

FROM HOWTH TO TORREVIEJA WITH LA LUMIÈRE OF HOWTH

Ken and Carmel Kavanagh

(Previous issues of Flying Fish carried Ken and Carmel's account of exploring the Black Sea aboard their previous yacht, Safari of Howth, and then bringing her back west across the Mediterranean from Turkey to Spain. Two years on, and we rejoin them in their home port of Howth, a fishing and yachting harbour on the north side of Dublin Bay...)

Two OAPs in a Boat

In late 2013 we sold *Safari of Howth*, our beloved Hallberg Rassy 42. After a thorough search she was replaced with *La Lumière of Howth*, a Hunter Legend 36, which we thought would better suit the needs of two ageing sailors who wished to spend their final years pottering around the Med. We found her in St Quai Portrieux in Brittany in 2014 and sailed her back to our home port of Howth, where we spent a season kitting her out for what we hoped would be a new beginning in the Med.

The excitement begins

On a wet, cold Sunday, 24 May 2015, the skipper and I finally set off for Greystones, just 20 miles south of Howth. We thought we had a serious problem when the autopilot refused to hold a course, but on investigation discovered that 'the crew' (moi!) had packed an electric polisher too close to the fluxgate compass in the cockpit locker, and the magnets in the motor had led the autopilot astray. Flogging and walking the plank were discussed, but thankfully that thought was soon abandoned!

We left for Milford Haven at 1500 the following afternoon to catch the tide at St Anne's Head. Light variable winds accompanied us for the first few hours, then veered to the west so we were able to roll out the sails and motor-sail down the Irish Sea. It was a cold, bumpy and, on one occasion, alarming passage. At around 2330, while I was on the first night watch of the season, a red masthead light suddenly appeared ahead on what looked like an imminent collision course. According to the AIS this would occur within the next two minutes! I quickly altered course and watched as a large yacht glided past under sail, far too close for comfort. While I was recovering from the fright it disappeared from the AIS screen and the navigation lights were extinguished. Hardly the smartest idea with two rather anxious OAPs at large in the middle of the Irish Sea.

At 1100 the following morning we duly locked into Milford Haven marina without any further excitements, not realising that nine days would pass before we would be on our way again. There followed a week of gale-force winds, which reached storm force 10 in Lundy, the Bristol Channel and the Irish Sea. Even though Milford Haven is far from being a 'des res' town, we enjoyed our stay there because of the central location of the marina and its excellent facilities.

The Bristol and English Channels

On Thursday 4 June the weather forecast was reasonable enough to make the 120 mile



Our new, swing-mounted, TV/chart-plotter

passage across the Bristol Channel to Newlyn in Cornwall. We exited the dock at 1130 and the southeast 3-4 allowed us to make good progress in the early part of the trip, but at midnight it

veered to the southwest which resulted in a long, slow slog down to Land's End. Soon the wind had reached 22 knots and we were concerned that we would miss the tide to take us round Land's End. The decision – prompted by the forecast – to depart Milford Haven two hours earlier than strictly necessary paid off however, and at 0845 next morning, with the fog lifted and the Longship's Lighthouse finally visible, we shot round Land's End with the help of 4 knots of favourable tide and a nice westerly breeze, which brought us into Newlyn by 1300.

At 1715 the following day we left Newlyn for the 100 mile passage across the English Channel to L'Aberwrac'h. The wind was forecast to be west 4-5 backing northwest 3-4 later. All went mostly according to plan, except for the extreme cold, but there was one funny incident along the way. While once again on a solo night watch, I roused the skipper to seek advice on how best to handle the large orange-coloured cruise ship coming over the horizon. After peering at it for a second he looked at me as if I had lost the plot, said "that's the moon" and returned to his bunk. I was left feeling very alone and stupid in the middle of the English Channel...

