

## THE JOURNEY HOME FROM IBERIA

### Vice Commodore Daria Blackwell

*(In 2008 Daria and her husband Alex sailed their Bowman 57 ketch Aleria from Nova Scotia to Ireland, enjoying it so much that the following year saw them cross from the Canaries to Barbados, returning to Ireland in 2010 – see Atlantic Spiral, in Flying Fish 2011/2 and 2012/1. Both Daria and Alex have written for Flying Fish on many other occasions. Clearly a glutton for punishment, Daria became OCC Webmaster in 2013 and is currently our Web Editor as well as being Vice Commodore.)*

We had spent three seasons cruising around Galicia and Portugal both of which we loved. We had contemplated going into the Mediterranean, but the closer we got, the hotter and more expensive it became. When the temperature reached the mid-40°C we opted instead to head home to Ireland. That's not always so easy, as the winds along the Spanish and Portuguese coasts tend to be predominantly northerly and strong,



*The author on the final passage in this article,  
from Clew Bay to Kilrush*

leaving the choice of heading out via the Azores or picking our way north up the coast as conditions allowed. We got a break in 2018 with a five-day interval when no wind was forecast – unheard of. We filled the fuel tanks and motored north, from southeast Portugal straight through to Galicia in three days. It was a joy to see the green hills of Baiona again and to feel the relief of Atlantic air.

After Astilleros Lagos commissioned *Aleria* in 2019 we met up with her in Bouzas, near Vigo. We then meandered up the *rías* in no particular hurry, stopping in all of our favourite places – Vigo, Barra, the Illas Cíes, Aldán, Illa de Sálvora, Combarro, Caramiñal, Portosín... We said our farewells to our special friends, PO Alberto and Alfredo in Vigo, Oscar at the Monte Real Club de Yates de Baiona and PO Carmela at the Real Club Náutico Portosín. We also stopped in Sanxenxo, which we had heard was to be avoided, as we wanted to visit the vineyards of Paco & Lola which are close by. Sanxenxo turned out to be quite interesting and, being early in the season, the harbourfront discos were not yet open so it was quiet. Our berth was next to a superyacht



***Aleria at the marina in Sanxenxo next to superyacht Valoria B***

owned by Amancio Ortega, founder of Zara and other chains and the sixth richest man in the world, so we were in good company – not the kind of company we normally keep.

The visit to Paco & Lola was amazing. The marketing manager arranged for us to tour the winery with the tourism director and then to tour the vineyards with the manager of the growers' co-operative. When he learned what we were doing in Ireland – growing grapes in response to climate change, including Albariño which is their speciality – he spent the entire day showing us vineyards at different stages of development: some hundreds of years old, some more recently planted, and one being planted that day. He

***Alex (on right) with the wonderful staff of Paco & Lola***





*Looking out  
towards the  
anchorage from  
Camariñas*

explained what they were experimenting with, such as companion crops and organic methods, and answered scores of questions. Paco & Lola is a co-operative of 400 growers, some

