

THE ZORA SAGA, Part 3

Rhys Walters

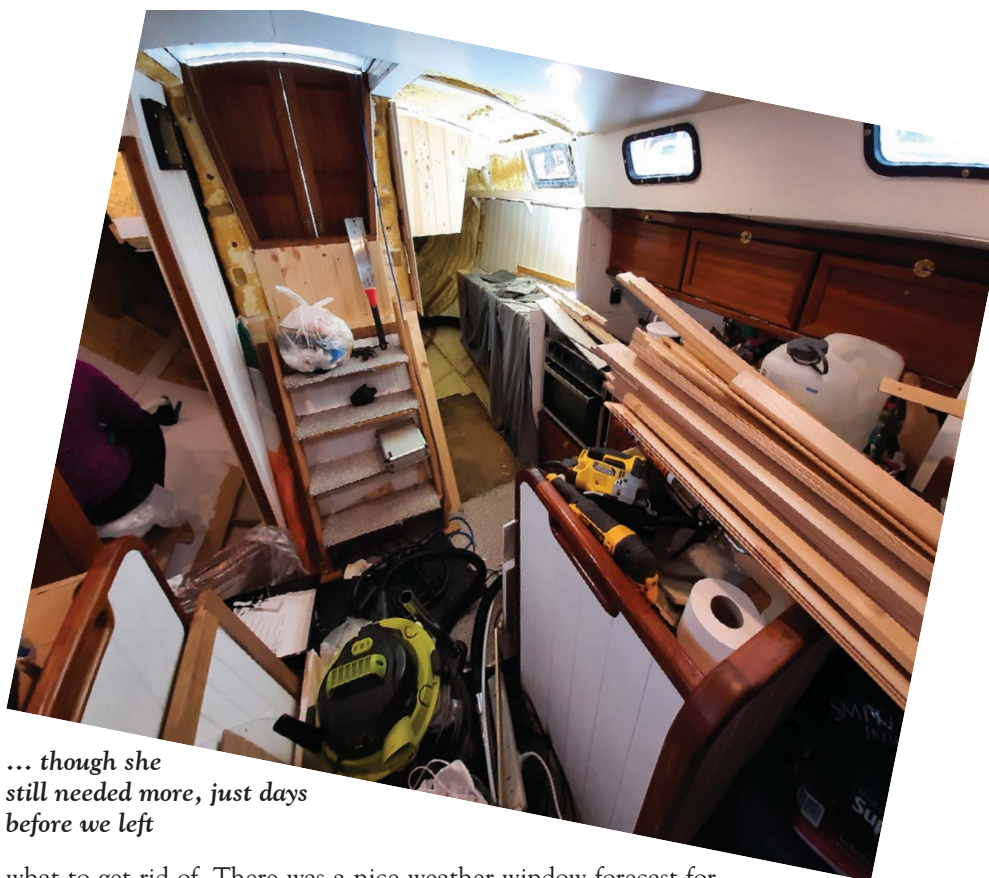
This latest instalment of the *Zora* saga sees the crew set sail for sunny Spain and beyond for their first proper sailing season – the crew being me and my fiancée Niamh, and *Zora* being the steel 38-footer which we found as a bare, neglected and burnt-out hull in a boatyard in Baltimore, Ireland and gradually brought back to life. *Zora* made her *Flying Fish* debut in 2019/1 and reappeared a year later in 2020/1, and in both editions we detailed the huge level of work it took to get us this far. With an almost two-year hiatus from writing, it's safe to say that a lot has changed. From the burnt-out shell we found in the back of a boatyard, to a voyaging boat capable of going anywhere, this is the story of a mad couple who wouldn't give up.

I remember the moment I decided enough was enough and that we had to set a deadline and get sailing before one or both of us either burnt out or lost interest. It was the end of 2020 and it had already been nearly three full years since we had started working on *Zora*. I had been living on board since before she had even been insulated, and by September 2020 she had an almost complete interior that just needed one big final push to make ready for sailing. The question was, were we able to give it that last push? I called Niamh (we only saw each other once every few weeks, as she was living at home so we could keep saving for the project) and told her that we would give it until March 2021, and if we weren't ready to go by then we should consider cutting our losses and doing something else. I picked April for departure, because any later and there wouldn't be much of the season left to enjoy anyway. We were both so completely exhausted that beyond that it wasn't going to be fun anymore.

Fast forward to 31st March 2021 and my friend Jim was helping with the interior and half the galley was still out on the pontoon in Kinsale. All my tools and nearly all my belongings were spread out on the pontoon as well, while I decided what to keep and

Zora after nearly four years of work...





