

A trip across the bay

It all started some 12,000 miles away in a small rural area North of Sydney. Both Chris and I manage each year to visit the southern hemisphere on the pretext of seeing relatives and especially grandchildren. The fact that the weather in November, January & February is considerably better on Lake Macquarie Australia, than it is in Poole Harbour does have some influence over our reasoning. Whilst in Australia we are fortunate in that we have made friends that invite us to race on their Adams 42. Last year one of the racing crew announced that he and his brother in law were each buying a new Lipari Fountaine Pajot catamaran. Upon hearing this I could not resist offering to help with any delivery needs on the way back from France to Australia.

Whilst on our annual sailing holiday between Brittany and the Channel Islands there came a call for help via the magic of e-mail. Allan Davis the fellow crew member I had spoken to some six months earlier was looking for crew to assist him and his wife Coralie in getting their new boat "Whiskers" from La Rochelle to Cape Finistère. Allan's brother in law David Solomon had apparently already recruited a local Frenchman to assist. I really wanted to help but had a number of commitments that seemed to conspire against me the most important and totally unmissable was that of my father's 100th birthday bash which was organised for Saturday 4th September.

I decided I could get to La Rochelle by Sunday 5th September and would be prepared to make the trip for the cost of my fare and meals. No sooner had I agreed to fly out a further request came from David asking if anyone else could be found to assist him and his wife Lucy on their boat "In Tune" as the Frenchman had found something else to do. It did not take me long to find additional help, John Waller of "Rumpleteaser" was equally enthusiastic about the project and was soon recruited on similar terms. John, fortunately has a sister living near to La Rochelle, which proved to be very useful indeed. John was able to spend ten days with his sister and brother in law and upon my arrival they were able to transport both of us from the airport to the marina at Pornic where the boats and owners were waiting for us.

The evening got off to a good start with introductions and a fair exchange of views between all parties. After a detailed analysis of the weather pattern predicted over the following four days, it was concluded that we would be best served by leaving as soon as we could and 1000 the following day was agreed. And so it was that we left Pornic at 1100 on a smooth sea in bright sunshine and a gentle southerly breeze. After clearing the harbour and all local obstructions we turned into wind, hoisted full sail with the use of the magnificent electrical winch and away we went at a steady six knots to West. This took us clear of the islands and out into open water. I was fully prepared for this idyllic scenario to change and of course it did. As nightfall approached we shortened the mainsail to the first reef in case we should be caught out with stronger winds during the night. This proved to be the opposite of what actually happened. The wind dropped to the point of being only just sailable and for good measure veered leaving us with the choice of tacking North-West away from our destination at a ridiculously slow speed, South into a strong wind pattern we had previously chosen to avoid or motor head to little wind down our rumb line. Having taken the last option we were now in for a very uncomfortable time as the Lipari does not seem to like short choppy seas taken head on and we pitched continuously to the point that we all felt ill. As we had expected to notice a change in sea pattern after

crossing the continental shelf, we longed for its approach. This did happen and the seas were far easier to cope with as the waves although having increased in size were far less steep, more like rolling hills but by this time the damage to our sensitive stomachs had been done. We had broken the watch up into three hours on and six hours off and for the first two days my off watch time was spent lying down some of which was under the saloon table where I had concluded was the point of minimum movement. I can clearly recall kneeling in the heads shouting into the big telephone for “yoouuuueeeeeee”. Fortunately after taking some medication this activity was effectively brought to an end and the rest of the journey made with the minimum of discomfort.

One of the major disadvantages of serious offshore sailing is that you have to be ready for a trip outside at any time; this means being dressed in full all weather kit with lifejacket and harness and living in what might be regarded as a Michelin man suit. The necessary calls of nature then require a complete strip down and reassembly of the multi layers of clothing. This is not an activity that is engaged upon until really necessary neither can it be completed quickly or without considerable effort. The relative comfort of our own boat “Dragonslayer” with a steering position inside a pilot house is now really appreciated.

Towards the end of the second day an attempt was made to sail if not to our rumb line, to as near as we could get to it. This attempt was thwarted by two unconnected incidents on both of the boats. Due to a strengthening of wind and an attempt to reduce sail, one boat lost the mainsail halyard which made a beautiful cats cradle between the stays at the top of the mast and as if in sympathy the halyard on the second boat parted at the top of the mast dropping the sail and disappearing back down the inside of the mast. The following two days were completed courtesy of the well behaved Volvo engines.

Of course the best plans always seem to slip away and La Coruna our port of arrival was not our first choice or our objective but time alas awaits for no man and to go on to Pontevedra would have had us miss our flights home. With cheap flight operators, cheap flights become dear flights if you try to book them at short notice. We could not afford to risk such an eventuality. So three hundred and eighty miles later La Coruna it was. At 0300 on a dark moonless night the entrance has little to offer apart from a transit line marked on the chart and a transit light deep into the harbour. The chart shows a maze of rocks completely encircling the harbour entrance. We could not see the transit light or anything come to that. The reason became quite obvious when the bank of fog completely engulfed both boats. A quick switching on of the radar soon had us weaving our way between fishing boats coming out of the harbour and suddenly all was clear, the transit light with it’s red white and green sectors and the whole expanse of the harbour was in front of us. We were escorted in by a pod of dolphins that played with the boat for five minutes or so. No messing around trying to get into a marina for us. We were all tired and needed to keep things simple. We went to what was marked on the chart as an anchorage and lowered the hook. Twenty-five metres of chain and a rope bridle gave us a very peaceful night, on the first bit of flat water we had seen for four days and nights. At 0400 you need to get to bed quickly and that’s what we all did.

Next morning was a pleasure, rising late to a bright warm sun in a cloudless sky. A leisurely breakfast, a quick tidy up and away to the marina. Although both boats managed to get into the marina finger berths without incident I very much doubt that would have been the case had an attempt been made during the night. There was much debate about the trip, a lunch and dinner to organise, payment to the marina and a brief trip into town to see what it was like. We all had dinner on David and Lucy's boat "In Tune" cooked to perfection by David's wife Lucy and of course we sat up until gone midnight telling life stories to each other and using up the wine that had been shaken up. Next morning was the day of our departure and a taxi to the airport was arranged for 1300. But of course we could not leave without putting right that which had gone wrong on the trip so with no more ado and a hearty breakfast inside me I was hoisted up each mast in turn and within an hour we had both halyards back to normal working. I can only imagine what it would have been like to try to do the same whilst at sea. I take my hat off to Ellen MacArthur.

The flight back to Heathrow was relatively uneventful save for a thirty minute delay to our departure. Coralie came with us for a surprise for her visiting daughter and a theatre trip to see "Les Miserables" in London.

The plan is for the two boats to winter ashore on the South coast of Portugal and to spend next season in the Mediterranean. I look forward to hearing more from them both.

Aleck Tidmarsh