



MONIKA SANDEL, MONIKA-SANDEL.DE

Along (long) way from Tipperary

She was just another single woman who'd given up on her dreams and opted to climb the corporate ladder. So when adventure came calling, Emma Dowley grabbed her opportunity and set off to sail the world. Eight years later she's found a happiness she never imagined

By YVONNE GORDON Main Photograph MONIKA SANDEL

Like most people, leaving the humdrum of everyday work for a life on the waves was an idle daydream Tipperary woman Emma Dowley would rerun in her mind when her job with a pharmaceutical company got boring. 'I had done a bit of racing,' says Emma now. 'But there was a lot of sunning yourself and just pulling ropes. I had a dream, and would think, "I'd love to sail around the world", but it seemed so unachievable. You have to get on with life, don't you?'

In her twenties, she had crewed on yachts – spending a couple of years as a hired hand on a succession of vessels in the Channel Islands – and loved the life but, aged 35 and established in her career as a medical relations manager in London, those days seemed firmly behind her. Then a friend, Roger, suggested sailing around the world. Suddenly, the dream was back again and within her reach.

'I was on a good career ladder but the opportunity wasn't going to come around again,' says Emma. 'In the end, it didn't take much to persuade me, so I gave up my job and sold my horse, Aero. Saying goodbye to him broke my heart, that was the biggest thing, but obviously I couldn't bring him on the boat...'

Emma and Roger pooled resources to buy Up Spirits, a 12-metre yacht, and the pair – plus another friend, Nathan, set out from Lanzarote in the Canary Islands on Christmas Eve 2003.

'I had never done a transatlantic journey before, and I felt sick for the first couple of days. It was my first sail on this boat, and there was lots to learn. One night a particularly nasty squall took us by surprise and ripped one of our sails. We also had to keep a look out for whales: we'd heard stories of boats bumping into these mammals as they slept, something which could have been disastrous.'

It took 25 days to reach the Caribbean. Isn't that a long time for three adults to spend cooped up in a confined space? 'We learnt a lot about each other – there's no escape if there's a bad day,' Emma says carefully. 'It was good fun but when we landed, we were happy to see land. It was a relief to get to the other side.'

Emma, Roger and Nathan soaked up the sunshine and the relaxed ambience of the Caribbean as they visited Saint Lucia, Martinique, Dominica and Guadeloupe. When Up Spirits reached Antigua, Nathan decided to call it a day and disembarked, but Roger and Emma continued on with their adventure, heading for Panama via the Windward and San Blas islands



and the tiny island of Montserrat which is known as 'the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean', both for its lush green landscape and its historical links to Ireland (the island's first non-native residents were Irish slaves shipped to the West Indies in the 1600s) and where Emma, who hails from Carrick-on-Suir, was 'treated particularly well'.

By the time they reached the Panama Canal – the gateway to the Pacific, the next stage of their round-the-world trip – it was April 2004 and they faced a two-week wait. 'There's always quite a bit of a backlog – plus there's major red tape in Panama – so all you can do is wait.'

The delay gave Emma and Roger the opportunity to take stock, and with Roger admitting that he'd grown tired, the pair agreed that Emma would look for another boat to move to. Of more immediate concern was negotiating the vast Panama Canal through which almost 300 million tonnes of shipping ➤



Opposite page: Emma with one-year-old Fionn and Alana, two. This page, clockwise, from above left: Fishing in the Atlantic Ocean; the Freefall moored off the Cocos Islands; Axel and Emma in Madagascar; the couple in Grenada; in South Africa; Emma and a new friend in Trinidad and Tobago



◀ passes each year: travelling just 50 miles through the network of locks, channels and artificial lakes requires the presence of five crew members on board.

'The tightknit spirit of the sailing community means 'everyone helps everyone else out by being a line-handler on another boat,' explains Emma. 'So I went around knocking on boats to see if anyone would line-handle for us. On one of the boats, a German guy said, "Sorry, we'll be gone by then – but come on up for a cup of tea." I said, "I can't – it's getting dark", and went on.'

It was only when Emma reached the Pacific that she slowly got to know the hospitable German a little better. He was Axel Wellendorf, a 31-year-old engineer crewing his brother-in-law's yacht Freefall with a friend. Axel was quite taken with the slim, pretty Irish girl and remembered meeting her weeks before. 'He says now that he saw me getting my hair cut on the dock somewhere. He even made a passing comment that the man cutting my hair was "the local pimp"! I have a vague memory of the incident – but obviously he didn't make much of an impression,' she laughs.

