



LONG TERM CRUISING WITH KIDS

| story **NICK BRETtingham-MOORE**

'Living the Dream' is a term and yacht name that we have come across on many occasions over the past 10 years onboard *Sonrisa*, our Lagoon 440 catamaran. For each cruising couple this has a different connotation, however for Melissa and I it meant extended cruising, looking for secluded surfing locations, without time constraints, with our young children, who at the time did not even exist. Having worked for many years in Europe on luxury yachts, we were fortunate enough to have our new dream yacht available in France after Benjamin was born in Tasmania in Sept 2007.

There are numerous books which delve into all the technicalities of cruising with children, safety, food, education, so this article is a brief resume of our experiences. Apart from knowing that we wanted a catamaran, which is the most child friendly way to cruise, we spent little time considering how children would affect our cruising. We have often been asked if we were being selfish in making our children conform to our cruising lifestyle, apart from the dangers of crossing oceans with six month old child. Our reply is that this is our life and not the children's, and their turn will come when they turn 18. Frankly we find driving on any freeway, living in a society with guns, drugs, alcohol, and Facebook considerably more dangerous than the open ocean – at least one can prepare for mother nature.

For five months, we rented a small apartment in La Rochelle, France, just 10 minutes from the excellent hard stand area where *Sonrisa* was delivered. Here, in typical French fashion, we thoroughly enjoyed the café culture, while fitting out the electronics, antifouling, rigging the mast and generally making all those personal changes to our new home. Ben has very few recollections of this time as we made many friends and he attended a small preschool, and I took him for coffee and croissants, vegemite not being a big hit with the waiters!

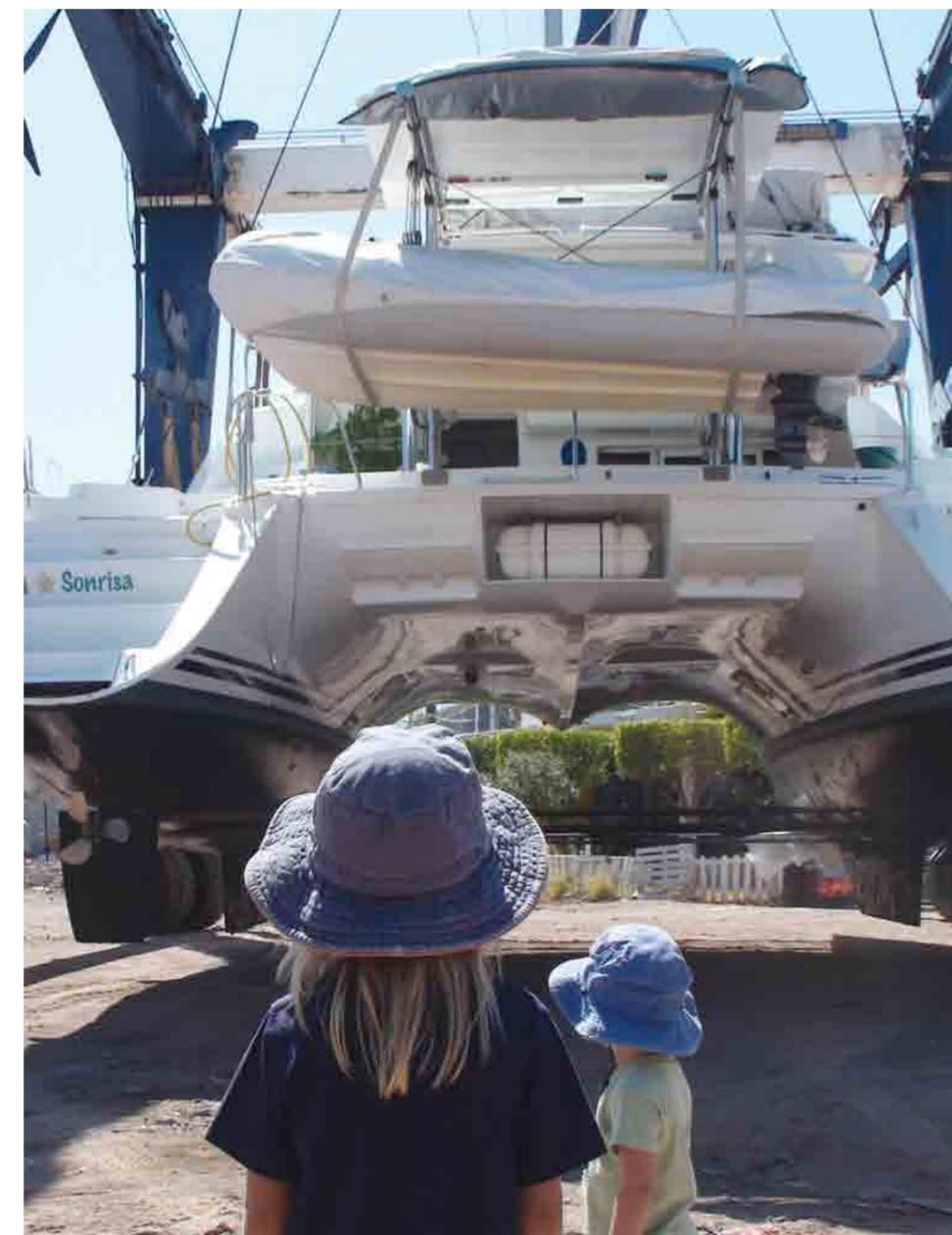
We did make some small Perspex doors at the top of the stairs into each hull to stop him from falling. The fact that the salon and cockpit area are all on one level so he could crawl between these made life so much more enjoyable than a steep ladder from the cockpit into the salon as on most monohulls. We did not bother with the traditional netting around the lifelines, rather adopting a policy that if he was in the cockpit

