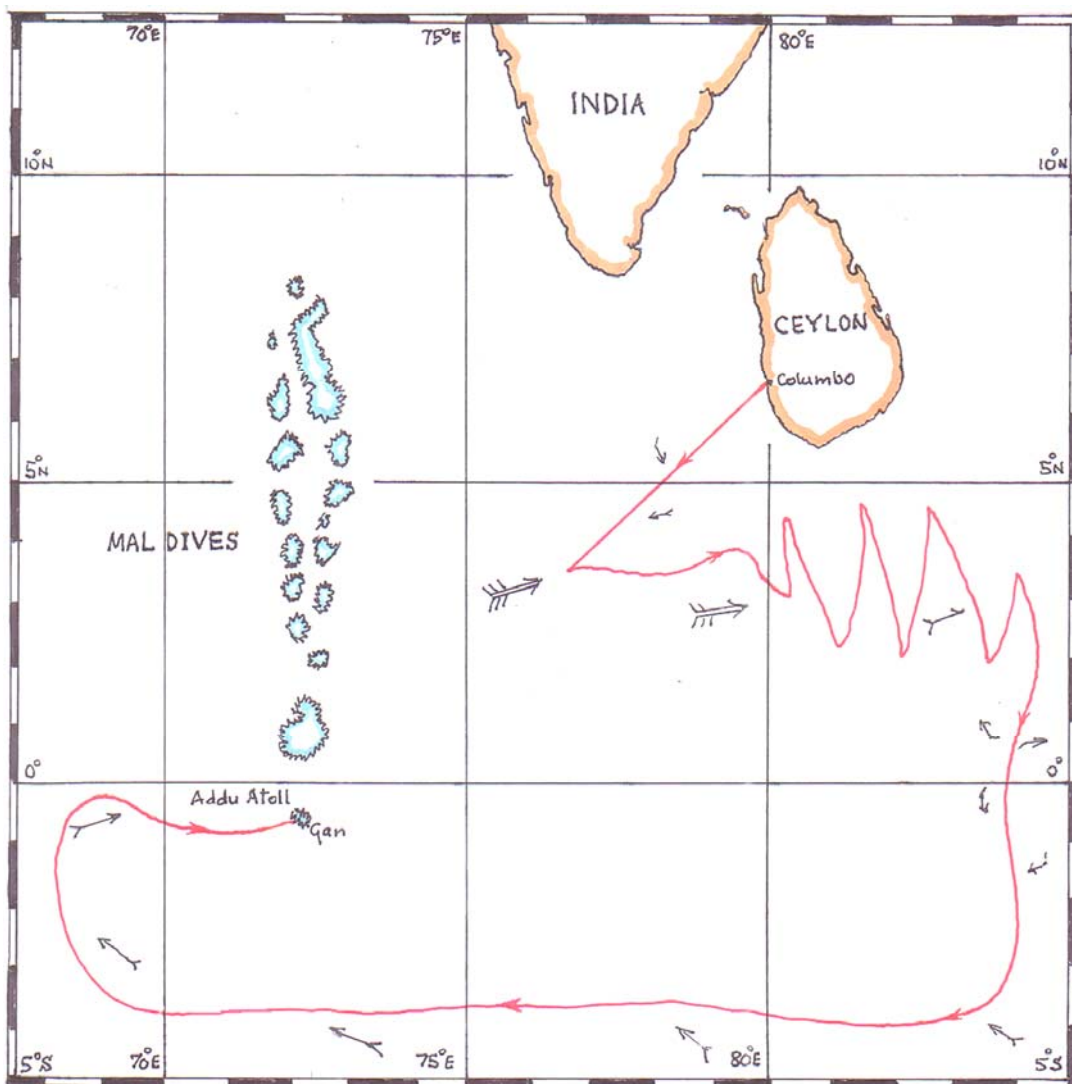
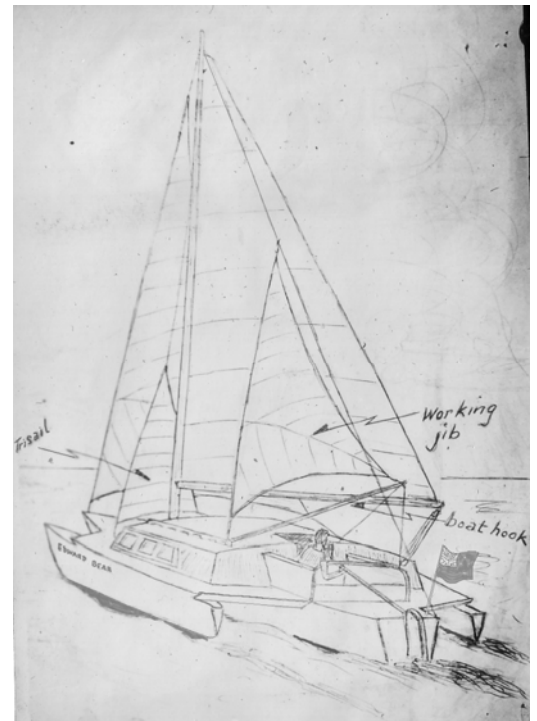
Apart from these two wonderful feasts, our diet grew dreary. We had long finished our staples, except for a large sack of wheat flour which was heavily infested with weevils. The utter impossibility of picking hundreds of these vile little animals out of the flour made the necessity of closing one's eyes and swallowing a dozen of them with every mouthful the lesser of two weevils...er...evils.

The US Army combat rations had long been emptied of basic foods, and tasty snacks, but numerous cachets of milk powder, sugar and margarine remained. Along with our bag of flour this should have enabled us to make bread, and pasta, pancakes and cake?...but our combined culinary skills were not up to the task. Some of our results were astonishing: one particularly gooey concoction, when heated in a frying pan, produced round objects with hard, brown bottoms and a top surface covered in sink-holes...reminiscent of what I in my youth referred to as "crumpets". Not much of what we cooked was appetizing, especially without anything much to spread on it, but we had no other items on the menu, bar weevils.

We sailed on in light winds, setting as much extra canvas as we could (see contemporary drawing done during the voyage), setting four sails where two were usual. Our anxiety increased with every new day in which we progressed ever away from land. When the evening stars finally told us we were more than three hundred miles SW of Gan, we turned North in some trepidation about encountering the violent SW winds of our earlier storm.

The transition from Trade Winds through the Doldrums and into the SW Monsoon turned out to be quite gradual and reasonably gentle. The Monsoon skies were largely cloudy, but these parted enough times to allow me to shoot sun or stars, and so we sailed confidently towards the crowns of the palm trees of Addu atoll, and its islet of Gan.

The hospitality of the RAF at their resort-like airbase under the palms on Gan proved overwhelming: fresh fruit and real bread, with all manner of tasty stuff to spread on it, beefsteaks, cold beer and comradeship. Scurvy and our overwhelming sense of isolation were banished.



To make good just 517 miles from Colombo to Gan we had sailed nearly 2,400 miles, and taken 35 days to do it....see Map. If we had not discovered Addu, or any other atolls of the Maldivian chain, our food supply would have run out within a few days more. We had not seen one human face, nor one ship, in all that time. Many months later I was to sail from the Seychelles, a thousand miles further West, in an ancient British India steamer to Bombay, thence by Air India to Colombo, and on to Penang. That last leg, covered in just three and a half hours, gave no impression of the size of our Planet, nor of the immensity of the Sea, unlike our earlier voyages of 29 and 35 days. It merely carried

me from one air terminal to another, almost identical one. I have scorned the virtues of air travel ever since, for it offers neither adventure, nor colour.