More gales, but blue skies on the horizon

We berthed on the visitors' pontoon in the small, very exposed marina in L'Aberwrac'h at 1245 next day, and were kept in port another four days by gale force winds. Eventually they abated and we set sail to pass through the Chenal du Four bound for Camaret, 35 miles along the coast. It turned wet and murky towards the end of the passage, and we were glad to be in by 1800. We set off early the following morning to pass through the Raz de Sein, hopefully into sunnier climes, and were not disappointed. After transiting the Raz at slack high water, we emerged into South Brittany and the first real sunshine of the trip. The 37 mile stretch from the Raz to Loctudy also produced the first really enjoyable sail since departing Howth.

The following morning, 30 June, saw us depart Loctudy at 1015 bound for Lorient, 38 miles away. We had another lovely sail in sunny conditions arriving off the harbour at 1700, but to our horror there were no marina berths available as the Volvo Round

the World Race yachts were there for the weekend. I think the staff of Marina Locmiquelic must have got fed up with me eventually, clogging Channel 9 with my foreign accent, begging all and sundry for a berth, so they sent out a RIB to escort us into their marina where we were delighted to find ourselves berthed alongside the renowned meteorologist Frank Singleton and his wife, who were cruising Brittany.

The village of Locmiquelic itself was an absolute delight and has an excellent *boulangerie* and *charcuterie* where we stocked up with some very tasty provisions.

For the fourth day in a row the wind gods co-operated with our sailing plans, forecasting north 3–4 occasionally 5 and some showers – excellent conditions for the 55 mile passage to Pornichet/La Baule at the mouth of the Loire, where we were due to meet up with some friends from Nantes. We left Marina Locmiquelic at 0850 and headed southwest, and by 1400 it was finally warm enough to don shorts for a few hours and commence working on the tan! The sunshine didn't last too long, however, and we docked in Pornichet at 1830 in an absolute downpour, pleased that we had completed the first 500 miles of our journey.

Biscay – always a challenge

We spent a relaxing day in Pornichet in the company of our friends, and then it was back to planning the Biscay crossing. After a considerable amount of soul-searching we decided to opt for a two-night crossing from Pornichet to Gijon, a distance of 262 miles – with just two OAPs on board, prolonged passages at sea are no longer the fun they used to be!

At 0800 on Tuesday 16 June we began the passage to Gijon, and were soon making 6 knots with the help of a northwesterly 3–4. About an hour out we were hailed by a Customs vessel from the ever-zealous Lorient region whose crew examined our ships' documents. Thankfully all was in order, and we were sent on our way with cries of *Bon Voyage* ringing in our ears. Then at 1830 the passage came to an abrupt and juddering halt! There was a sudden vibration from the engine and all indications were that the



Glad to have the Raz behind us

propeller was fouled. The best option was to head for Les Sables d'Olonne, the nearest port on the French coast, 55 miles to the east. As darkness closed in the northwest wind increased to 20–25 knots which, accompanied by a 2m swell, turned the passage into a tough, challenging, overnight sail. We were utterly exhausted when we finally docked in Les Sables d'Olonne at 0800 the following morning. There, a diver established that all was well with the prop – the offending article had somehow detached itself in the very rough conditions we had experienced during the night.

Mutiny aboard

By this stage I was both exhausted and freaked out, and presented the skipper with three reasonable options for the onward journey, the fourth being that he cross Biscay singlehanded! They were:

1. Do an overnigher to Santander and work our way along the north coast of Spain;
2. Get a third person to accompany us across Biscay as far as La Coruña;
3. Have the boat transported by road to the Med.

The marina manager referred me for advice to Jean-Louis, owner of the nearby boatyard, and he offered to introduce us to his cousin, Jean Garnier, a retired fisherman with great local knowledge and also a highly experienced singlehanded sailor. Jean-Louis also agreed to get a price for transporting *La Lumière* by road to the Med. The following morning he introduced us to Jean who, after hearing our story, promptly offered to accompany us across Biscay. We would depart the following Monday, 22 June, and cover the cost of his return flight to La Rochelle. As it would cost around €5,000 to have the boat transported by road, Jean's offer was a no-brainer!

