

CONCENTRATED CRUISING: GALICIA's RIAS BAIXAS Rear Commodore Daria Blackwell

(In 2008 Daria and husband Alex left the US aboard their Bowman 57 ketch Aleria, criss-crossing the Atlantic three times before returning to settle in Alex's native Ireland. Both work hard for the OCC, as joint Port Officers for Westport, Co Mayo, Alex as Regional Rear Commodore Ireland, and Daria as a full Rear Commodore and member of the Board. It's amazing they find time to go sailing!)

Alex and I have medical conditions that make it difficult for me to take the heat and for him to tolerate the cold. So high latitudes and tropics are out, making temperate zones our practical targets for cruising. After three Atlantic crossings we debated whether a circumnavigation was in order, but family matters were pressing, so we thought we'd try a different approach. For the last few years, we have concentrated on one area at a time seasonally.

A few years ago we spent some time in Scotland, and thoroughly enjoyed getting to know some of the many anchorages and harbours with enough to spare for a return trip. The weather was brilliant the entire time we were there and the tides were not too challenging to master. Last year we were heading to Spain when gear failure caused us to turn back and sail the 'Costa del Cork'. We have absolutely loved sailing the south and west coasts of Ireland and have explored many tiny coves and hidden anchorages others would pass by. In remote harbours on the west of Ireland very often we were the only sailboat at anchor, with archaeological remains of many past civilisations to ponder. We even wrote a book called *Cruising the Wild Atlantic Way* to share our discoveries

with those wishing to venture here.

This year we again went south to Spain. It took us only three days to sail from Crookhaven to Portosín in the Ría de



**The OCC
raft-up at
Enseada da
Barra in the
Ría de Vigo**

Muros y Noia, and included our first 200+ miles in 24 hours run in *Aleria*. We spent five days dealing with 'engine issues' and the next 12 days sailing in company with 60 boats from the Irish Cruising Club (ICC), something we had a bit of trepidation about. It turned out to be great fun and a huge success. And as so many members of the ICC are also members of the OCC, we even took part in an OCC raft-up on a lay-day for the ICC fleet – see the December 2017 *Newsletter*.

Once the ICC rally was over we continued to cruise among the Rías Baixas, attending a classics regatta here and a festival there. Mostly we just lived among the local people, dropping anchor wherever we found sand or mud and heading ashore to the local *tapas* restaurant for a meal. We started to pick up some of the Gallego language and felt more comfortable making friends. The temperature was a lovely 25°C, and although the water was too cold for frequent swimming snorkelling was fine with a wetsuit. There are hundreds if not thousands of white sand beaches interspersed with rocky outcrops.

We transformed from being cruisers on a schedule to being semi-locals with a boat. By the end of two months we had visited many anchorages, walked the islands of the national parks, and spent a week anchored in Corcubión just because we loved it. We fell in love with the people, the food, the attitude, the climate, the sailing, the land and the lore. After all, Galicians are a Celtic people. We felt right at home among them.

Here are a few things we learned this year. Plenty has been written about the Rías Baixas in recent years so I'll recount only our favourite stops.

Spain in General

The northwest corner of Spain is very different from the rest of the Iberian peninsula in almost every way. The people are Celtic in origin, temperatures are moderate, it rains quite a lot (just not while we were there), fog is common, it may be the best place in the world to eat seafood, and they prefer to speak Gallego rather than Spanish.



*The author in front of the
waterfalls at Ezaro, between
the Ría de Corcubión and the
Ría de Muros y Noia*

You won't find flamenco or bull fights. You will find Celtic art, music and archaeological remains. The Rías Baixas, as the region is known overall, have even achieved their own *Denominación de Origen* for the wines of the region, particularly the fine whites known as *albariño*. Most shops, including supermarkets, are closed on Sundays, but prices are amazingly reasonable.

Over the past ten years the government and private enterprise have invested a lot of money into a string of marinas that facilitate cruising in every way, whether as a destination, a stopover en route to the Caribbean or the Med, or for charter holidays. It's a good place for crew changes, or for leaving the boat either in the

water or ashore. Transportation is good, with regular flights from airports in Vigo and Santiago de Compostela and trains and buses to both. Because so much has changed, it is critical to have the latest edition of the RCC Pilotage Foundation's *Atlantic Spain & Portugal* aboard.

