



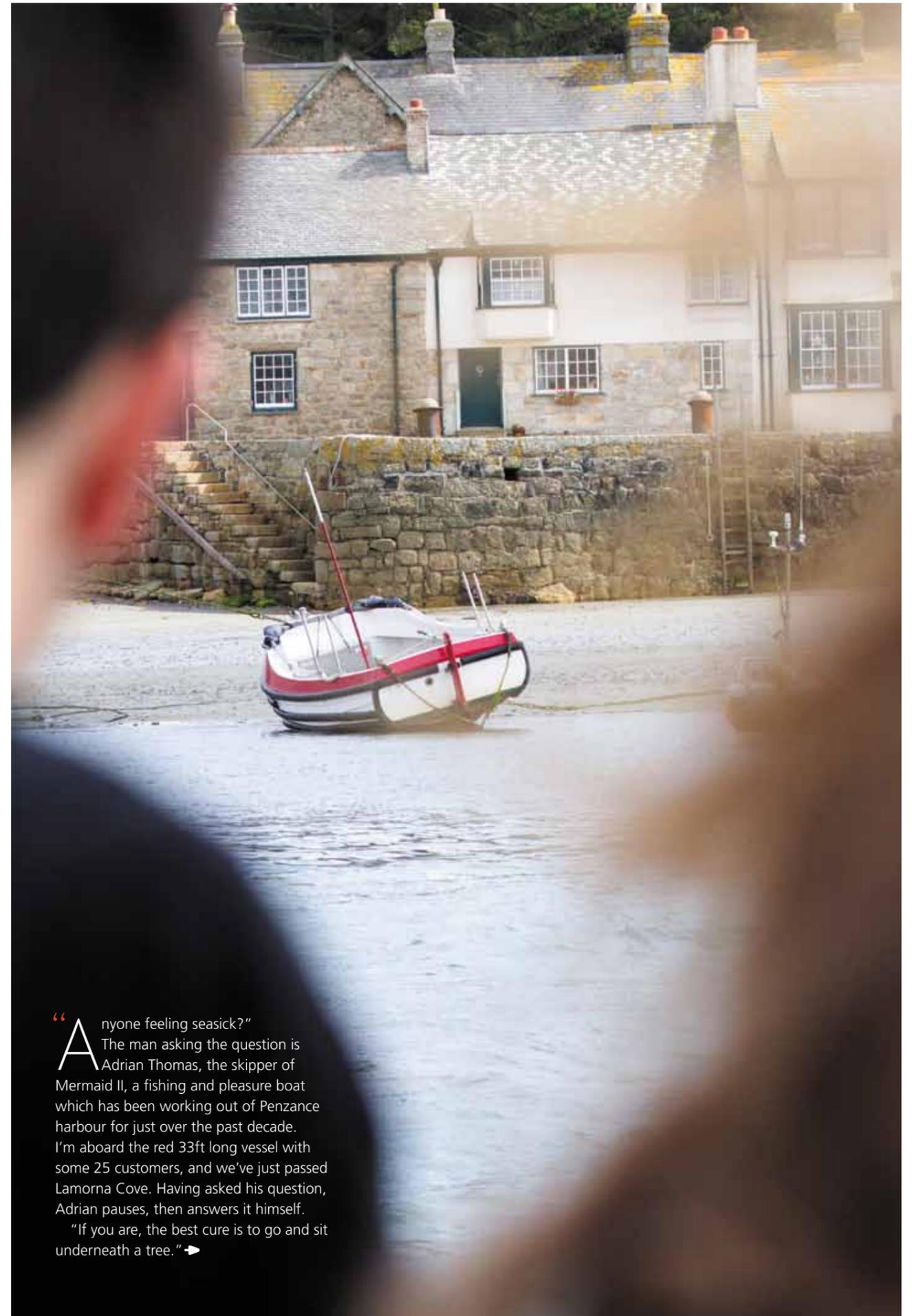
welcome to the best office in Britain

ADRIAN THOMAS, THE MAN AT THE HELM OF MERMAID PLEASURE TRIPS
IN PENZANCE, COULDN'T BE HAPPIER

Words by **Alex Wade**, photographs by **Mike Newman** / www.ocean-image.com



ABOVE: SKIPPER ADRIAN THOMAS GIVING A GUIDED TOUR



“Anyone feeling seasick?”
The man asking the question is Adrian Thomas, the skipper of Mermaid II, a fishing and pleasure boat which has been working out of Penzance harbour for just over the past decade. I'm aboard the red 33ft long vessel with some 25 customers, and we've just passed Lamorna Cove. Having asked his question, Adrian pauses, then answers it himself.
“If you are, the best cure is to go and sit underneath a tree.” ➔

ABOVE: THE HARBOUR ON THE MOUNT



ABOVE: THE OLD PENLEE LIFEBOAT STATION; HANDING OUT THE RODS AND TACKLE



It's a nice line, and it's one of many: Adrian's commentary when he takes Mermaid II out into Mount's Bay and beyond is almost as notable as the spectacular scenery all around us. He has an able sidekick, too. Nine-year-old Kingsley helps greet passengers, and father and son make a great double act throughout Mermaid's trips, with Kingsley also keeping a careful note of everything they see or, if it's a fishing trip, catch. Another crew member is Billy, 16, who is serving an apprenticeship.