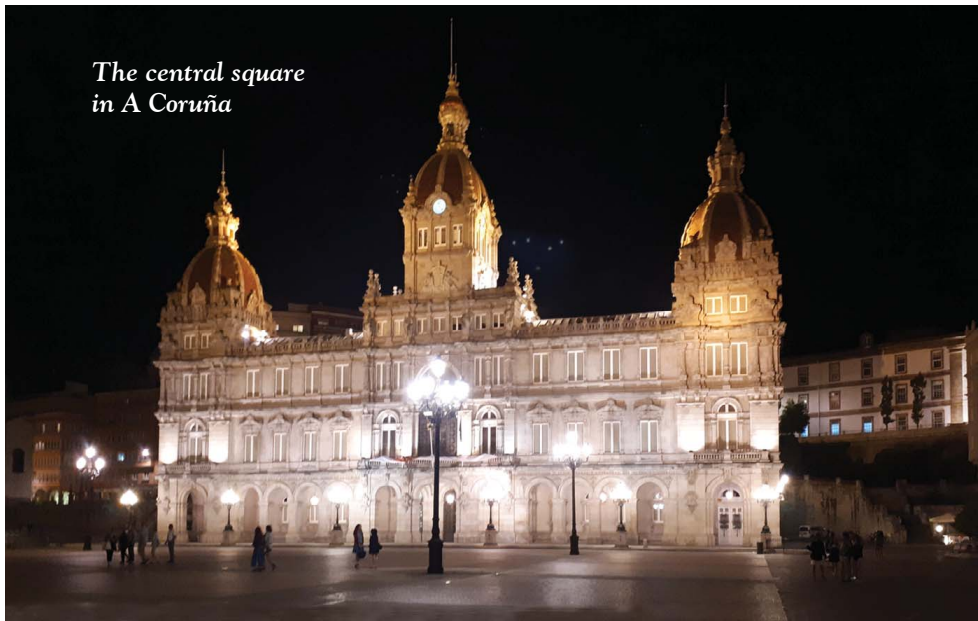
of whom might have only ten vines. It was fascinating and we learned a lot, mostly that we are not as crazy as we thought.

It was time to move on. We had to stop in Corcubión, still a favourite, then had a favourable passage north to Camariñas. We had not been there before but had heard from several OCC members that it was surprisingly lovely. And so it was – a big anchorage surrounded by wooded hills, a pleasant waterfront town, lots of colourful fishing vessels, a small marina and *sardinas* for dinner.

Our next stop was A Coruña, and we got lucky motor-sailing up the coast from Camariñas and then reaching along the top of Spain. We'd never been there and had no idea that it was such a big city, but that was good, as we were pinned down by strong (25–30+ knot) northerlies for a week. We were in the middle of the city in the Real Club Náutico de La Coruña marina, a great location. As guests of the marina we had use of the clubhouse, including the option of a three-course dinner with wine for 15€ Definitely worth it (but you need proper attire).



*The central square  
in A Coruña*





*The Tower of Hercules  
and statue of Celtic king  
and warrior Breogán*

We have bicycles on board and we cycled everywhere. To the Tower of Hercules and the Celtic Compass Rose, where a lone piper was sending tunes across the ocean to all the places Celts scattered over the centuries, to the aquarium, and over to the beaches and museums. We hosted OCC drinks parties and recruited new members along the docks. We had a great holiday in the middle of our cruise in a lovely ancient resort town.

*The Celtic  
Compass Rose*

*Seahorses at  
the aquarium*



Finally, the forecast changed – we'd have northwesterlies leaving Spain, no wind across the middle of Biscay, and then southwesterlies approaching Ireland. We topped off the tanks and set off. We were pointing at Dingle on the southwest coast of Ireland and everything was going to





*Aboard Aleria with Geo of Petit Prince 2, who is now PO for Marseilles, and prospective Dutch members Jacqui and Robert of Scilla*

plan. The wind died off on day two as expected so we started the engine and furled the sails. In the middle of the night on my watch (which is always when things happen) the engine suddenly revved up and started making horrible clunking noises. I'd just reached for the throttle to back off when the engine died altogether. Not good. No, not good at all.

Alex bounded up on deck and we restarted the engine. The banging noise was awful, so we quickly shut it down and raised the sails despite flat calm. Alex went back to bed and I went back on watch. In the morning Alex and I went through a check list of things we thought it could be. Something wrapped around the prop – no. Air in the fuel – no. Tighten this and that – uh, uh. Ah, the shaft was spinning freely without engaging the transmission – something was wrong between the shaft and the engine. We couldn't fix that at sea so our best chance was to divert to Cork. It was the only place in the south of Ireland where we thought we could find a mechanic who could do a big job on a Yanmar. It turned out to be the right choice.

Alex wrote a text to Mike Hodder, PO in Crosshaven, asking him to help find a mechanic and the best place to bring the boat. He figured the text would go out as soon as we had a signal near the coast. That's when my frustration started. I entered our new destination and the chartplotter informed me that it was 99 hours and 99 minutes to the next waypoint. There was no wind ... zilch ... not even a zephyr. My breath produced the strongest particle motion in the vicinity. Fortunately we were not in a ship traffic zone because we would not have been able to get out of the way if we'd needed to.