he was tethered to the table, and if on deck he was tethered to us – not always to his amusement!

Being mentally readied to live onboard a small, confined area for months at a time is probably the most neglected part of the pre-cruising preparation. The practical seaworthiness of the vessel is a straightforward process with systems and equipment checked of the 'to do' list. We were fortunate as we had worked and lived together for many years within shouting distance for 24 hours a day, though even this was not enough when throwing in a six month old, whose sole purpose in life was to destroy a magic new yacht!

Now looking back at the first three years of Benjamin's life we realise

it was the easiest time afloat we had with our children. Apart from the constant attention needed, he was easily satisfied onboard, the restriction in space helping to contain him safely. With simple toys, a beach nearby, a small wading pool in the cockpit and dry sleeping place he was – usually – contented. During these early formative years we found the many different cultural changes the boys constantly experienced in different countries, along with the comfort of their own home close by, was a lasting educational experience. Without a set schedule to our cruising we happily took advantage of any school that was readily available within walking distance of our anchorage or marina berth.



OPPOSITE LEFT: Benjamin 6, and Huon 3.

RIGHT: Haul out Guaymas, Mexico 2012.

Anyone that has cruised the Latin speaking countries will know that the family is the basis of all activities, with kids having a very special place in this environment. On our wanderings from La Rochelle south to Spain and Portugal we always made friends within minutes of stepping ashore, in particular, similar families with children and older couples without. On many occasions this led to visits to their homes and we would reciprocate onboard

Sonrisa, thereby enhancing our own cultural experiences that would not have occurred without Benjamin. By early October 2007 we were in Lisbon preparing for our Atlantic crossing – as we had visited Gibraltar and made land surfing trips to the Canary Islands we decided to make St Marteen our next landfall. Three delightful weeks in Lisbon was an enchanting mixture of exploring old world history and shopping for the many weeks at sea. The previous

winds. Ben learnt very quickly our sailing rules about when to venture into the cockpit, the stability of *Sonrisa* meant life onboard was little different to at anchor. He would happily spend hours in his harness attached to two 'bungy' chords, bouncing around in any swell, often falling asleep to the gentle rocking motion. The high chair permanently attached to the cockpit table meant meal times, while messy, were easy to survive, a simple hose down after,

