

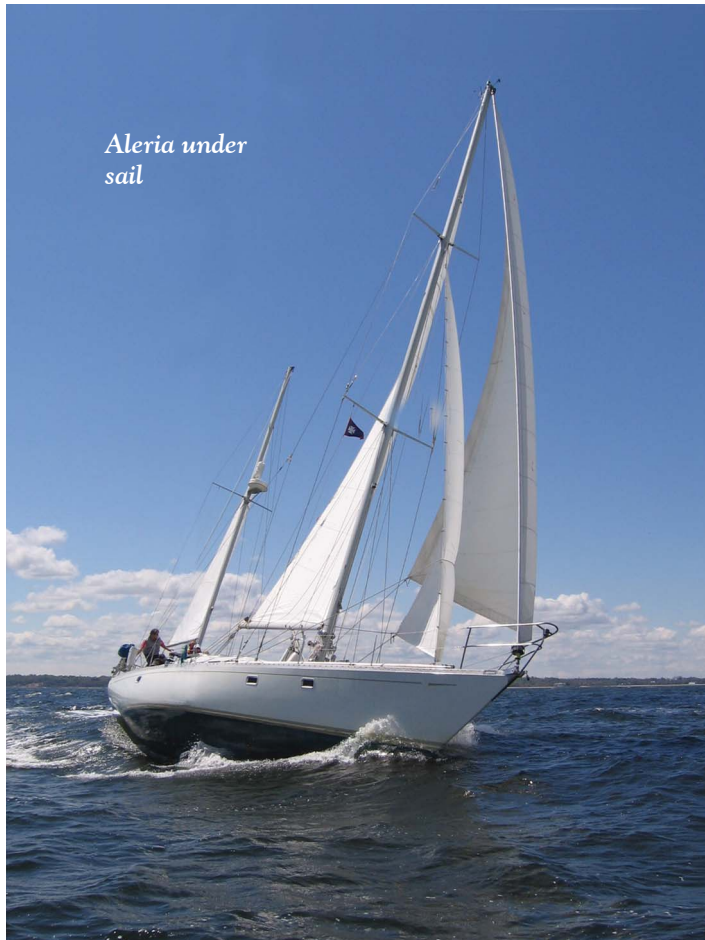
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

Alex Blackwell

Regional Rear Commodore Ireland

(Alex and Daria Blackwell live on the west coast of Ireland. They sail their Bowman 57 cutter ketch Aleria double-handed, and have crossed the Atlantic three times. They are both very involved with the OCC, and have written two books on sailing subjects as well as novels, a guide to self-publishing and an oyster cookbook. They are frequent contributors to sailing publications on both sides of the Atlantic.)

Crossing the Bay of Biscay can, by many accounts, be a challenging experience. In my experience it has indeed been 'interesting'. On a recent crossing we sailed from Crosshaven, Ireland to Portosin, Galicia, a distance of over 550 nautical miles, in precisely 72 hours – sails up to anchor down. On our first day we even beat the 200 mile threshold that had always eluded us. The passage was almost entirely on a beam reach, and exhilarating to say the least.



Aleria under sail

On our way back north this past summer, after spending three delightful seasons exploring the Rías Baixas of Galicia, we stopped off in A Coruña. We had planned a few days to get to know the town, visit museums and, of course, get our last fix of *tapas* and *raxiones**. June/July is the season for the 'great southern migration' and French, Dutch, British, Irish and a scattering of other nationalities arrived in A Coruña daily. Almost all we met said how horrible their passage across Biscay had been.

* *Tapas* are snacks served alongside a drink, whereas *raxiones* (or *raciones*) are meal-sized portions.

After a week of indulgence and meeting fellow OCC members, a weather window showed itself on the GRIBs we downloaded daily. It was time for us to head home to Ireland, in the opposite direction to the general flow of boats and the recent predominantly northerly winds. We would start in northerlies with a bit of east in them. As we progressed, the winds were predicted to clock to the east and then south, before dying altogether for a bit. The next system was to bring southwesterlies, with westerlies following in due course. When it came to the calm spells, we had no worries – we had enough fuel aboard for the whole distance and at least half again.

A day out, close to midnight, we came into the offshore shipping lanes. We crossed the steady stream of northbound ships steaming in a narrow line without incident. Sailing in the separation zone, we could already make out the southbound ships in the distance to port. We continued our beat on a north-northwest heading and at around 0200 the first southbound ships appeared to starboard, heading right at us. It was my watch and I was a little surprised as the southbound lane should still have been about 8 miles to the west. But then, everything always happens during the midnight to 0400 watch.

