

Flying Fish

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VOYAGING WITH VETLE

Dag and Ma Theresa Hoiland

(Escape is a Beneteau First 47.7, home port Stavanger Norway, which Dag and Ma Theresa (Con for short) had already sailed thousands of miles. She has served them well and it was time for new horizons, literally and figuratively.)

Dag, Con and four-year-old Vetle shared their decision to depart with family and friends in October 2018, and in July 2019 Escape left Stavanger for Gran Canaria. They continued across the Atlantic in December/January 2020 and cruised the Caribbean until COVID-19 caught up with them in March/April – see the September Newsletter.

Escape is currently on the hard in Curaçao Marina and the Hoiland family are back in Norway waiting for the opportunity to continue their learning and exploration.)

Our thoughts were on the table

When will you be back? You don't know? What do you mean? Where will you go? Atlantic? That's far! And deep! How did you decide to sail across the Atlantic? What about Vetle? He's only four years old – today!

It was the end of October 2018 and Vetle's fourth birthday party. The cake was on the table, the coffee was warm and kids were running in and out. We put our thoughts on the table and were mildly surprised by the questions that flew across the room. We were happy because it meant they cared. 'They' are our family – cousins, uncles and aunts in Norway, and cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents in the Philippines. 'They' cared. That was the best start we could imagine. One needs a home to be outward-looking.

We have no answers to these questions, or to a bunch of other good questions, and we don't look for any. Answers put too many frames on our journey, limit our exploration and prevent us from learning. Answers build expectations that trigger more questions requiring more answers. Phew...

We had lived the comfortable, safe life in Norway for more than ten years, working and weekend sailing. Nothing bad happens if you buy into the suburban 9am to 5pm formula, but we never did. Con had, after her education, worked overseas as many Filipinos do. I had lived outside Norway during

Vetle and Con





*Dag ...
dreaming of
sailing south?*

my university years and later in Africa doing humanitarian work at the tail end of the Angolan civil war. We are a well-travelled, multicultural family which rubbed off on our

priorities, world views and perspectives. Exploring is ingrained into our marriage. Now it morphed into a sailing trip.

The arrival of Vetle in October 2014 made a change. We instantly transformed from an adventurous couple to a small family, but we did not let go of our curiosity and it was during these first months of Vetle's life that we started talking about how to let him explore, learn and share his world. How could we, as responsible parents, not go?

By Vetle's fourth birthday *Escape* was already on the hard in Stavanger and preparations were well underway. We needed to change her from a performance cruiser to a long-term, safe, liveaboard kid's boat. We needed to transform ourselves from weekend sailors to a long-term liveaboard family.

Escape ready for a winter of preparations





Big knife, small fingers

Preparing is not planning

There is a difference between planning and preparing. To us, planning is of limited value; preparing is practical, fun and invaluable. Safety is found in the balance between adapting behaviour and eliminating known risks. We find behaviour to be the more important of the two.

Our biggest safety concern is the galley. From birth, Vetle had been allowed on the kitchen counter while cooking at home. We gave him space to explore and learn. Stirring hot sauces, cutting vegetables with knives, using the mixer and making smoothies with the blender. Instead of limiting, we supervised, taught and guided. The mess was total but he got used to being on the tabletop participating, as opposed to standing on the floor looking up at pots of boiling water. We brought this habit to the boat – he is still always in the galley participating in the cooking – and we look forward to the day when he starts to churn out muffins.

Our second major concern is the running rigging and cockpit – our layout is not kid safe. The sheets and halyards are led back to the cockpit, as in most contemporary boats, and



our companionway – the favourite playground – is lined with clutches for the halyards, reefing lines, cunningham and kicking strap. Small fingers explore and find their way to these clutches, which have no lock or brakes. Our sheets are led back to four self-tailing winches, with loads in the thousands of kilos. The same goes for the mainsheet on a traveller across the cockpit. Small hands want to winch. We



considered moving the halyards to the mast with granny bars and fitting cleats to secure our sheets. Both were the norm before self-tailing winches appeared on the market and someone decided the deck was a dangerous place. Both changes would be safer for small hands and exploring fingers, but we did not move anything.

Vetle has been sailing from birth. At 8 months he spent his first season in a cockpit locker and secured in a bicycle seat on the pushpit. His second season he learnt to trust his harness and lifejacket to stop him falling into cold Norwegian water. Now, at five, he wants to winch and we let him ... supervised and guided.