Drying out in Les Sables d'Olonne





Ken, Jean and Jean-Louis

Biscay here we come ... again

The following Monday at 0715 the three of us departed Les Sables d'Olonne with a forecast for light, variable winds. While initially there was some wind from the northwest it soon died, never to reappear again during the 84 hours it took us to reach Bayona – after all my fear and dread of Biscay, it turned into a long, uneventful passage in flat calm seas! Under these circumstances there was plenty of time to chat, so I became an authority on fishing for tuna off the Azores and prawns in the Irish Sea, and on the politics of EU Fishing! (Jean's English was very limited, so I got a chance to use my French). I also discovered that Quai Garnier, to starboard of the entrance to Les Sables d'Olonne, is named after Jean's uncle, a war hero, who was a member of the French Resistance and who died on a train heading for Auschwitz after being captured by the Germans in 1944.

We passed La Coruña at 2200 on Wednesday 24 June and decided to continue on to Bayona, 150 miles down the coast. La Coruña radio advised us to expect east-northeast force 4 occasionally 5, which would be perfect. The visibility was to be good. This turned out to be pure fiction – the wind died completely, a dense fog descended, and our speed dropped to 4 knots as we battled against tide and current towards Cabo Finisterre, finally struggling past it at 1000 the following morning. The fog didn't dissipate until 1430, which was pretty tiring. But with clear visibility, a freshening wind and sails hoisted, our speed increased and the final 36 miles into Bayona passed pleasantly and swiftly. Upon arriving in port, our main priority was to replace all the fuel we had used over the previous 84 hours – and to enjoy a good meal!

We were now under some pressure to reach Porto, from where Jean was due to fly back to La Rochelle the following day, so departed Bayona at 0700 and covered the 63 miles to Porto in 11 hours. With good visibility, a flat sea, and a northwest force 3 we were able to motor-sail on low revs, just bumping over one unseen lobster pot along the way. There are thousands of these down the Portuguese coast!



Jean and Ken consult the oracle

Another hard day on passage!



We docked in the marina at Leixões, a few miles north of Porto, to find the town abuzz with a Mediaeval Pirates' festival. We celebrated the completion of another 518 miles of the journey with a delicious meal in a local restaurant, where all the serving staff, cooks and indeed many of the patrons were dressed as pirates. After Jean's departure we enjoyed a few days R&R exploring Porto. We also had time to become acquainted with our neighbours in the marina, a Norwegian couple in *VidVandre* and a French couple in *Lazycat*. They too had just crossed Biscay and were en route to the Med, so we had plenty of stories to exchange!

Plenty of help from the Portuguese Trades

Our next deadline was to get to the Bay of Cadiz by 9/10 July to meet up with one of our sons and his fiancée, who were coming to Spain for a wedding. So from Tuesday 30 June, after four nights in Leixões (dense fog kept us in port for an extra, unplanned, night) we proceeded to hop, skip and sail our way down the Portuguese coast, slipping in and out of marinas on a nightly basis. The northwest wind and the Portuguese current ensured speedy, uneventful passages from port to port.

First up was Figueira da Foz, 63 miles down the coast. Then it was the turn of Peniche, 52 miles further on, where we spent the bounciest night of the trip as local fishing boats entered and exited the harbour at high speed throughout the night. A much more peaceful night was spent in Cascais, west of Lisbon. Then came another day of lobster pot dodging as we made our way to Sines, a fishing port and holiday resort 35 miles south of Cascais.

Friendly pirates – we hoped!





The weather forecast predicted increasingly strong winds along the west coast of Portugal and in particular at Cabo São Vicente, notorious for strong winds and big swells at the best of times. As the winds were due to last for 4–5 days and strengthen to gale force, we decided to depart at 0400 next morning in order to round the Cabo before conditions really worsened. We made good time down the coast, with plenty of wind from the right direction. Once round the Cabo we were met by 25 knots gusting 30 from the northwest, and hurtled northeast to Lagos where we docked at precisely

1700, delighted and relieved to have finally rounded that infamous corner. We decided to reward ourselves with a two-night stay in Lagos Marina as we needed to catch up with laundry and provisioning, but Monday 6 June saw us heading along the coast to the expensive and rather characterless marina at Vilamoura.



