



# Rolex China Sea Race

## Whiskey Jack Double-Handed

WORDS: NICK SOUTHWARD | PHOTOS: NICK SOUTHWARD | BARRY HAYES | ROLEX / DANIEL FORSTER

Feature | Rolex China Sea Race – Whiskey Jack Double-Handed

The start of the race was miserable. Within five minutes of the first downpour my offshore gear was soaked and was to stay like this for the next three days (note to self – don't go offshore in 10-year-old heavy weather gear again). However, our start was not too bad and we tacked our way up the harbour and out through Lei Yu Mun Gap with me driving and Barry trimming. We had not short-tacked with the big genoa before with only two of us, but by the end of the harbour we had become surprisingly good at it.



At Shek O we got stuck in a frustrating hole next to *Explorer* and we both watched *Wonderwall* in wonderment as they slipped past us around TCS2, especially as they had only tacked back to go inside it after Barry had reminded them to sail the correct course. We flirted with different sail changes and at one stage even had the A2 up, but finally the north east breeze kicked in with a solid 10kts and we were off. As dusk arrived we reached out past Waglan under genoa with the breeze gradually building to 15 gusting 20. The waves started slapping into the belly of the genoa and finding the boat hard to control we reefed the main, the boat settled down and we powered along just fine.

We had a dinner of meatballs and fresh pasta, which hit the spot, albeit slightly soggy and salty from the rain and waves over the boat intensifying in the short choppy seas. We then had the brainwave of putting up the spray-hood (2<sup>nd</sup> note to self – next time assemble this before the race not during, as it would have been a lot easier). But with the spray-hood our good karma returned as we were protected from the weather, even as the wind intensified to a constant 25kts, by which time we had furled the genoa to number 4 size.

The boat's navigation computer failed about this time. This was not a good feeling and it was too rough to go troubleshooting. Luckily we had a laptop back-up, which was quickly plumbed in, so we had all the AIS information of the numerous fishing boats which were appearing out of nowhere.

At 30kts of breeze we took the main to reef 2 and later furled the genoa to half size. This was a very stable combination – with a foresail larger than a storm jib, but smaller than a no 4, the boat was set up perfectly and we powered along. The larger fully-crewed boats may well

have been under jib top at this stage, but for us that would have needed weight on the rail which we didn't have.

Thus was spent the rest of the night plus most of Day 2, but spirits were momentarily dampened when a monster wave broke over the boat and ripped all the spray-hood cover fixings out of the boat. We jury rigged a solution which meant that although it would not be as watertight from now on, it would at least have some give in it so that the whole thing would not fall apart the next time a wave broke on it.

Late afternoon on Day 2 the genoa furling line snapped when the breeze was up to 40kts. As a result the genoa opened fully, which was a rather horrifying sight. To get out of that I had to manually steer the boat dead downwind to create a stable platform for Barry to go forward to take down the sail. With Barry on deck feeding the genoa into the luff groove, I had to winch the sail up from the cabin top winch, a task I found extremely exhausting despite all the pre-race gym training. I was shocked that lack of sleep had left me so fatigued and consequently with no strength. Imagine then

our dismay as the furling line failed again within five minutes (3rd note to self – get new furling line). So on deck again to take the sail down and replace with the pre-furled storm jib, set on a padeye on the deck. This worked a treat and finally we were back to racing again.

With wind now sustained at 40+kts we decided to put the storm jib on the foil in order to be certain that nothing would break. So Barry was up the foredeck yet again and I will never forget the scary surfing we were doing whilst this operation was taking place and I doubt Barry will either. With the boat surfing at 18kts I tried hard and succeeded in not submarining the bow into these monster waves. Luckily the waves just rolled out from under the boat and we never actually buried the bow, however much it looked like this was going to happen.

That night the breeze was now gusting 45+kts, but we felt safe with the boat rock solid. The Expedition log shows patches of 50+ gusts, the most I have ever been out in, but *Whiskey Jack* powered along and I felt safe and comfortable. It was only when Barry asked me if I had ever lost a rig did I begin to think that perhaps he thought otherwise!

We both felt glad we were not steering at the back of the boat as this would have been the place to be washed off when the waves broke over the boat. In one wave the inflatable Danbuoy exploded (4th note to self – get a proper traditional pole and not these stupid self-inflating things). Then we got hit by a huge wave and knocked down. The force of the wave flung Barry to the other side of the cockpit engaging both his safety lines (by this time we were clipped on with double lines on separate jackstays) and he was very lucky to have missed the winch on the far side of the cockpit. Luckily he was not hurt, but his life jacket inflated and consequently set off his AIS alarm. We were concerned that there was no DSC alert squawking from the VHF, as is supposed to happen, but we did see a mark on the chart plotter (later a radio wave expert on another boat explained that this was to do with the location of the antenna at the masthead having a blind spot immediately below, ie the cockpit).

At this point we realised that all the talk of MOB training and all the plans we had made would have been a rather different story in reality. Imagine this: It was pitch dark, big waves, strong wind, boat going at 10kts. What would have happened if one of us had gone over? With the exhaustion from lack of sleep how would the other have reacted? By the time one had fired the sails and turned the boat round it would have been very hard to find him. With the AIS being on the laptop downstairs how

could one of us have monitored this and driven the boat at the same time? How to see him with 5m waves? I now think it essential to have a dedicated marine chart plotter integrated with AIS up on deck by the wheel. Something that I have never thought necessary for inshore racing, but essential when short-handed. We had planned to rely on iPad repeaters on deck, but the wifi connection always proved to be too unstable and they were too fiddly to use.