Each of the *rías* is a contained cruising ground, and the *rías* in total provide enough diversion for a full season. The Spanish love their *fiestas*, and it's worth looking up the *fiesta* schedules for two reasons: (1) to see some of the great spectacles, and (2) to avoid the crowds in marinas and anchorages during the events. In the summer the predominant winds are northerlies, which tend to be light in the morning and a bit breezier in the afternoon. Travelling north to south is preferable, and using the afternoon *siesta* time for sailing makes it easier to do some shopping in the morning and have shore time in the evening. Think Scotland with finer weather and *tapas*.

Ría de Corcubión

This is a small *ría* just inside Finisterre. There is no marina in the town of Corcubión, but with the right anchor there is plenty of room to anchor in mud (with weed) and find shelter from the northerlies. There is a smallboat pontoon for access to the town,



which is ancient, non-touristy and charming. Restaurants and cafés line the waterfront, and there's an exceptional butcher as well as a small convenience store and a market. There are some lovely walks around the town, which is a stopover for pilgrims travelling from Santiago on to Cape Finisterre. The church on the hill is worth a visit.

A longish walk or a short bike ride away is Cee, a modern city with a waterfront park, a small hospital, an excellent *ferretería* (hardware store), a large fresh market and an indoor mall with a giant Carrefour supermarket. The *fiesta* in August features spectacular fireworks displays over the water best seen from Corcubión.

Ría de Muros y Noia

The next *ría* south is the Ría de Muros. On the eastern shore is the delightful marina and Real Club Náutico de Portosín. With notably friendly and helpful English speaking staff, and a 25% discount for OCC members, it is a worthy stop. The village is small, with several good restaurants, a *ferretería*, bank, convenience store and a large Eroski supermarket that delivers to the marina. The marina itself has excellent laundry and shower facilities, and a fabulous terrace on the upper level for cocktails and dinner. There are exceptional beaches on both sides of town and fine walks over the hills above the town. Portosín is also a good place from which to take a side trip to Santiago de Compostela, and the marina staff will help arrange it for you. They will also organise mechanics and electricians, and translate their findings.

Noia, which was once the main mariners' route from the British Isles to Santiago, is now untenable for yachts as it has silted in, though shallow-draft vessels can gunkhole its limited waterways. It is an interesting town to visit with two lovely churches, one of which has been turned into a museum of carved stone slabs and crosses. We took a bus tour to Noia and Santiago from Portosín.

We found Santiago itself to be over the top with tourism. The old town is interesting but loaded with street vendors, cheap souvenir shops and cafés. The new town is

***Galician musicians at the Real
Club Náutico Portosín***



Big crowds in Santiago de Compostela

post-modern and industrial. The Pilgrims' Mass in the cathedral was standing room only, even though we arrived 20 minutes early. The front of the cathedral is under renovation and closed; the interior is



Romanesque and plain, except behind the altar where it is overpoweringly ornate. The queue for walking past the altar and touching the statue of Saint James was appallingly long, so we opted to just visit the tomb through the tiny underground passage, which was a much more intimate experience. We stayed for mass said by four priests from different corners of the world, but left before they swung the *Botafumeiro**.

Muros, across from Portosín, is also a lovely stopover, with a new marina in the heart of an ancient village with a tree-lined walk, shoreside restaurants and shops, and plenty of ambience. The *marinero*-style church on the hill is fascinating with more statues per square foot than we've ever seen. The protected anchorage outside the marina has good holding and the slipway is a convenient dinghy landing place.

Ría de Arousa

The largest of the Rías Baixas has much to offer. A Pobra do Caramiñal on the western shore has an excellent marina, its ambitious development still in process. The anchorage is ample and nicely protected with good holding, but one must skirt the mussel rafts in the approach. The town has an old centre, with a lovely old church and high-walled private estates, as well as the usual amenities such as shops and restaurants. There is a convenient Gadis supermarket at the beginning of the long beach which runs south from the town, and another huge Gadis about halfway down the beach. *Supermercado* heaven!