So, what do you do when there's no wind and there's no engine? You think of people like Lin and Larry Pardey who never had an engine. How did they manage all those years? You whip out your next book or the Kindle and start reading. You take dozens of photos of beautiful sunsets and sunrises. You watch the birds and hope for a visit by cetaceans. You try fishing, but I don't think there are any fish left in the seas. You thank the gods for a seaworthy vessel, pray for wind, and plan your strategy for the harbour approach. We'd been to Crosshaven before and knew the lay of the harbour – we'd just sail in and drop anchor. Then we could get a tow into the marina. Simple, right?

That's when the fog descended ... thick pea-soup fog ... can't-see-to-the-mast, much-less-to-the-bow, fog. We turned on our lights and the automatic foghorn on our VHF. We put out a *securité* informing ship traffic that we were disabled and unable to alter course, and repeated it every 15 minutes – our AIS was working, so hopefully they would see us. Thankfully, we had not seen any ship traffic before the fog so we were hopeful that we wouldn't encounter any now. We also have a generator, fortunately, so could charge the batteries without difficulty. After a few hours the fog lifted, the sun came out, the sky cleared and we continued to drift. Still no wind, and still 99h 99m to the next waypoint. Adjust the sails, check the currents and complete your watch.

And so, we passed the time. We had plenty of reading material and occupied ourselves as best we could while floating around Biscay. The dreaded chartplotter continued to register '99h 99m to next', so we weren't drifting far. We had plenty of food and plenty of water. I spent hours thinking of all the things I never wanted to do on a boat again.

When the wind finally filled in it was glorious and from the southwest as promised. We adjusted the sails and pointed towards Cork with precision this time, and just in the nick of time – we had reached the shipping lanes. Cork was only two days away. No more 99h 99m to go. Soon after I took watch under sail again a ship appeared on the AIS before I could see it. We were clearly on a collision course. I quickly hove-to and let the ship pass. The dreaded 99h 99m to next came back up. I cursed the chartplotter. When I was certain the ship was clear I got back underway. The rest of the night proved uneventful as ships passed us with plenty of room to spare.

Would the wind hold out? Would we be able to stop our 57ft, 29 ton vessel where we wanted and anchor without incident? Yes, we knew we could. After all, we had a great anchor, we'd practised all kinds of manoeuvres and we knew these waters. But there were ships coming in and out of Cork harbour at all hours. Could we avoid any traffic?

Ping. The phone vibrated. Mike had received our message and had activated members of the OCC and ICC to come to our assistance. Mike called Crosshaven Marina and arranged for a berth. Others contacted the mechanic and asked him to stand by. We were sorted, we hoped. Alex called the Coast Guard as we approached the harbour and alerted them to our situation. They asked if we needed assistance; we said no, we just wanted to avoid large ship traffic. They put out an advisory to concerned ships on our behalf.

Our approach to the harbour worked exactly as planned. It was mid-day, the wind was blowing a gentle 15 knots from the right direction. We furled the yankee while heading downwind, turned into the wind and dropped the main, then returned up-wind and sailed with jib and jigger (staysail and mizzen) past the spot we had picked inside the harbour, then turned downwind to sail slowly back to our selected spot. Alex was on the bow ready to drop the staysail and the anchor. I was at the helm and ready to back down with the mizzen. I turned the boat into the wind and she stopped exactly where I wanted her. Alex dropped the sail and went forward to drop the anchor while I climbed back to the mizzen ... except the current caught *Aleria* and started to spin her around, then the mizzen caught the wind and she started sailing over the anchor. I quickly released the halyard and spilled the wind. Phew. The anchor bit and we were secure.