*... though she
still needed more, just days
before we left*

what to get rid of. There was a nice weather window forecast for the following day and I was absolutely adamant that we were leaving. Niamh was on the way down from Wicklow, and the plan was to sail back to Greystones just south of Dublin as our sea trial, then head over to Wales for the new mast and sails that were waiting for us in Pwllheli. I was frantically trying to finish jobs when she arrived and I honestly don't know why she didn't get back in the car and leave ... but somehow we managed to put the new galley countertops in, finish some woodwork, stow all our stuff and finally, on 1st April 2021, we left Kinsale. It was the decision to leave that day that showed me just how inexperienced I really was.

We made our way out of the harbour and were met by quite steep 2–3m waves and over 20 knots of easterly breeze, right in our faces. Had I looked at the more recent forecast in my rush to leave I'd have seen that the weather was forecast to be much better a few days later. It's a lesson I'm glad I learned early – that there's no shame in waiting for better weather. I quickly decided that we would either have to go back into Kinsale or motor through the swell and get a few miles around the corner to Oysterhaven, where I had the use of a mooring, or failing that it's a lovely protected anchorage with good holding. We decided to push on, because the weather wasn't horrendous and *Zora* was punching through it really well. I noted that she wasn't slamming at all and felt really comfortable and safe. We had a small bit of our genoa out close-hauled, but in order to make Oysterhaven needed to use the engine, which promptly air-locked shortly after I started it. After about 20 minutes of bleeding the



A still fairly bare-bones boat on the way to Greystones

raw water side, vomiting because of the motion while I hunched over the engine and generally just having a bad time, we were motoring again and all was well. We arrived into a flat calm Oysterhaven, and in our attempts to hook the mooring the boat hook broke and found its way to my face, resulting in a black eye and a headache. Not a great first day!

Next morning we decided this trip should be done as slowly as possible – we were still very new to commanding our own vessel and trying to rush was guaranteed to take all of the fun out of it. So we left and slowly made our way to Crosshaven, only a few miles further east, to wait for nicer weather. In a couple of days the weather settled, so we left Crosshaven at 0500 on 4th April and made our way to Kilmore Quay, an uneventful passage with a light breeze and calm sea. It was good to be covering some miles and we both felt that we were really on our way now. Zora was working well, with no issues aside from a slight leak in the forward hatch. There were strong northerlies forecast for the next few days and because neither of us had

Black eye, courtesy of the boat hook



been to Kilmore Quay before, we stayed and enjoyed the area. Kilmore Quay has a huge fishing fleet, and it was fun to watch them coming in and out at all hours of the day and night. Some of the larger outrigger designs are very pretty boats.

After a few days of enjoying our first real new port, we picked our tides and made our way towards Greystones. Carnsore Point, just east of Kilmore Quay, has a reputation and is not an area that you want to get wrong, but just as we were about to arrive with a very favourable tide we managed to catch a fishing pot around our propeller. It was an old float that wasn't attached to anything on the seabed, with about 5m of old rope and a smaller pick-up float on the other end. The sea state was pretty good and there wasn't a lot of wind, but it still wasn't a great situation to be in especially with how strong the tides can get. So I lowered myself over the side and managed to cut most of the rope off, and thankfully the rest came off by itself. We were able to get most of it on board to keep it out of the next person's propeller, and made our way towards Greystones.

The rest of the day was very calm and we motored on with a good tide for the next



Singlehanded the last stretch, black eye and all

60 or so miles before Niamh called my attention to a rattling sound from the engine. I opened the front cover of the engine box and saw that the water pump pulley was wobbling badly. The water pump was very much on its last legs and if it failed totally would leave us no choice but to call a tow, something I was very keen to avoid. I brought the revs way down and we headed for Arklow, only a few miles away. The harbour master

was very kind to us and refused to take payment. He organised for me to be taken to a motor factor where I could get coolant and supplies and I changed the water pump that night so we could finish our passage next day. Without the people who helped us it would have been a far more stressful situation. Niamh had to go to work next day, so I took *Zora* the final stretch by myself and had a good sail past Wicklow Head with a very strong tide. At one point we were doing almost 10 knots over ground with a nice westerly breeze pushing us along. The Monitor windvane that we had fitted before we left was doing the steering and as Greystones came into view I started to feel quite proud of myself. A lot of hard work had brought us this far and, while there was still a lot of work to be done, we had completed our first trip.

Our plan from here was to do a little more organising on board while we were in Niamh's home area, then head over to Wales for what we anticipated would be about a month. We left County Wicklow a couple of weeks after we arrived and, completing our first passage to another country on *Zora*, landed in Wales well before the sun set. We were both really happy with how well the boat had performed – she was proving to be very comfortable and able to cover some respectable distances each day. I had expected her to be very slow considering her weight but, as we would find later in the year, she was able to keep up with most other boats her size and in some cases leave them behind. Upwind was a different story, but who wants to do that anyway?