Once in the Pacific, Up Spirits set sail for the Galapagos Islands almost 1,000 miles away – one of the toughest and most frightening journeys Emma had experienced. 'It was slow and exhausting – it wasn't helped by the fact that we were hearing reports on the radio of people having to turn back.'

When Up Spirits finally docked in the Galapagos, Emma found Axel there ahead of her. 'I wasn't expecting to see him again, but people tend to take the same route,' she says. 'He and Andy came over with beers and rum to celebrate our arrival.'

If Emma failed to notice that the two boats were playing a form of 'tag' across the world's largest ocean, in her defence, every day of the journey brought an unforgettable and enchanting sight and experience. There was the suspected pirate raid which turned out to be a pod of pilot whales, the 'spectacular' Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia and the jungle-covered hills of Fatu Hiva where Emma would trade second-hand clothes for bread, bananas and eggs. 'I had miniature bottles of perfume which the local girls loved!' she says. 'We'd go for jungle walks in the hills and visit waterfalls. They don't get many visitors – there's no airport – so you get to know the people very quickly...'

It was in the Marquesas that Emma decided that Axel and Andy would be perfect companions for the next stage of her journey, and asked to join them on Freefall. The men discussed the issue and agreed (Emma would later learn that they welcomed the prospect of a third person on



'I learnt so much – the culture, the people, the wildlife... We still hope to take the children around the world – that would be the big dream'

board: the atmosphere had become a little stale) and it was decided that she would join them two months later, ahead of the Freefall's voyage to New Zealand.

In September 2004, Emma 'jumped ship' at Bora Bora, saying her goodbyes to Roger and Up Spirits. She threw herself into life aboard Freefall, visiting the coral atoll Suvarrow ('it's everybody's dream of what a tropical lagoon should look like,' she points out) and, finally, falling for Axel. She has particularly fond memories of Upolo Island. 'We stayed in a straw hut on the beach there – Axel called it our honeymoon,' she laughs now.

From there, the trio sailed to Tonga and on to New Zealand in November 2004 to shelter from the hurricane season. There they spent several months stripping and repainting Freefall, and said goodbye to Andy who had decided to buy his own boat.

In spring 2005, Emma and Axel set sail for the Fijian Islands and then on to Australia, where, in November of that year, Emma went backpacking with a friend while Axel flew home to Germany.

After almost two years on the world's oceans, was Emma tired of life on the high seas? She

Living in Germany and expecting her third baby, Emma says she isn't ready to retire from sailing

points out that life on a yacht is not as glamorous as you might think, 'Friends back home think you're sunning yourself on deck and having a glass of champagne but, no, something always breaks down. You're either taking out pipes to clear a blockage in the toilet or water's been getting in the bilge. Then, when the sails rip, you're trying to put them back together again...'

By April 2006, Emma and Axel were ready to return to the sea: they sailed up the Australian coast before crossing the Indian Ocean to Madagascar (a journey that saw them 'guided' through a narrow channel – and away from a dangerous reef – by a school of dolphins) and then South Africa.

After a few weeks' rest in South Africa, they rounded Cape Horn before crossing the Atlantic, bound for Brazil where they docked just in time for carnivals in spring 2007. By now on the home stretch, it was May 2007 when they bade an emotional farewell to Freefall in Florida.

By July of that year, Emma had moved to Cologne in northern Germany to be with Axel, and had started working there for an Irish-based pharmaceutical company. Within a year, the pair had itchy feet once more and, when offered ownership of the Freefall by Axel's brother-in-law Sidney (who had met his own wife – Axel's sister Susanne – on the boat), thought long and hard about walking away from their comfortable lives once more.

This time, however, there was an added complication: Emma was pregnant. Ultimately, Emma and Axel decided to stay on terra firma and married in April 2009. Their daughter Alana is now aged two years, and has a little brother, Fionn, who was born in May 2010. With their third baby due in August, Emma, 43, and Axel, 41, have taken the pragmatic view that Freefall, currently chartered out in Spain, is probably too small for their growing family.

But she looks back on her days on the world's greatest oceans with fondness. 'I learnt so much: the culture, the people, the wildlife... they all made it really special. It was a fantastic adventure.' Freefall, she believes, will eventually be brought to either Ireland or the Baltic Sea where it will be refurbished before being sold off. But that doesn't mean this Tipperary woman is retiring from the sea.

'We still have the dream of taking the kids around the world,' she says, admitting, 'That would be a big dream.'

And knowing Emma, it may not be too long before all the family has taken to the high seas for another adventure... 