

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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CROSSING THE DOLDRUMS

One of the old problems of sailing ships in voyaging from the northern to the southern hemisphere or vice versa was to cross the doldrums--the equatorial belt of calms and variable winds separating the two trade-wind belts--at the point where this intermediate zone was narrowest. Captain Dampier, writing at the close of the seventeenth century, states that ships in the Atlantic crossed the equator midway between Africa and South America, but Lieutenant Maury, in his epoch-making "Wind and Current Charts," showed that the doldrums are narrower on the American side. Sailors were prompt to take the hint, and it became customary to cross on the western side of the ocean, despite the previous bad reputation of the neighborhood of Cape St. Roque, where some transports were lost in the eighteenth century.

The limits of the doldrums are, however, subject to great and rapid variations. Thus in a given longitude they may be as much as 500 or 600 miles wide for days together, and then for a time be invaded to such an extent by the trade winds that they are almost extinguished. Maury wrote of this belt: "We find that within certain boundaries it is continually changing place and limits. This fact is abundantly proved by the speed of ships, whose log-books show that it is by no means a rare occurrence for one vessel, after she has been dallying in the doldrums for days, in the vain effort to cross that calm belt, to see another coming up to her 'hand over fist,' with fair winds, and crossing the belt after a delay in it of only a few hours instead of days."

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