

Azores Cruise Review

In preparation for this cruise we consulted:

- CCA Cruise Planning Guide
- Previous Cruise Guides
- Previous Lessons Learned

Planning and Scheduling

Commodore Binch proposed the Azores cruise idea in late 2014 and planning began early in 2015—well over two years before the event. Other national cruises follow similar time lines as date selection, announcements, sign-ups, event scheduling, charter reservations, passage planning, hotel reservations, etc., consume many months. In March 2015 a rough outline of the cruise was presented to the CCA Cruise Committee recommending late July as the most sensible date thus allowing own-boat participants to reach the Azores following the America's Cup in Bermuda in June, the Marion-Bermuda Race, the Bermuda One-Two; and before the Atlantic hurricane season, and with consideration to the Azores' own weather characteristics. The outline recognized that the mid-summer date could limit participants because most of the US enjoys its best weather during the period. Commercial flights from the US, availability of charter boats, a local support system, cruise distances, and marina facilities were investigated and considered. Upon learning of the event, a number of CCA members offered valuable insights and recommendations. We also consulted with the Ocean Cruising Club who had recently visited the islands.

Charter Boat Availability

We quickly recognized that the availability of charter boats was very limited and determined that only Sailazores (SA) had the infrastructure to serve a large group. They offered six boats at the time with the expectation that their fleet could expand to ten boats by July 2017, which could accommodate about 50 participants. This further limited the potential cruise size. (As it turned out, we chartered eight of their nine boats and were joined by four Member yachts for a total of 53 participants.) The single charter source worked well as we could

assure consistency of boat condition and preparation, pricing, cruise information, support, and communication. SA not only provided support for their fleet but also for our own-boat participants as well. As the CCA was their first high profile group, they were intent on providing us a first-rate experience.

Local Support

SA also served as our event coordinator. Needless to say, the event would have been near impossible to execute without their local presence-hotel contacts, local vendors, etc. Recognizing this fact early and establishing a close working relationship were imperative to the success of the cruise. We compensated SA for this extra service and made a contribution to a local charity with modest excess cruise funds.

Organizing Committee

We considered a committee based upon the experiences and recommendations of prior cruises; but the expected limited size, one charter company, and local presence led us to believe that the two of us could run the event more successfully rather than delegating responsibilities to multiple individuals. Having one or two points of contact, in this case, proved simpler for the CCA, participants, and vendors. We divided some roles and responsibilities, but more often worked jointly.

Pre-Cruise Communication

All communication occurred through the website or through email supplemented by telephone. We formally announced the cruise on August 8, 2015 on the cruise website and requested preliminary indications of interest in March 2016. With about one year to go, in early July 2016, and following the co-chairs' site visit, we provided more schedule details to interested participants and asked for charter boat preferences based upon SA's fleet. We announced that, in the event of multiple interest in a particular boat, there would be a lottery. (As it turned out, everyone got their first choice; so, we did not have to resort to a lottery). By late July, we informed interested parties that all but two of the boats had been subscribed. Participants were then invited to confirm their charter agreements directly with SA. In early August 2016, we informed the participants that reduced

hotel rates had been made available for a limited time at two of the more popular hotels. Therefore, by late summer 2016, charter, hotel, and flight information had been provided to participants.

Communication During Cruise

The modest size and the co-location of the fleet most evenings in marinas enabled us to communicate verbally supplemented by text and email messages. With one exception, the lack of natural harbors and protected anchorages obliged the SA fleet to stay in the islands' marinas; the own-boats were similarly encouraged. SA provided each of their boats with a cellphone to communicate with their base and for local calls.

Site-Visit

We and our wives visited the Azores in June 2016-more than one year before the event. The purpose was to meet SA's personnel, inspect the boats; visit event venues, marinas, and hotels; and tour the islands. The CCA Cruise Guide highly recommends chartering and imitating the actual proposed cruise. Because the Azores' inter-island ferry and air service were relatively convenient we elected to visit the islands and potential venues without actually sailing between the islands saving time and money. We were still able to observe the sailing venues. Upon return, we presented Commodores Binch and Willauer with our findings (including challenges) and the decision was made to proceed.

Budget/Finance

We created a budget following our site visit and provided an estimate to potential participants. It included allowances for four events, a group tour, cruise swags and gifts, printing, and an event planning fee to SA. We asked for about a 50% deposit (\$300) at sign-up followed by a final payment of \$200 (adjusted for more fine-tuning) one-month prior to the cruise. We did not permit any a la carte arrangements to limit accounting challenges, which was not a problem as it was unlikely that anyone would be just passing through the Azores. The monies were paid by credit card or by PayPal to a CCA account maintained by Peter Chandler, CCA Treasurer. The cash account enabled us to pay vendors who asked for

upfront deposits. We used personal credit cards for gifts, swags, and other expenses during the cruise, which were reimbursed promptly by Peter.

Cruise Book/Printing

Although this important document includes basic information there is a range of styles and content depending upon the cruise's size and personality. We began writing the book in February and completed it in mid-June-over one month prior to the cruise. Some cruises produced earlier versions of their book, but we did not find our timing to be problematic. SA's own website and Ocean Cruising Club's cruising guide to the Azores, which was uploaded to the cruise website prior to the Cruise Book, provided extremely valuable supplemental information. We had access to a graphic designer and printer who helped us with our logo, layout, and printing.

Events/Entertainment

We scheduled formal opening, mid-cruise, and closing events and a fourth casual event. We arranged distinctive, traditional musical entertainment for each evening which was highly popular with all the participants. Not only did we listen to enchanting performances, but we were also invited to participate with one evening's folk dancing. We experienced no closing dinner attrition as it was scheduled the same night the boats were returned to SA, the timing of outgoing flights, and the no, a la carte policy.

Gifts

We provided a canvas bag, hats, a bottle of Azorean wine, and a Cruise Book to each couple and to each single participant. Each boat received a cruise flag. Shirts, fleeces, etc., emblazoned with the cruise logo could be purchased at Team One Newport. They also produced the canvas bags and the cruise flags. We ordered magnetic, plastic name tags including last names and the cruise logo. We found appropriate closing dinner gifts in the Azores.

Island Tours

We organized one, formal island tour on Terceira via motor coach with an English-speaking guide. The prepaid, four-hour tour included stops at natural and tourist attractions. Participants organized private excursions elsewhere.

Summary

The small size of the group, the mix of newer and older members, the restricted cruising grounds coupled with the spectacular scenery and the warmth of the Azorean people created an intimate experience. Winds were generally light and ahead or behind, one breezy day (10-20) on the nose, but a number of participants reported nice sailing conditions from time to time.

There were no surprises nor was there anything we would have done differently; all elements met or exceeded expectations.

It was a pleasure organizing this cruise and joining with wonderful and interesting CCA members in an exotic location.

Mark and Sandy