

This man went from bin-diving in Bristol to yacht captain in the Caribbean

Seven years ago Leo was busking on the street to earn money, now he's basking in the Caribbean as part of the superyacht set

BY [Joe Smith](#)

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Leo works on his folk boat before his Atlantic crossing (Image: Leo Sampson Goolden)

Leo Sampson Goolden began his life in Bristol living under a friend's stairs, working for free at a boatyard and eating out of bins. Now, he lives in the Caribbean and rubs shoulders with millionaires on one of the largest sailing yachts in the world.

He used the skills he learned working in Bristol as an apprentice to re-build a boat which he then sailed single-handed to the Caribbean where he now works as the third mate on a superyacht owned by an international banker.

One autumn afternoon in 2010 Leo simply walked down to the Underfall Boatyard on Bristol Harbour and asked if he could work for free and learn to build boats. They took him on and to save money he moved in with friends in Montpellier.

He said his time spent living under the stairs of his friend's student house tested his resolve.

"I remember being cold, it was near Christmas and the basement was freezing," he said. "I lived right next to the washing machine, it was a bit of a party house and people would be running up and down the stairs all night.

"Often when I got up for work people would still be partying in the room next to me.

"I got through a lot of ear plugs."



Leonid, Leo's first boat, in Bristol Harbour (Image: Leo Sampson Goolden)

In spring 2011 Leo was able to escape his under-stairs existence. He said: "I spent two or three days walking up and down the docks asking to live on an old boat and work on it."

Leo's persistence paid off and he moved into an empty boat, Leonid.

Between working at the boatyard and restoring Leonid he busked to earn money and found food in supermarket bins. Even in those lean times, he was still choosy about what he ate.

"I was a discerning bin raider. Waitrose at the top of Park Street was probably the best place to get a free meal – who says beggars can't be choosers?"

After saving up his busking money and working a bar job in the evenings Leo eventually scraped together enough cash to get a boat of his own. After sailing down it down to Falmouth in Cornwall he got work in another boat yard and traded up to a 25-foot wooden folk boat, Lorema.

He said: "I was planning to sail to France but pretty much the first time I sailed her properly the mast snapped. So I had to change my plans."

Leo found work at a boatyard in Gweek where he took Loreema out of the water and rebuilt her.

"There was a lot of rot, it was a huge job. I worked 8am till noon on the boat and then from one to eight or nine. I was living on the boat for a lot of that time, rebuilding it around me."



Clothes dry on the rigging during Lorema's Atlantic crossing (Image: Leo Sampson Goolden)
Finally, after getting his yacht masters qualification Leo set off on his transatlantic voyage in July 2015.

He describes his month-long trip as, "terrifying, exhilarating and boring".

His arrival in the Caribbean caused quite a stir, it was unusual for someone to make such a long voyage in such a small boat.

Leo entered Lorema into the prestigious Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta and won first place in his class and an award for best young skipper.

Having caught the attention of the Caribbean yachting set Leo was offered a job a captain of Sincerity, a 90-foot ketch , a wooden sailing yacht from the 1920s.



Sincerity navigates icebergs near Greenland (Image: Leo Sampson Goolden)

Leo skippered Sincerity and her crew back to Europe, via Bermuda, Nova Scotia and Greenland before returning to the Caribbean in 2016 to accept a job as Bosun on the superyacht Adix.

“She is a three-masted gaff schooner – 65 metres long, weighing 270 tonnes. The size and scale of everything shocked me at first. To walk from one end of the boat to the other seems to take forever. The bowsprit is almost longer than my whole boat.”

Leo has come a long way from his humble beginnings in Bristol but the city will always be a special place for him, he said: “It’s been an amazing journey, it has not always been easy but it’s been an awful lot of fun. I’ve sailed a long way but Bristol Harbour will always feel like home to me.”