In the mainstream cruising grounds of the Caribbean we met numerous other yachts with similar aged children – though yacht children seem to get along with all ages unlike the age divisions we find in suburbia. Travel planning, outings, pot luck's aboard other yachts - invariably this was on *Sonrisa* due to her space, perhaps one of her few drawbacks! Cruising for several months from Grenada, the islands of Venezuela, Cartagena we finally ended up in the San Blas islands, Panama. The indigenous Kuna people really enjoyed Ben's blond hair and blue eyes – often spiring him away to show the other villagers. In our society having your child disappear for hours at a time would be a serious cause for concern, here, within the small islands and knowing how they dote on children we never felt any real concern. On occasions Ben (and us) would suffer from some 'Bali belly' but these bugs



TOP LEFT: Ben like a fish at eight.

TOP RIGHT: Start them early.

CENTRE: Ben on watch, Bay of Biscay aged 10 months.

ABOVE LEFT: Huon spears a small grouper.

ABOVE RIGHT: Ben swimming underwater.

months coastal cruising indicated no special requirements for Benjamin's safety, food, or entertainment. As we try to be environmentally considerate Melissa purchased washable hemp nappies for inside while outside he went naked – like his parents. We would tow the soiled nappies in an open woven bag, with a final wash in fresh water. The water maker a definite plus for washing down the cockpit and rinsing off every time we went for a swim. With so many 'natural' toys available, bought toys were kept to a minimum. Cheap arm floaties, a sit in inflatable 'duck' and infant life vest the only other requirements for water activities.

The 29 day crossing was uneventful, with long relaxing days in the trade

while being fun for Ben also relaxing for us.

In France we had purchased a rather sophisticated three wheel pram which became a multipurpose transport vehicle – Mel would go jogging while Ben enjoying the scenery, the amount of groceries Mel could transport always amazed me, apart from fuel and other supplies. Again, the space available on *Sonrisa* for such large equipment not normally found on a small monohull. In both Bonaire and Grenada Ben attended the local schools, which meant a two hour return trip in the morning and the afternoon, great exercise for us and a wonderful way to really know the local culture.



TOP: Laundry day with Ben in Granada.

ABOVE: Ben and dad – Chess time.

RIGHT: *Sonrisa* launching Guaymas.



would normally pass quickly – just part of the different food and hygiene in each country, and impossible to escape if one wants to sample the local cuisine.

In the San Blas Islands Melissa joyfully informed me of our imminent second child, though at the time I felt that one was probably enough. We spent the following several months wandering down to the Panama Canal, hauling out *Sonrisa* at the Shelter Bay Marina opposite Colon and onto Costa Rica. We cannot remember any time when Benjamin was anything but fun to have around, children being a natural friend maker and talking point – well to those cruisers that were interested in children, many were not!

We decided that the second child would again be born in Tasmania, while the facilities in any of the countries we visited were suitable for the birth, the comfort of a home environment and a known gynaecologist made the decision easy. Due to flying restrictions Melissa flew home at some 30 weeks, I had the tough job of going surfing with my best mate for a month along the Costa Rica coast – a memorable trip.

We returned to Golfito, southern Costa Rica with Huon aged six months and Benjamin at just over three years old. Apart from the added responsibility of a second infant life continued just as easily as with only Ben. Many activities that Melissa and I enjoyed together like scuba diving, kayaking, long bush walks were just not possible with the two young boys. However, the pleasure of watching them adapt to new environments and people more than made up for these restrictions. At this stage in 2010, we decided to wander up to Mexico, as the original plan to cross the Pacific around 2012 just did not seem sensible with boys so young and considering that they would not remember cruising that would hopefully be the experience of a lifetime.