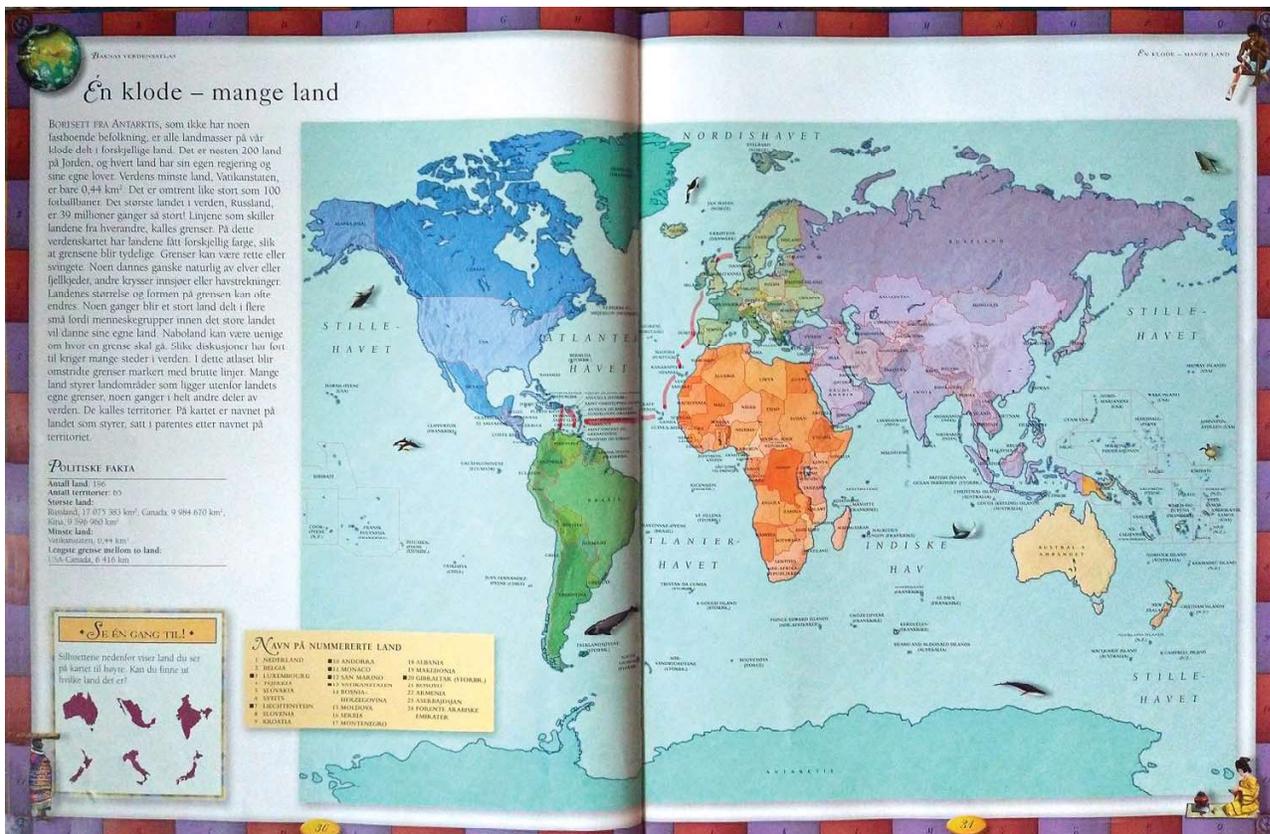


Departure, expectations and routines

We departed on 11th July 2019. The route was Stavanger – Caledonian Canal – Ireland – Spain – Portugal – Madeira – Gran Canaria. After upgrades in Gran Canaria we continued to Mindelo in the Cape Verdes and then onwards to Barbados, where we arrived in January 2020.

With departure our major concern was tested. What would it be like to have a five-year-old on a small boat on the ocean for days on end? Boredom for him? Too much energy in a small body for tired parents? Too little space? This was unknown territory and no books gave us the answer.





The world, as shown in our atlas

We had, from the start, included Vetle in the preparations. A large world wall-map filled our kitchen wall and we used it every day leading up to departure. We drew our intended route on the map. We pointed out countries. We followed the route with our fingers. We talked about what we would see ... drew dolphins, boats and strange fruits. We YouTubed orcas, whales and other families travelling the same way. *Finding Nemo* is a great film for curious kids and can be the source of many stories.

We made promises. We promised him he could choose the fish hooks he wanted in Gran Canaria. We promised him he could choose fins and a mask for his swimming. We promised him he'd be able to swim without his lifejacket. We promised him we'd see dolphins. This built expectations and highlights to look forward to. For us as parents, it is hard to understand and remind ourselves that his day-by-day journey is made up of the small things while we are thinking about provisions, weather forecasts, rigging and blocked toilets.

In Gran Canaria we bought him a mask and fins, the largest fish hooks around, and gave him his own box for his fishing gear.

Ready for swimming...





*Picnic
on the
foredeck*

Throwing off the shorelines meant that we started watches and new routines. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are the milestones we work around, and we have a set schedule at 0800, 1200 and 1600 whether at anchor or on crossings. The first 300 miles from Norway to Scotland was blessed with fair winds and a rapid crossing. We saw orcas, caught mackerel, cooked dinner and could enjoy North Sea sunsets from the deck.