We were clipped on to two separate jackstays at all times in this period – one long, one short tether. We had spare tethers laid around the cockpit to enable transfers for movement around the deck and also one downstairs, so it was possible to clip on prior to coming up on deck. But the clip mechanism on the tethers that we had was not good and created a lot of friction when moving along the deck, so we must replace them with Spinlock elasticated tethers, which don't seem to snag as much.

On Day 3 the wind abated to 30+, but a fresh set of problems arose. We could not turn off

the engine after a period of charging, as the power appeared to have gone from the engine control panel. Of course we could turn off the engine manually, but because the control panel was dead we were concerned that if we did, we could not start it again. It turned out that the fix was simple – the grab bag was located close to the battery switch and it had moved and brushed against it, turning it off in the process. This made us realise that you really need to know how to turn an engine off and on without use of the electronic control panel or a key.

Just after this the autopilot broke. Until then the Raymarine pilot had been performing superbly in the large quartering seas. The unit has an additional gyro compass that I only recently added and this made a big difference to its steering ability. We both agreed that the pilot was better at steering in a straight line than we were, but of course the pilot can't play the waves so overall using the pilot made us slower. But in 50kt gusts we felt safer in the cockpit under the spray-hood than at the back



steering so were happy to give up that speed advantage. The failure was a sheared M12 bolt between the ram and the pilot plates on the quadrant. I had no M12 spares and even if I had, I doubt one could have been used as it needed an extra-long bolt which you would not normally have. Despite being confident that we could fix it, at first we had no clue of a solution and tried many ideas involving lashings, shorter smaller bolts, jubilee clips etc, all of which failed. In the end we had to fabricate our own bolt from the handle of a ratchet spanner, which was unfortunately just too large to fit through the hole in the ram bearing. It meant we spent two hours filing down the handle to the required diameter using the file on a Leatherman (5th note to self – get a proper file for the toolbox). The whole fix took six hours and meant that we took our eye off the racing – in hindsight we should have hand-steered for the rest of the race.

On the evening of night 3 we finally ate again. The M&S pre-cooked baked potatoes with Swiss cheese were probably the best potatoes ever grown and it felt great to be warm and comfortable again. By now the wind was just behind the beam and with 25 to 30kts we changed from storm jib to no 4 heavy weather jib, again set on its own furler on the staysail pad eye. This was a great set-up, but in hindsight was a bit slow and we should have pushed harder, as it was during this period that we lost touch with the front runners in our division. To our defence however, we had this sense of having just survived a great storm and combined with all the issues above we were happy just to truck along.

On the Saturday morning we saw *Ymir* on the AIS, who from being a long way behind had pulled 3.8 miles ahead. This was the kick we needed to start racing again, so we took down the no 4, put up the code zero on the furler with the luff set very tight and with 25kts sailed at about a true wind angle of 110. This was right at the edge of the danger zone where the boat would spin out, but it was extremely fast



and Barry's record was 14.8kts.

Ever so slowly we hauled *Ymir* in, closing the gap inch by inch. After lunch the wind backed to behind north so we decided to replace the code zero with the A5. At 140 true wind angle we had the same great speed and we got closer to *Ymir* and the Philippine coast, with high hopes of finishing that evening.

Then, just before the 1800hrs radio checks, we discovered the SSB radio was not working – there was no power in the control head. I later found this to be the fault of a crack in the positive power wire from the battery, but at the time it was just another groan of frustration at something else not working.

As dusk set in we sailed the last 20 miles to the reef at the corner in sustained gusts of 25+ at fantastic speeds. However we did have to harden up to keep on course so the boat was again on the edge of control. In one particular gust the boat rounded up and I had to release the kite sheet from the winch in a hurry. In doing so the winch spun under load and because I had not removed the winch handle before doing so, the handle spun and smashed into the back of my wrist. Nothing was damaged other than the winch handle, which exploded on impact, but I was lucky (6th note to self – always take out the winch handle before easing the sheet in that sort of loaded situation). At this point we decided that discretion was the better part of valour, so we

doused the kite using Barry's kite sock – which was such a simple and safe manoeuvre done entirely from the cockpit, that I am now a kite sock convert.

We had a brief lull going round the corner, before coming on the wind again and beating up to the Grande Island finish, to finish 5 mins behind *Ymir* on the water and 3<sup>rd</sup> in IRC Div 2 behind *Seawolf* and *Krampus*.

This was the fastest and windiest crossing I have had. Previously the 2009 San Fernando was quite exciting at 30kts for two days, but all races since have been relatively benign. This had lulled me into thinking that doing the race double-handed would not be too challenging, so we did have a bit of a reality check during the race. What was strange about this race was that it was only the slower boats at the back of the fleet that were caught up in the really spicy weather – the rest further ahead seemed to have a relatively pleasant sail, with the front runners always ahead of the weather.

What summarised this race for me was the realisation that no matter how well prepared you think the boat is, it never is prepared enough. The race proved to be a series of challenges, one after the other, of how to fix broken stuff without the relevant spare parts you never thought you would need.

We do hope to see more double-handed boats on the start line in two years' time for the next Rolex China Sea Race. 🌊

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