The wonderful benefit of having no specific travel plans and the ability stay in a country that one likes really struck us when we entered Mexico,

which has become our current home. By now we were starting some 'proper' home schooling for Ben, while I am not sure what this term really means there was at least a specific time in the morning that he had to study. Mel and I both took turns with basic English, Maths, Science etc though the studies invariably would relate to the world around us – the sea and its animals, the climate, storms and finally the people and cultures that were so different to Tasmania. We spent 24 hours a day with our children, and as they grew so did we, re-learning all those basic experiences of life that were in our distant past. In our

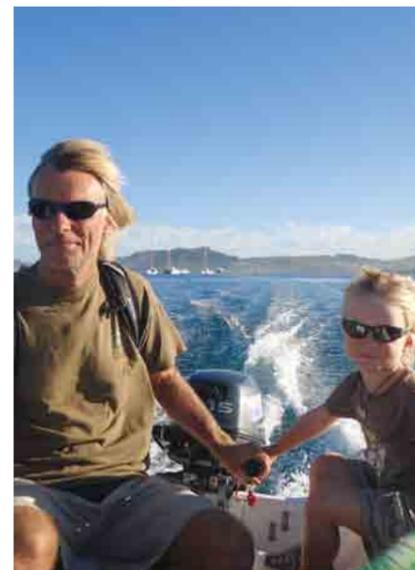
modern, high speed world we feel that parenting is a lost art given over to schools, child care and numerous other outside influences. Can you imagine your children growing up to never having watched TV, being mesmerised by an electric escalator, never having a soda, being naked all the time (along with their parents!), growing sprouts and swimming before they could walk. The social networking, electronic games, serious study routines and the money competition that the younger generations are now faced with can all come in good time – children need to be kids for a while, not a bad idea for some adults also!



TOP LEFT: Standard mode of transport.

TOP RIGHT: Ben bouncing across the Atlantic at one year.

ABOVE: Launching Nayarit, Mexico.



Since 2010 we have extensively cruised the Sea of Cortez on *Sonrisa* and still we are enchanted, surprised, and mesmerised by the sea life, bird life, within such a harsh natural environment, but also captivated by the generosity and friendliness of the Mexican people. Home schooling continued at a subdued pace, no real agenda, just getting the basics right along with learning Spanish. The boys were enrolled in the Tasmanian E School for this period, which basically meant a weekly one hour lesson online with a teacher in Tasmania. Just getting a suitable internet connection, at the right time, created some hassles to say the least. The real benefit of the E school was that we could gauge the boys progress, which we were pleasantly surprised with, as on all occasions they were well up to scratch with their peers in Tasmania.

We recently returned to Tasmania for several months so the boys could go back to their local school, again they were comfortably equal or at a higher standard than their classmates. Ben

LEFT FROM TOP:

Ben reading *Tin Tin* with friend.

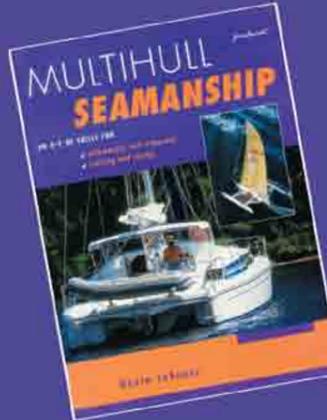
Fun times La Rochelle during fitout.

Into La Paz with no traffic.

(10), who loves to read, was rather bored with the whole system which tends to dumb down to the lowest standard. Over the past two years both boys have been enrolled in a local Mexican Montessori school – they start in the classroom at 0700 and finish at 1530 due to the hot days. They are the only non-Mexicans there, they speak perfect Spanish (well the Mexican lingo) and have many good friends, while progressing well with their general school work. We feel that even if they were behind in their schooling the benefits of another language, different social customs to Australia and their general worldliness would still make them better persons – plenty of time to study when required.

As we venture back into the 'real' world of electronic tablets, phones, school activities etc we realise that probably the simplest and best years of cruising with the boys has ended. Hopefully they will continue to enjoy cruising with their parents, but we cannot continue to shelter the boys from (unpleasant) outside influences so we are all experiencing growing pains. Ben only has one more year in primary school so some tough decisions will need to be made in the next year – stay in Mexico, cross the Pacific, or just go cruising again, not a bad bunch of options. From our personal experiences, we would wholeheartedly encourage anyone to cruise with young children and learn from them as they do from you.

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