A FAMILY AFFAIR

Emma Bamford meets the Atlantic Odyssey: all-age sailing for an epic ocean crossing
spent seven years cruising the world – was the original founder of the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers).

“I believe that sailing with your family is still the best way to go cruising,” he said. “That’s how I started, and for me it’s still the most pleasurable way. I am lucky in that I still get to sail with Doina and Ivan, even though they are now in their 40s.

“It’s a great thing to do, to show your children the world, and I wanted to give people the opportunity to do it themselves, and to help them.”

Two years ago he launched his Atlantic Odyssey – a small, family-friendly Atlantic rally. “Jimmy effectively came out of retirement for this,” said the indefatigable Gwenda.

It is very much a Cornell family project – Jimmy and Gwenda were there to see the boats off, Jimmy welcomed them to Martinique and Doina is events co-ordinator (there are four other Odyssey rallies, including the round-the-world Blue Planet Odyssey). This season, 46 boats took part in two halves. Thirty-three left Lanzarote in November, and the last boat arrived in Martinique on 22 December. A second fleet of 13 boats, Atlantic Odyssey II, left Gran Canaria on 8 January, for the same destination.

Jimmy said at the skipper briefing in Lanzarote, the night before the first fleet departed: “The atmosphere we have had here in the last two weeks has
been fantastic – better than we have ever had before, maybe because we have so many families, maybe because everyone is so open-minded. The Atlantic Odyssey will not grow – at 50 or 60 boats we will stop and have another event. We won’t go to 200 boats, but return to the original spirit of the event and show that you can organise something like this for sailors, not for commercial reasons.”

When I arrived in Arrecife, the day before the first Atlantic Odyssey departed, there was an overriding sense of calm on the pontoon. Final provisioning, fruit-cleaning and packing had been finished, and crew were enjoying the last few hours of peace. A passing holidaymaker would have had no inkling these people were about to set off on a big adventure. It was quiet – until the helicopter that Cornell Sailing had booked to carry out a rescue demonstration whirred into view and landed. Then thrilled children of all ages and nationalities put down their iPads and Kindles, picked up their collapsible scooters from the cockpits of whatever yacht they were on and whizzed over to congregate in a big crowd of excitement on the hard, where the helicopter pilot gave them a tour.

Fast friends
Of the 46 boats taking part in the Odyssey, there were 17 with children. Watching them, it was hard to tell who was related to whom. It was obvious that they had quickly forged bonds, both with other children of all ages, and with other parents. After the helicopter tour, one mother led a string of bronzed children back to the boats, like the Pied Piper. When I stepped on board one yacht, to talk to the father, one of his daughters was below, with a girl from another boat, and his own second daughter was off playing somewhere else. It was as if all of the sailing families had merged into one big, chaotic – but safe – family.

The roles of the children in the Atlantic crossing itself varied from boat to boat, depending on the children’s ages, but also on how much sailing experience they had.

Miss Behaving, a Discovery 55, is the yacht of the Page family, Justin, Deb, Hayley, 12, and Riley, nine, who were crossing with their friend Tim James. Justin and Deb had done half a circumnavigation, from Florida home to Australia, before they had their children and are now doing the second half with them. They’ve been at sea for two years. Hayley and Riley get involved in the sailing – they feel the heave and trim, using the powered winches, alter course, and answer the radio – all under instruction. They can lower the duction, start the engine and even drive it over to other anchored boats.

For the past year they’ve been standing solo watches during the day. They know how to check the instruments to see if they’re on course, and whether there’s enough wind to sail. They can stream movies to the iPads, which are set with an alarm every few minutes to remind them to do their look-out duties.

Riley told me: “I’ve made lots of friends. Sam is on another boat and we keep bumping into one another. “That’s not coincidental, Riley!” Justin pointed out. “We do plan to do something, like loom bands, they tend to stick with it longer and make the most of what they’ve got.”

I spoke to them after they’d arrived in the Caribbean. “The kids both did really well,” Justin said. “Riley loved being able to devour books – he read more than 20 novels. Hayley liked night watches and would watch movies during her watch with the timer set for lookouts. She had strict parameters to look out for and was to wake me if needed.”

Younger crews
For the children of German-flagged Vida, life aloft is quite different, not only because Felix, six, and Alexander, three, are much younger, but also because this is the family’s first big sailing trip. Parents Angelika and Bernhard Helm bought their Balicat 42 in Faro two years ago and weren’t planning to circumnavigate. “It just developed,” Angelika said. They moved on board in August last year and their six-day crossing from Faro to Marin, Martinique

CRUISING WITH KIDS

All Schinas, author of Kids in the Cockpit writes:
The entertainment of choice for a child is a playmate, and if none is available then mothers will be called upon to fill the void. At sea, both parents will be too busy to play all day, and so advance planning is needed.

First, recognise that even a whole shelf full of toys will not buy a month of peaceful play. The most useful toys will be ones encouraging creativity.

For a 10-year-old child, reading is a good way to pass the hours. Reading can be educational, too. Computer games are another matter, and would ban this option of retreating into a virtual reality. Instead, emphasise participation in the unique and wonderful adventure of crossing an ocean under sail.

When your child craves companionship, let him join in with your activities, such as baking bread or navigating. This will make the chore take longer – so slow your pace.