* The massive *Botafumeiro* – Gallego for ‘censer’ – is probably the best-known symbol of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. It hangs below the main dome and is swung toward the side naves during the Cathedral's main liturgical solemnities to disburse the smoke from the incense through the building.



*Meeting up with friends in Muros, including Stanton Adair,
Commodore of the Irish Cruising Club*

There are several really nice anchorages in the *ría*, including one off Illa Arousa inside Punta Cabalo where the lighthouse is now a high-end restaurant. The Varadoire (boatyard) de Xufre, run by Nito – a lovely man who speaks excellent English and offers a car to clients for their occasional use – offers a 10% discount off haulout and storage to OCC members, and an additional 10% for payment up front. The place has an excellent reputation.

The Castillo Museum overlooking the anchorage in Illa de Sálvora



There is another good anchorage at Illa de Sálvora, an island at the mouth of the *ría*. The barrier islands are part of a national park, and permission is required to anchor and visit – apply online to get a permit valid for two years to print out and keep aboard. Then it's necessary to apply online for each day you wish to spend there, for which you receive a confirmation within minutes. In our opinion Sálvora is the most interesting of the islands. Few tourists, lovely walking trails, interesting rock formations, wild horses, a *castillo* museum, and an abandoned village. Lovely beach, too. Oh, and the sword in the stone. Really.



*The ancient city of Cambados,
home of albariño wines*

We were not impressed with the marina at Vilagarcia, which appeared run down, but Cambados was charming despite the shallow depths requiring us to anchor a half mile out (we have 8½ feet draught). It is the home of *albariño* wines and has two excellent churches, many restaurants and wine bars, a lovely square with a *castillo* turned into a winery, and stately medieval homes. The new harbour is home to a vast fishing fleet, and a yacht marina is promised but not yet completed. There are vineyards nearby that make for good day trips.

Ría de Pontevedra

At the mouth of the *ría* are the Illas de Ons, also in the national park and requiring permission to anchor. Ferries bring many passengers to visit, but most leave by nightfall. There are nice walks on the island, but the ferry terminal is the main stopping point for the majority, with restaurants and a church. Ons has a small population living there



The beautiful beaches of San Vicente

full-time, and from that perspective it is interesting. The anchorage in the north is lovely, but the walk in is uninteresting. The moorings near the ferry dock are a better bet for a nicer walking experience.

Just inside the peninsula which divides the Ría de Arousa from the Ría de Pontevedra is San Vicente, with a reasonable anchorage and a small *club náutico* and marina. It's a gem of a place with a decent restaurant and access to some of the most beautiful beaches in the *rias*. In August they hold a Classics regatta, which is a fun event in which the former king is normally a participant with his Six Metre. Unfortunately, this year the class did not race as it was shortly after the terrorist attack in Barcelona.

The marina in Combarro, full of Irish Cruising Club members



No trip to the *rías* would be complete without a stop in Combarro. The marina has 3m depth at the outer pontoon – concrete and massive. The town is charming, and a good section of it is ancient. Shops, restaurants and bars are carved into the rocky hillside and a large number of the distinctive Galician *horreios*, or grain storage buildings, line the waterfront. Touristy, but great fun and interesting.

Ría de Aldán

At the mouth of the Ría de Pontevedra is the Ría Aldán, a favourite anchorage with the locals. Excellent in southerlies, it is exposed to the north and full of mussel farms. This part of Spain is the largest producer of mussels in the world and the rafts are everywhere, but navigating through them is quite easy as the anchors and heavy chains go straight down from the rafts and they are usually in 60 feet of water. The rafts also tend to smooth out the water. The best anchorage in the Ría Aldán is off the abandoned shellfish plant, near the head of the *ría* on the west side, but beware of an unmarked rock which only appears as an asterisk on the charts even though it shows at low tide. Bring the dinghy inside the stone pier and tie up by the second set of stairs.

The water is the warmest of all the *rías*, because the white sand beaches go out a good distance and when the sand heats up in the sun it warms the incoming tide. There is a beach bar near the smallcraft harbour, a small supermarket, a butcher, a bakery and several nice restaurants, including a special one near the commercial dock and boat slip.