But it wasn't over yet. The Coast Guard came out in their RIB and told us they'd heard that we had a commercial service coming out to tow us in. They could do it for free, but it was our choice. Just then a small utility boat came out with a man driving while talking on the phone. He T-boned *Aleria* and bounced off. We asked a few questions then waved him off, not feeling comfortable that he knew what he was doing at all. When the Coast

#### *The Irish Coast Guard lend a hand at Crosshaven*







*The flexible coupling  
disassembled from  
the gearbox*

Guard saw him leaving, they returned. They put a young man on board with us to handle the towlines – it was a training exercise for two young recruits and the senior coastie explained everything in detail. Alex was at the helm steering and they were providing propulsion. They towed us via a long line

to just inside the main harbour buoy, then took us in an alongside tow upriver and dropped us gently at the hammerhead where several marina staff were waiting to take our lines. It was the most perfect docking manoeuvre we'd had in years! We thanked them profusely and off they went. Six days after leaving A Coruña we were safely tucked into Crosshaven. Our passage down to Galicia three years earlier had taken only three days from Crookhaven to Portosín – including a 200+-mile day – so quite a contrast.

Within minutes, a guy came zipping down the docks on a mechanised scooter. He got off, introduced himself as Hugh the mechanic, and said he was told he had to come see us right away. He took one look and diagnosed the problem – a disintegrated flexible coupling (it's the thing with springs that keeps the engine from taking a severe whack when the gears are engaged). Hugh explained that it would take some time to find the right part – there might not be one in Ireland. And then he explained his fee structure:

- The fee is so many €per hour of labour.
- If the owner stays aboard while work is being done, he charges double.
- If the owner insists on helping, he charges triple.
- But if the owner wants to take things apart himself to begin with, that would be appreciated.

We booked into the only B&B in town, which turned out to be delightful, and spent the next five days exploring Crosshaven and Cork and getting to know Mike Hodder and other local or visiting OCC members. We got to really appreciate Hugh as well. He had lovingly converted a retired lifeboat for cruising and he gave us a tour. He learned from Yanmar that our part would have to be shipped from Japan, which would take two weeks, but then discovered that it was actually made in Germany, so called the German manufacturer and got it shipped in two days at half the cost. Five days later we were back in business.

We really learned the value of our OCC membership that week – many thanks to Mike Hodder and the others who pitched in to assist. And, by the way, we learned that the lifespan of a flexible coupling is about 10 years, though ours had lasted 15. So





*At Cronin's in Crosshaven with fellow members David and Trudie Ball  
of Persephone and Robert and Caroline Jollye of Aragorn*

if you hear an alarming noise from the engine and you can see metal shavings around the transmission, you'll know what's gone wrong.

We spent the next few weeks sailing home in awful weather – rain, cold, confused seas, winds fluctuating between force 5–7 and even 8. Having coast-hopped home to Clew Bay we spent the next three weeks offloading 15 years of accumulated gear from *Aleria* as she was being put up for sale. We kept a watch on the weather as we'd have to sail her back to the Shannon River to be hauled out in Kilrush, but meanwhile the weather continued to be miserable.



*Underway again along the west  
coast of Ireland in force 5–6*



***The iconic  
Fastnet  
lighthouse***

As luck would have it, Hurricane *Lorenzo* formed in the Atlantic and headed straight north toward Ireland. It was only the second

hurricane on record to do that, the first being *Ophelia* two years previously. Strangely, *Lorenzo* was being forecast to come ashore exactly in Clew Bay where we live. It was time to sail *Aleria* south and out of harm's way.

In the Aran Islands, we came across OCC member Toby Peyton-Jones and crew heading north in a Bowman 40 called *Truant*. We discussed the various forecast models, and offered our mooring just outside our house as a last resort should they need it. Then we sailed south and they continued north – see *Our friend Lorenzo and the Rescue that Never Happened* on page 132 of this issue for their story. Suffice to say that both *Aleria* and *Truant* and their crews made it through Hurricane *Lorenzo* unscathed, even though the eye passed right over our house and our mooring.

It had been an interesting summer – one to remember.

***Hauled out by POR  
Simon McGibney and crew***