I bore off onto a reach, bringing our boat speed up to 8 knots in the light wind, and the ships I had seen were soon passing us well astern. Then the actual southbound fleet appeared ahead. As with the northbound ships, there was a steady stream. Upwind, in the distance, I spotted a gap and aimed for the last of a group of ships. Once safely past, I bore up again, back onto course. Then I spotted a line of six ships upwind looking as though they were steaming abreast of one another and a couple miles apart. I bore off again and left them in our wake. Only one of them came within a couple miles of our stern.

Again, I brought us back to sailing hard on the wind, only to see that there were three more ships upwind and to the west. Two were quite far off, but one seemed to be heading right for us. I bore off again, keeping an eye on the oncoming ship. Constant bearing, decreasing range = not good. Finally, at 8 miles out, the ship popped up on AIS. We were in a 'crossing situation'. Realising that I could not outrun it, and as bearing up did not have the 'feel-good' factor, I brought *Aleria* about without releasing the headsails and hove-to, letting the ship pass safely three miles ahead. After about fifteen minutes I completed the turn, gybing back on course to resume our journey.

With the night past and the day brightening we sailed on, spotting the occasional ship. All were far enough in the distance not to cause any concern. It then got a bit hazy and one did pop into view and simultaneously onto our AIS display. Once again, I chose to heave-to to let it pass. Later that day, with 330 miles to go, we sailed into a hole ... no wind. Having plenty of fuel aboard, we started our engine and motored along our rhumb line towards Dingle and the west coast of Ireland. At 0200 (what is it about the 0000–0400 watch?) the engine suddenly revved up a bit, making noises reminiscent of a cement mixer. Daria, who was on watch, quickly cut the throttle and the engine died. We had a good look around but saw nothing amiss and, as there was a bit of wind, decided to sail on and leave the diagnosis until daylight.

In the morning we gave the engine a thorough going over. Being certified for diesel mechanics, Daria grabbed the service manual while I did a visual exam. I removed some parts to look inside but found nothing. The noise could result from air in the fuel, Daria determined. There was indeed some air in each of the fuel filters. We



Alex scans the horizon

started the engine, expecting the worst, but it ran smoothly with some minor noise that did not worry us greatly. We put it in gear and the lever moved on the gearbox as it should, the engine revved, but the shaft did not turn. The grinding noise started again, this time with a vengeance. We quickly shut it down – it was the ‘worst case’ scenario. The next decision was easy. We would continue under sail – after all, *Aleria* is a sailing boat. The only thing we altered was our course. We would head for Cork Harbour, as that was the most likely place to find a mechanic.

That night we sailed into another hole – a big one. At 0030 the drift began. With little or no steerage I gazed at the stars and watched countless satellites going west to east and east to west. There were also numerous shooting stars. One in particular came down in a wide brushstroke of intensely bright green that momentarily lit up the sky, ending in a bright red ball. And then I saw it. There was a ship on the horizon at a bearing of 150°M. Through the binoculars I clearly made out two vertical white lights, a green starboard and a red portside light – it was heading right for us! Five minutes later I checked again – still 150°M. Constant bearing, decreasing range. We were stationary and it was moving towards us, presumably at the same 12 knots all the other ships had been travelling at.

I reached for the VHF handset and put out a *Securité* alert message stating our position, lack of speed and requesting a wide berth. After another ten minutes the ship appeared closer. I still saw the same light pattern – it had not changed course and was still at 150°M. As it was not yet on our AIS I guesstimated a position about 10 miles off. I hailed the oncoming vessel directly. I stated its assumed lat and long and bearing of 330°M, adding that we had no way on and no engine. Again, no reply.

I turned on all external lights to increase our visibility – two sets of navigation

lights, anchor and deck lights on both masts, and the steaming light to light up the headsails. I turned on a flood light and aimed it at the ship – a commercial ship's captain had suggested this as a good idea. I hailed it again on VHF. Again, no reply. I went below and fetched the flare canister. I spent a while deciphering the cryptic instructions printed in ultra-small type. (Note to self: this is a really good thing to do *before* bringing the flares on board.)

I turned off most of the lights so I could see exactly where the ship was. A haze I had not noticed before had cleared and I was able to scan the horizon – where was the ship? I went back to look at 150°M again. Nothing. Wait ... there at the top of my field of vision, well above the horizon, was the ship! I saw its lights quite clearly – an atmospheric refraction, perhaps enhanced by my binoculars, of a configuration of stars matching my ship's lights. Same bearing, same range, no threat.

Next day the wind filled in and we made good speed to Cork where Mike Hodder, our Port Officer for Crosshaven, had a top notch mechanic waiting for us on the dock. A few short days later the part arrived and we were soon back underway.



Can any member identify the stars which had Alex so worried from the information given? No prizes, but do e-mail me on flying.fish@oceancruisingclub.org as it would be interesting to know! Editor

*A bird's-eye view
of Aleria*