Above the town of Aldán is O Hío, a small village with spectacular views down the *ría*. It also has a church with the most beautiful *cruceiro* in all of Spain – carved from three sections of granite, it depicts the story of Christianity from creation through to crucifixion. There are some 30,000 *cruceiros* in Spain marking the pilgrim paths to Santiago de Compostela.

The magnificent cruceiro in O Hío overlooking the Ría de Aldán



Ria de Vigo

At the mouth of the Ría de Vigo are the Illas Cíes, also part of the national park and requiring permission to anchor. Millions of tourists visit the islands annually and it can be daunting to deal with the crowds on the beach – named by the *Guardian* newspaper as the best in the world. But if you anchor in the southern anchorage, between the central and south islands, you can land your dinghy on a tiny beach and walk from there to places distant from the ferry landing – the further one gets from the ferry, the fewer the people. A beautiful island with interesting topography. Ask any of the Lagos family about summers at their grandfather's house on the Illas Cíes – lovely, lamenting stories.

The anchorage at Ensenada de Barra, on the north shore just inside the entrance and a famous nudist beach, is delightful and very protected in northerlies. There are nice walks around the anchorage and several beaches to the east which are not nudist for swimming. The water tends to be cold, however. Further up the *ría*, Cangas has a nice marina, a long beach to anchor off, and a lovely town with a lively market. The main market days are Tuesday and Thursday, but it is partly open on Monday, and there's an excellent fruit and veg shop near the church.

Alex assists Flor Long, OCC Port Officer for Cork, aboard Miss Demeana into a berth in Cangas





The colourful streets of the old city in Vigo

Vigo itself is a true destination – an old, romantic town despite industry and modernisation, with the Club Náutico de Vigo right in the heart of the old city. It's a tight little marina but they were great, finding space for our 17m. There are restaurants, shops, museums, and the best *lavandería* (laundry) anywhere, and you can feel right at home. There are at least three other marinas in Vigo, including Marina Davila Sport in Bouzas, southwest of the city, which caters more to superyachts and is in the middle of a huge industrial estate a long, long distance from anywhere. There's a great chandlery in Bouzas, and of course Astilleros Lagos has been a friend to the OCC since it was founded. Honorary Member Alfredo Lagos, now 91 years old, is still welcoming to his friends, or call Alfredo Jr or Alberto – who has recently taken over from his father as our Port Officer Representative – if you need anything done. Trust is absolute.

Punta Lagoa, northeast of the city, is one of the newer marinas but unfortunately has no real services. The showers and toilets are in a container far from the docks and there is no restaurant or bar. The closest village is about 20 minutes' walk up, up, up a steep hill. It has supermarkets, a launderette, butcher and bakery, but Vigo is about a 15 minute taxi ride – as is the airport, which makes this a good place to overwinter or make crew changes. They have in-water and haul-out facilities.

Baiona (Bayona in Spanish) is technically not in the Ría de Vigo but a place unto itself. It is truly extraordinary, with a huge fort on the hill, now a *parador**, and the

* A top-class hotel, one of a number recognised nationally for their historical and architectural value.

Monte Real Club de Yates below it. The MRCY was once very exclusive but has in recent years become receptive to visitors. It has expanded, and is now huge with an excellent fuel dock, restaurant and marina. It is more expensive than the town's other marina, the Puerto Deportivo de Baiona, but its facilities are worth the difference (their wifi extends all the way out into the anchorage).

The town circles the bay and the views from the walls of the fort are extraordinary. It has some really nice restaurants in the old part, but does get very crowded in August when Spaniards flock to Galicia for their holidays. There's a super bike path all round the harbour front and a decent chandlery. Within (uphill) walking distance is an amazing statue of the Virgin Mary – the Virxe da Rocha – looking down over the harbour and greeting mariners to her home waters. An early arrival was the *Pinta*, which made landfall in Baiona following Columbus's first voyage to the New World. There's a replica to visit, of course.



Spectacular view over Baiona from the Virxe da Rocha

Future plans

Our intention is to leave *Aleria* in Spain for the winter and fly over for a few shorter cruises as weather permits (many British and Irish yachts are permanently berthed in the *rías*). Next summer we may head into the Mediterranean via the Azores as part of the 2018 OCC Azores Pursuit Rally – the Azores have a temperate climate, too. Or plans may change ... it's a cruisers' lifestyle, after all!