"How'd do you like my office?" asks Adrian, as we chug past St Loy's cove. We've already seen two seals basking on the rocks of St Clement's Isle, just off Mousehole harbour; now we're heading to the Minack Theatre to see if we can find the marine life often seen on Mermaid's voyages – basking sharks, sunfish and dolphins. It's a sunny, balmy day, with the sea ruffled only slightly by a light breeze; with the

ancient granite cliffs dropping down into the ocean to the starboard, and on the port side, endless blue sweeping away to the Lizard, it's impossible not to agree that Adrian's office is just about the best in Britain.

Suddenly there's a commotion. Paul Semmens, a wildlife expert who comes on Mermaid's trips to work as a spotter, shouts "Sunfish! To the right!" Adrian expertly brings Mermaid around, and there on the surface is something I've never seen, in all the years I've lived in Cornwall: the heaviest known bony fish in the world, a silvery mola mola, or ocean sunfish. They can grow to a huge size but are benign – save when they leap from the water: in 2006, a four-year-old boy on a fishing trip in Wales was knocked over on his parents' boat when a 30kg sunfish landed on him.

The sunfish wriggles, its dorsal fin waving on the surface for

a few moments before it dives. "They always do that, before they swim off," explains Semmens.

On we go. The golden sands of Porthcurno beach are tantalisingly close but Adrian has set a course for the Runnel Stone buoy, which lies off a mile off Gwennap Head. The buoy marks the beginning of the treacherous Runnel Stone reef, scene of over 30 shipwrecks between 1880 and 1923. It emits a haunting, mournful moan when there is a swell running. Today conditions are calm but the Runnel Stone can never be taken lightly.

"I know these waters like the back of my hand," Adrian tells me, "so I can take us between the reef, so that we'll hug the shore on our return journey. But every year the lifeboat comes out for sailors who get in trouble here. It's a dangerous place."

Adrian's commentary, indeed, turns out to be as educative as it is humorous. He explains the purpose of the day marks visible on Gwennap Head, the seaward one a red cone, the inland one a black and white one. "You need to keep eye on the cones," he says. "You've always got to have a gap between them, so that you can see the black and white one. If it's obscured by the red one, you're directly on top of the reef."

The cones were built in 1821 by Trinity House, the UK's lighthouse and pilotage authority. Trinity House is also where Adrian began his working life: "I started with them as a deck boy in 1977, when I was 15," he tells me. "I worked my way up and became a Bosun, which means I was in charge of the deck. I've spent my entire life at sea, working as a merchant seaman."

Born and bred in Marazion, Adrian also lived on St Michael's Mount when he was growing up. His in-depth knowledge of the Mount is obvious when Mermaid II potters around it, and so is his love of this part of Cornwall. "I've travelled the world's oceans but this is the only place I want to be," he says. "I started running Mermaid Pleasure Trips in 2004 with my wife Vanessa, but it isn't a job to me. It's the

only thing I want to do."

It's as well that Adrian doesn't see his work as drudgery, because there's an awful lot of it. From late spring to the end of September Mermaid II is at sea more than she is moored in Penzance harbour. Adrian takes passengers on seal cove cruises, on trips to the Minack Theatre, on voyages around St Michael's Mount and on mackerel and deep sea fishing trips. The wildlife to be seen is extraordinary, from fulmars, puffins and gannets to dolphins and porpoises, even minky and humpback whales.

On my trip, there are beams of delight among those on board; Adrian tells me that customers on the fishing trips are sometimes even happier. "People love catching their own fish, going out to sea and coming home with Pollock, or bass, or mackerel. That's just for starters. It gives me so much pleasure to see the smiles on their faces."

Back on land, I meet Vanessa. She takes the bookings and runs the couple's fishing supplies and gift shop, right on the harbour. "Business is going well," she says, "but there's just one problem. We're so busy that I don't get a chance to go on the boat any more."

This strikes me as a nice problem to have – and it's one that looks set only to increase, given that Adrian and Vanessa have decided to embrace social media. "We're a traditional, family business, but we recognise that we need to move with the times. So we're now on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Instagram, and we're looking to build up this side of things even more."

Look out for Mermaid Pleasure Trips online, but better yet, climb aboard. Adrian is right – his office is just about the best in Britain. 🐟

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ABOVE: BILLY HELPS FRANK LAND A POLLOCK; BILLY ENJOYS THE CUSTOMER'S PLEASURE AT CATCHING A DECENT SIZED COD



ABOVE: FRANK IS ALL SMILES HAVING CAUGHT A LARGE WRASSE