Normal kids,” said Justin, who cruised the Pacific with his family when he was nine. “They have seen so much more and hang out with such a varied group of people. The flip side is that at Hayley’s age [most girls] are wanting to wear make-up and dress up. We don’t get that as much. It’s still okay to hold Dad’s hand.

And we don’t have access to the latest toys or trends, so when the kids do something, like loom bands, they tend to stick with it longer and make the most of what they’ve got.”

‘iPads are set with alarms to remind children to do their look-out duties’

Right: Miss Behaving get the warming committee.
Below right: Run downpant over the anchal party.
Left: Menteau du Mart, Martinique
to Lanzarote was their maiden voyage.

"The catamaran is like a little apartment," she said. "For children it’s nice because it’s stable and they have their toys with them. We have pens and paper, Lego and Play-Doh, audiobooks on the iPhone.

"We read a book called Kids in the Cockpit, written by a woman who gave birth to all her children afloat. It covers watches; tells you how to keep children entertained.

"I was astonished how easy it was to get to [Lanzarote from Faro]. You develop a rhythm. I was having breakfast and then reading something to the boys, then Felix would do his exercise books and Alexander tried to do the same. They’d listen to stories."

Bernhard added: "On the Atlantic crossing the kids (and the adults alike) coped surprisingly well."

The Helms have since stopped at several islands in the Caribbean and plan to pass through the Panama Canal to the Galapagos and continue on to the Society or Fiji islands on their way to New Zealand.

Home and away

In contrast to the Helms, and more like the Pages, the Clarke family – Mark, Yvette, Maya (11) and Jenefer (10) – have been cruising on Bear for several years. They crossed from Florida to Bermuda, then to Ireland in 2011 and since then have followed the same annual pattern: cruising for five months and returning to Florida to work and school for seven.

The Clarkes have visited Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, Finland, Denmark, Germany, the UK, Spain and Portugal. They were taking part in the Atlantic Odyssey for the journey back home to Florida, where they planned to refit the boat before going on to the South Pacific. They want to be settled back in Florida by the time the girls turn 14, or 15, when they start high school.

Mark and Yvette made sure the girls attended some of the Atlantic Odyssey instructional seminars with them, as they are aware that Jenefer and Maya are as much a part of the Bruce Roberts 52’s crew as they are. They go on watch with their parents and handle lines. They are not doing any navigation but as they get older their responsibilities increase.

Schooling at sea

Rules on children’s education out of a traditional classroom setting vary from country to country, and by age. In the UK, parents can teach children at home and do not need to follow the national curriculum, but must ensure their child receives a full-time education from the age of five. They must inform the school and local authority.

"Australia is quite well set up for distance education because of the Outback," said Justin Page. The normal public school sends work every six months, in two-week modules. The children’s work is scanned in and emailed back to the school. "The hard part is getting them to sit down and do it," their father said.

Angelika Helm is less bound by school systems, because her two boys are too young to be in formal education. "Felix wouldn’t have been in school in Germany yet because he has only just turned six. We have a book called Learning all the Time, which says children should learn whenever they want to," she said.

The Helms might put Felix into school when they stop over in Fiji or the Society Islands; otherwise they will wait until New Zealand. "At the moment I have no schedule," said Angelika. "The American authorities are pretty good with home schooling," said Mark Clarke. "The girls are two months ahead. They learn so much [on the boat]. It’s an education in itself.”
“It’s good for the kids to see the life raft demonstration,” said Mark. “They know how to use the VHF and we’ve done fire extinguishers and flares.”

Aside from the unique life experiences a childhood afloat offers – “they have friends in their 60s and friends in their 20s and that’s so cool,” Mark said – he and his wife are aware that it does have its drawbacks.

“When we start on a cruise they don’t feel so good for a couple of days,” he added. “I hate to say that, as a parent, but they muscle through it and they don’t complain or say ‘I don’t want to go to sea anymore.’”

In Jenefer’s blog from the boat, she sounded just like any other girl: “I did the dishes without anybody asking me (you know how hard it was cleaning four meals of dishes).”

It was only in her final comments, as they approached land, that it became apparent she was on a boat. “All of us are very excited to get there, especially me. I’m so excited, I keep asking my parents ‘when will we be there?’ and they’re getting really annoyed with it.”

**Back to school**

Mark Morwood and Marta Portoles, an Australian and a Spaniard who own US-flagged Catana 48 *Por Dos*, cruised before they had children. They left Boston nearly three years ago with sons Alec and Roan, 13, to cruise the eastern States and Bahamas before crossing the Atlantic to the Med.

“Our original plan was to go back to Boston,” Mark said. “But now we’re looking to go through the Pacific to Australia. High school starts in September 2015.”

Roan said, “the Atlantic passage wasn’t eventful, which is good”. He gave this piece of advice: “For other families cruising, the most important thing to have for long crossings is entertainment.”

Mark advised other parents to give their children watches if they’re ready. “It doesn’t need to be four hours, but make it their watch and brief them carefully and thoroughly on your expectations, in particular what they should do themselves, and what they need to wake you for. Then get out of the way and let them do it or at least don’t make it obvious you are monitoring.”

His highlight of the crossing was a moment when something went wrong that pulled them all together as a family. “About a week before we got to Martinique our code 0 halyard broke at 3am and dumped the whole sail and bowsprit in the water over the bow and under the boat. We all worked together well to get the sail and lines back on board, stowed away, and underway again within about an hour. No drama, just everyone working to get the job done.”