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## Overpowered on the Atlantic coast

Shannon Deconinck recalls a challenging sail around Cabo de São Vicente in southern Portugal, a headland renowned for its surf



**ABOVE** Cabo de São Vicente, Portugal  
**LEFT** Kathleen is Shannon's Maurice Griffith-designed steel-built Waterwich

**S**ailing down the coast of Portugal in winter had never been my intention; a holdup in Nazaré put me three months behind schedule. Still, there's worse places to be stuck. So there I was, in February, running on a 30-35 knot wind, while surfing down 5m breaking waves.

This, my dear *Kathleen* was never designed to do. She's an east coaster, bilge keel, steel ketch, built for the coast and estuaries of Essex and Suffolk, sheltered, shallow waters. Now I'm watching the spray hammer against the wet, tan sails, as she heaves and bucks over the messy swell hitting the port stern quarter, I'm literally fighting the wheel when the gusts hit, I have way too much canvas up and the wheel is way too small.

Looking over the stern I see these heaving green lumps of ocean, breaking into sheets of spray, rolling towards me,

and I can't help imagining a surfer hurtling across the face as it approaches. As a surfer I know about sets, same at sea: See them and prepare!

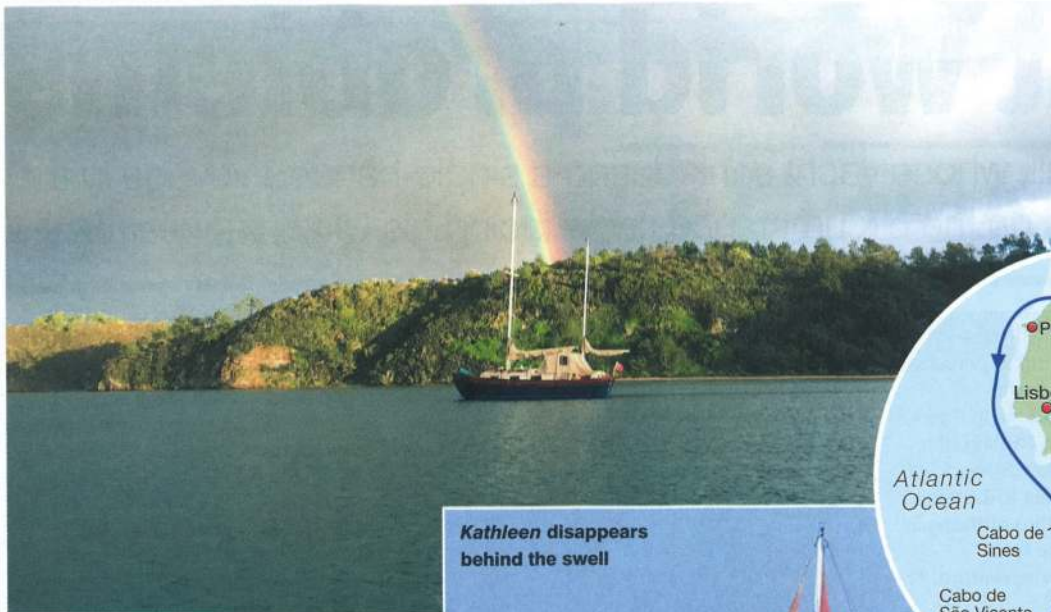
I have one reef in the main, and the genoa up. Way too much canvas!

That's the trouble with these funky old boats with hank-on sails and heaps of personality in a situation like this; alone, with my level of skill, I have pretty much no chance of reducing sail. So I just try to

fight out the gusts and line her up to ride the sets, dodging the increasingly breaking peaks. She's surfing! 9.5 tonnes of British steel, hitting 14 knots as we surge down the face. It would be hilarious if it wasn't so scary.

I know this bit of coastline, I've surfed here for years, but this is a very different way of getting to know a place! Cabo de Sines, of course it gets messy here, I've stood on the rock near the lighthouse and





**LEFT** Kathleen on the Algarve  
**INSET BELOW LEFT** Shannon Deconinck cartoon

watched the massive forces of wind, current and waves turn the sea into a senseless mass of heaving rebellious water. That's where I am now.

### Overpowered

The forecast said 18 gusting 25 knots. I thought cool, it's the last leg of a long journey, I set out with just the genoa, a brisk breeze from behind, going well. I raised the mainsail, the boom out wide and tied, the genoa bellying, set out south.

It started great, but it just kept getting stronger till it was past the point of unhanking the genoa and getting a small jib on.

Taking another reef on the mainsail meant turning through side-on to the waves to face 180° behind, then stand on the cabin roof, hanging on to the boom for dear life, and trying to reef. I learnt a lesson there!

So now as I look up at the sails and rigging, I see so much force held in that red-brown canvas. So much pressure, the mast and the heavy steel rigging lines, the shackles and stainless steel plates, all straining against each other, under the most incredible duress. The whole boat is being twisted and stretched by forces of



**Kathleen disappears behind the swell**



wave and wind. If one of the shrouds went, one of the spreaders, a shackle, the whole lot would go bang, and come crashing down!

I took it wide, knowing how it gets here, I'm about two miles out, scanning the familiar but different coast of the cape. The power station and refinery have come into view, I'm straining my salt filled eyes for the harbour wall. For each set wave I have to line her up for the face, not straight down, pitch-poling would be unthinkable, but across the face, straightening up in the trough. All the time keeping an eye on any crests beginning to break, and getting the hell out of the way.

### Safe haven

I'm looking for a red buoy, with a red flashing light, the harbour wall juts out about 800m, and once I'm round that point, I'm OK. The wind is constantly getting stronger, scuddy foam being whipped from the surface of the waves, and sheets of spray lashing my face. I'm anxious, tired and really want to get into port.

A pinpoint of red flashes through the salt haze and, intermittently between waves, I see the harbour wall. Great columns of spray shoot up as the angry ocean beats at the wall. One day it'll win, the sea is so much stronger than anything we can do.

**'She's surfing! Hitting 14 knots as we surge down the face. It would be hilarious if it wasn't so scary'**

The home run is in sight, I come in wide, about 500m out. When I'm clear I have to turn directly into the wind, and beam-on to the swell, I'll have to motor in. I lean down and turn the ignition, she starts immediately, thank god.

I'm motoring straight into 35 knots now and the sails are flogging horribly, the wet canvas whiplashing and snapping in the gale, the boat is heaving and yawing with the stability of the sails gone. With 300m to go I can see the calm water ahead, suddenly there's a crack like a pistol shot.

"Oh no, the engine's gone!" is my first thought, but leaning down I can hear the Ford diesel still grinding away.

I look up and see the genoa split cleanly in two, the halves flapping like medieval pennants. The breakwater passes on my Port side and I'm in. Suddenly I really want a beer.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Shannon Deconinck started sailing dinghies and surfing aged 13. He has travelled widely, spent a year on a fishing boat out of Massachusetts, crewed**

**on yachts in Australia, Asia and the Caribbean, and ran a surf adventure company in Morocco. He aims to sell his small campsite in Spain so he can upgrade to a larger boat for bluewater sailing. [shannondeconinck.com](http://shannondeconinck.com)**