Andalucia and into the Med

After one night in Vilamoura we departed for Mazagon, 66 miles across the Gulf of Cadiz, which was reasonably priced and very friendly. It is one of a group of Andalusian marinas run by the regional council, where charges are fixed and affordable, unlike at Cascais, Lagos and Vilamoura. The price per night for a 36ft boat was €27.67, which was great value given that it was now high season. From Mazagon we made our way to Chipiona and then to Rota in the Bay of Cadiz, where we met up with our son and his fiancée and ended up attending a fantastic wedding with them in Jerez de la Frontera.

Contrasting styles!

After four days in the lovely town of Rota we headed for Barbate, to position ourselves for passing through the Straits of Gibraltar. Unfortunately a strong easterly delayed our departure for five days, but our French and Norwegian friends from *Lazycat* and *VidVandre* were also held up there, so we spent the time socialising and generally having fun. We all enjoyed the celebrations on 16 July to honour our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Patron Saint of the Sea – indeed we had a special party on board *La Lumière of Howth*, given that it was my very own Feast Day!

On Sunday 19 July the wind finally changed direction and we were able to leave the swell and roll of the Atlantic breakers behind and head for what we hoped would be the less turbulent waters of the Mediterranean. First we enjoyed a few days in La Linea, arriving to discover it was *Domingo Rociero*, the first day of a week-long celebration of Spanish music and dance. There was a great atmosphere around town, with many locals dressed in traditional costume, singing, dancing and imbibing large quantities of alcohol in the streets!

From La Linea we popped into La Duquesa to meet up with a friend who was holidaying there, and after dropping her off in Estepona headed on for Benalmadena – which has to win the prize for the dirtiest marina we have ever visited! The heat, noise and dirt were so overwhelming that we were glad to make an early departure for Marina del Este (on the east face of Punta de la Mona) after just one night. We enjoyed two nights there, then nibbled our way along the remainder of the Costa del Sol, calling into Almerimar and Almeria before finally reaching Cartagena which we were really keen to visit. We enjoyed our stay in this historic city, made all the more enjoyable by the company of our friends from *VidVandre* and *Lazycat*.

One of Cartagena's beautiful old buildings with, on the right, an extremely lifelike sculpture



Journey's End

Our original plan had been to do an overnight sail from Cartagena up the coast to Denia, about 95 miles to the north, but soon after we left the wind swung round to the northeast and strengthened, turning the passage into a slow slog against wind and swell. Then at 1730 we got a weather update which mentioned the risk of severe thunderstorms north of Alicante, the direction in which we were heading, so we altered course and headed for Marina Salinas in Torrevieja which was only an hour away. This is a large new marina with excellent modern facilities, but unfortunately the non-stop music from the surrounding bars and discos turned our overnight stay into a sleepless nightmare.

We phoned the two other marinas in the harbour, and fortunately the Real Club Náutico Torrevieja had some berths available so we transferred there the following morning. The *levanter* continued blowing for three days, during which we became closely acquainted with Torrevieja and the club itself. We liked what we saw, and when they invited us to become members of the club we accepted. We now plan to stay there for the next few years – so ended our original plan to overwinter in Sardinia!

Direct, year-round flights from Alicante and Murcia airports to Dublin were a big attraction, while the club itself boasts a swimming pool, a great gym programme and lovely, friendly members. The cruising grounds are marvellous with the Balearics to the north and the Mar Menor to the south and, very importantly, the price was very right for our purse! Having covered 1945 miles and visited 31 marinas in the ten weeks since departing Howth, we were quite happy to finally sit back, relax and bask in the pleasure of having successfully brought *La Lumière of Howth* to her new home in the Med.

The Real Club Náutico Torrevieja

