

30,000 MILES TO CROSSHAVEN

By **KIM OLIVER** of Ballea Writers

In 1997 John and I decided we'd retire early from the US Air force and sail to Ireland. Our 34-foot steel ketch, Naia, was sturdy, well insulated, and even green. Plus, we were just as enamored with 'an authentic Irish pub' as the next American. A one-year, six thousand mile clockwise loop around the Atlantic seemed like a great way to get our feet wet as blue-water cruisers.

It has actually taken over a decade and about 30,000 miles, but we've finally arrived. Now a family of three, we are docked in Crosshaven enjoying village life for most of the school year. While here, with the help of the Ballea Writers Club, I've seriously begun my next journey, a writer's journey.

Our Sailing Journey

After a mad year of finalizing Naia's numerous refits, we got married on a south Texas beach. Without an inboard engine, part of the 'go early go simple' mentality at the time, we had to wait for decent winds to exit the east-facing jetties and get across the 1000-mile Gulf of Mexico. We got them— two winter gales, separated by one day becalmed. We weren't even to the Atlantic, but that nine-day passage got my feet plenty wet! Upon arrival in Key West Florida, I was about ten pounds lighter. We slept for 16 hours and then went ashore for a couple pints in an Irish pub. Reassessing our plans, we decided: we should travel more slowly than originally thought, we'd watch the weather more closely along the way, and we might need an inboard engine after all. We put 30 horses and a weather-gathering radio on our wish list, and escaped to the Bahamas.

Back on the east coast in the spring of '99, we installed those two major items and Naia was ready to go just about anywhere. She's shoal draft (less than 4 1/2 feet) and, with the inboard engine, we could easily poke around in America's smaller creeks and beachy shallows. Additionally, we could safely transit a wider range of harbors and motor up stronger rivers. We saw Washington DC from our floating home, for instance, and it's over 100 miles up the Patomac river. With the new HF radio coupled to our laptop, we could analyze weather predictions and make smarter sailing decisions. We were up in Narragansette Bay (near Newport, a famous America's

Cup venue) when we saw Hurricane Floyd coming, but we didn't see what it would bring. With Naia's decks stripped clean and the dinghy topped, we were chained to a mooring behind a small bay island for four days. Nine months later, we had our daughter, Hannah.

Hannah was born in a riverfront navy hospital and came home to Naia in the dinghy. Sailing magazines say infants do well on long passages but I wasn't quite willing to cross the Atlantic with a baby. Instead, we decided to spend a couple years stretching our range down and up the North American coast.

The Caribbean islands were gorgeous. We looked for conch in the Turks and Caicos, hiked under the canopied forests of Puerto Rico, and dove the wreck of the HMS Rhone in the British Virgin Islands. From there we turned north for Bermuda and beyond, while most of the cruising fleet continued southeast. Naia looked well at home in the northern waters of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Her wooden masts echoed the surrounding forests and her traditional lines blended in amidst the multi-generational fishing boats. We thought about going direct to Ireland from there, but I wasn't quite ready to cross the Atlantic with a toddler...

When we finally launched toward Europe, Hannah was old enough (almost 4) that her head and body sizes matched. The weeklong, 600 nm journey to Bermuda was manageable (again), but the 2000-mile arc to the Azores loomed. After a strong dose of Bermuda's charm and much weather analysis, we saw an opportunity to depart ahead of a frontal trough. For several days we had SW winds and minimal seas, but that trough was gaining on us and deepening. We packed on the sails and moved along at our whopping hull speed of 7 knots. The passage took 15 1/2 days and, as it turned out, remained relatively smooth. Hannah's highlights were her lopsided birthday cake and our hot-cocoa-laced sunsets; John's, the fish he caught and Naia's performance; and mine, Hannah's adaptability and arrival. The Azores were heavenly. Three months slipped by before we tackled the last, weeklong leg of our Atlantic passage. Arriving near Lisbon Portugal, Hannah and I quickly went ashore, found a park, and ran through the sprinklers. It was utterly



30,000 Miles Later - Kim and John Oliver aboard Naia at Crosshaven.

irresistible.

We headed south from there --with the prevailing wind and newly found friends- knowing Ireland would still be there in 2 or 3 more years. Proceeding at a leisurely pace, we barely got past Spain a year after reaching Europe. Then we skipped smartly through Italy and put Naia up in western Greece for a Christmas visit to the US. Turkey was our eastern limit. After 5 months there last winter, we turned around and headed west. Overall, the sun, the lovely waters, and the cultural feeding frenzy in the Mediterranean formed an indelible chapter of our lives.

But it was high time to head for Ireland. The French river/canal system was the perfect solution to our trip planning. We lowered the masts, strapped on tires and extra fenders, and adopted the 'canal boat' mentality. What a relaxing way to see inland France, save fighting the fast-moving current on the Rhone River. We chose the canal route that sweeps out to the east through champagne country and then curves west into Paris. It passes very near to Euro Disney, a fact we couldn't ignore. We loved Paris, and so waved a hearty good-bye to the miniature Statue of Liberty standing proudly there on the waterfront. A couple days racing down the Seine River and, voila! Naia was on the edge of the

English Channel.

We were running behind, regarding bad weather and schools starting, but we certainly couldn't get careless so close to our original destination. With a lucky stretch of Indian summer, we covered the Cornish coast in two weeks and then crossed to Waterford before Halloween. Waterford was a fun city to visit but we were still in search of a village to call home for the winter. John visited Crosshaven by bus and came back reporting that the RCYC has a slip for us and there's a smart little school up the hill, called Templebreedy, which might have room for Hannah in their 2nd class. Hannah loves her school and all her new friends. Our favorite features are friendly neighbors, plentiful shopping/services, the roadside path, and the 'book mobile'. We can't afford the pubs nearly as much as we might have ten years ago, but they're inviting nonetheless. We keep ourselves busy with boat work (of course) and active with brownies, ballet, yoga, biking and running. After such a long journey, it feels great to be part of an authentic Irish community. It'll be difficult to leave in the spring, but we have yet to cruise Scotland, Norway, and points beyond; maybe we'll stop by on our way back to the US in a few years time.

My Writing Journey

For a couple years, I had been toying with the idea of writing children's stories. Last year I enrolled in a US-based, online course aimed at helping me do exactly that. One of the first pieces of advice they gave me was to join a writers club but we were traveling so much that I didn't get the chance until I arrived in Ireland.

I was thrilled when, in my first week in Crosshaven, I picked up a Carrighdoun and saw the feature on the Ballea Writers Club. They had just launched their website, www.balleawriters.com I attended their next meeting, which welcomed a guest author, and have attended every workshop meetings since. I was nervous about reading my work to a group of writers for my first time, but am glad that I jumped that hurdle. The club is a perfect forum for constructive criticism and a terrific source of information on competitions and publishing. I feel like my writing journey has hydroplaned in the last few weeks. I'm solidifying ideas for children's stories based on Hannah's life afloat and working hard to hone my writing skills through various genres.



The Oliver family record Naia's Atlantic Crossing at Horta, Azores



Hannah, centre, on her first day at Templebreedy School, Crosshaven.