It was on this crossing that Vetle introduced us to his picnic routine. One banana and one apple, go sit on the foredeck together and talk about the happenings of the day as it passed into night. For him this pushed bedtime, for us it was a door opening into his world. It was during one of these picnics that Ploppy the fish first appeared. Since then we've seen him between the waves from the foredeck on many occasions. Ploppy is a curious fish-kid who puts his head out of the water to observe the weird world on land. When he has seen strange things – eg. sailing yachts – he swims down to tell his parents about them. There are no limits to what Ploppy tells his parents, and the parents ask questions...

After breakfast it is school and then inspection. School does not yet follow any curriculum – we focus on writing, reading and numbers. Being a multilingual family we practise words in Tagalog*, English and Norwegian.

Inspections are daily highlights for Vetle. On crossings we inspect the foredeck, genoa tack and clew, sheet wear and clevis pins. On the aft deck we inspect the Hydrovane and check the Garmin Navigator for speed, course and wind. We practise using our safety harnesses and the routine of securing ourselves with the safety lines

* Tagalog is an Austronesian language spoken as a first language by the ethnic Tagalog people, who comprise a quarter of the population of the Philippines, and as a second language by the majority.

while working the foredeck. We do this even if there is water on the deck and we're heeling. At anchor we inspect chain, bridle, snubber, hook and seaweed. Often, he concludes that we need to swim and inspect in the water.

Breaking routines conquers boredom

The 300 mile run from Stavanger to Scotland and the 700 mile run from Dublin to Baiona were merely preparation for the 2100 mile crossing to Barbados from Cape Verde.



School

We noticed as we cruised down the Portuguese coast that Vetle missed having other kids to play with. We kept him active, but we couldn't keep up with him – he simply missed playing with kids his own age. When he met other kids to play with it worked out fine for a few hours on the beach, but as night fell it was only the three of us. We had downloaded films and some games to his iPad and noticed they took more of his time now that the novelty of travelling had worn off.

The long crossing came up. We celebrated Christmas in Mindelo in the Cape Verdes – no snow, a small look-alike Christmas tree and *bacalao** for dinner. No, it was not what he was used to, but luckily Santa had been aboard while we ate ashore on Christmas Eve.

Again, we threw off the shorelines, this time for 12 to 14 days at sea and the first test for the three of us on a longer passage. We left harbour in the afternoon and by the time the sun set and *Escape* was sailing things calmed down. Dinner at sunset and then

* Dried or salted cod, a traditional Christmas dish in both Norway and Portugal, as well as many of the latter's former colonies.



Christmas in Mindelo

bedtime ... that is a good routine. When Vetle was in bed the first evening, we tried to explain what 14 days are – not an easy concept for a five-year-old. We counted fingers and toes and talked about sunsets and picnics, but in vain. His eyes lit up, however, when I told him I would wake him up after Con was sleeping so we could look at the stars together. Hush-hush. Secret. I kept my promise of breaking the routine and he had his first night watch looking at stars. Ploppy was out exploring.

The east to west Atlantic crossing is pleasant at the right time of year. We sailed conservatively, giving us time to be together as a family, and held on to the routines but broke them often to light the light in Vetle's eyes. Bucket showers on deck are more fun than fresh water. Dolphins deliver a break from



*Helping
service
a pump
is fun!*





schoolwork. Spraying WD40 while servicing a pump is fun. Building boats for towing always takes hours. Skipping brushing his teeth always made his face break out in a nice smile and it is undervalued by dentists. Joint drawings in the schoolbook are more fun than practising letters.

Then we started the countdown. Ever done mandatory military service? We did it. With seven days left we started the countdown to ice-cream. From a pile of seven sheets of paper, we made a drawing every day of what we wanted to do when we arrived, folded it neatly and threw it in the ocean at picnic time. We drew ice-

Ice-cream for all...

creams, kids, swimming, sharks, turtles. There were no drawings of stuck toilets, of watermakers not making water or of empty gas bottles. That was not a part of the world anymore.

Finally the signs of landfall came. Birds – we looked at, talked about and checked up on the birds we saw. Then we picked up Radio Bardados, and before long Mount Hillaby was on the horizon. We passed South Point, rounded Needham's Point and anchored in Carlisle Bay off Bridgetown. Sail down, boat tidied, tender in the water and then ... then there was ice-cream for all in Pirate's Cove.



We had reached the land of pirates, turtles and kids to play with. Motivating a kid for a Caribbean cruise is not about swimming, beach bars and hikes. It is about buccaneers, fortresses, real antique cannon, cannonballs and volcanoes. Caribbean history is a treasure-chest of stories and the islands themselves are full of fortresses, anchorages and trails to prove it is true.

And then some...

In Norway in late September 2020 Australia is at the centre of our new wall map, surrounded by beautiful blue oceans. The Pacific to the east, Southeast Asia to the north and, on a good day, we see Madagascar and Africa in the west. We explore and prepare, but we do not plan. There is no timeline. *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson has been replaced by *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Mutiny on the Bounty*.

We will continue west, hence the name of our journey – Escape West. When we continue we will be better able to seek out boats with other kids, stay longer in the same anchorages and take water sports to the next level. That is how we explore, learn and now share Vetle's world.



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