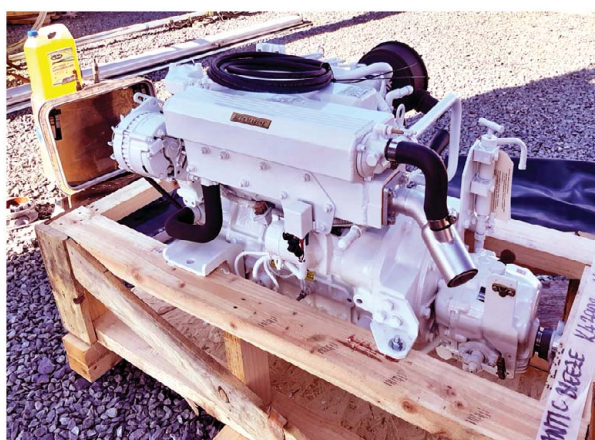
We arrived in to Pwllheli to a warm welcome from the gang at The Boatshed Sailmakers who we'd lined up to fit our new rig, sails and sprayhood and to deck out

the saloon with new cushions. (Full disclosure: the team at The Boatshed gave us massive support in the way of sponsorship and without them there would be no trip.) The day after arriving we unwrapped our brand new mast, boom and vang from their plastic packaging – it was like Christmas had come early. Our old rig had come from a much larger boat as *Zora*'s original rig was destroyed in the fire, but it was far too big for



*We were delighted
when our new engine
finally arrived*

*Beta engines are normally red,
but I asked for a white one*





Zora having her new sprayhood measured up

her, resulting in a big reduction in stability. We hauled the boat and the old mast was lifted off – luckily a buyer was found for it without too much trouble – but after this the delays started, due to a combination of Brexit and Covid-19. For weeks and weeks it was impossible to get new rigging terminals so we couldn't step the new mast, but we used this time to do a lot of other jobs that had been put on the back burner after we decided to leave Ireland.

The water tank was in serious need of attention and we took turns climbing into it to chisel off old paint and treat any corrosion we discovered. Luckily we didn't discover much, and none of it serious, so after three or four hard days with various tools we were ready to paint it. We used a potable-water paint that needed a lot of coats with a long curing interval, and had very specific humidity and temperature requirements while it cured. This was achieved by lowering a dehumidifier into the tank and luckily the temperatures were very warm. Even so, it still took almost two weeks until the tank was

Niamh learning to use the giant sewing machines





The crew ready to depart for Spain

fully painted, and was a really horrid job that neither of us ever want to suffer through again. We also did a plethora of other jobs, like painting the entire outside of the boat, redoing the non-skid paint, replacing the winches with new Lewmar self-tailers, welding a new mast step on deck and hundreds of other smaller jobs. An unexpected expense was a new engine, which sounds like a luxury but we had lost faith in our old engine on the trip from Kinsale – it was very old, and the ancillaries were starting to fail one after the other. We got a very good deal on a new BETA 50, so I welded in new bearers etc and, before we knew it, Zora had a new engine.

After about six weeks the rigging fittings arrived and the team wasted no time in getting the mast up. We decided to hold off fitting a forestay until she was in the water so we could make sure the mast was straight so, after the prop was serviced, the bottom painted and new anodes bolted on, we relaunched. The difference in how she sat in the water was immediately obvious, and we knew straight away that the new rig was the right decision. Once the mast was set straight the rigging team fitted a new furler and tuned the rigging while Steve the sailmaker took measurements for Zora's new sail wardrobe. We soon had a new mainsail, genoa, working jib and asymmetric spinnaker, which we were very excited to try out.

By now it was nearing the end of August and if we wanted to have a reasonable weather window to cross Biscay then we would need to leave pretty soon. So after a couple of short weekend sea trials and trips around Caernarfon Bay, we headed back across the channel to Greystones where we were picking up Nick to crew on the crossing. We had a fairly short time-frame to be across Biscay to Spain, due to our crew's work and family commitments, so we took the next weather window which promised decent winds and nothing nasty – we were acutely aware of Biscay's reputation – and left Wicklow in early September.

Biscay was an unpleasant passage as we had very little wind for almost the entire

crossing. We kept the main up for most of it, but had to motor most of the way. On the good days we managed to fly the asymmetric with a spinnaker pole and those days were fantastic, but most of the time there was torrential rain and absolutely no wind. We didn't want to hang around so the new engine got well and truly broken in, but it was very rolly and uncomfortable and, because we don't have an autopilot, we had to hand-steer almost the entire way. While under sail *Zora* was very comfortable, and the Monitor did a great job of keeping us on course.

We had left Greystones on the afternoon of 11th September and by



Zora under sail

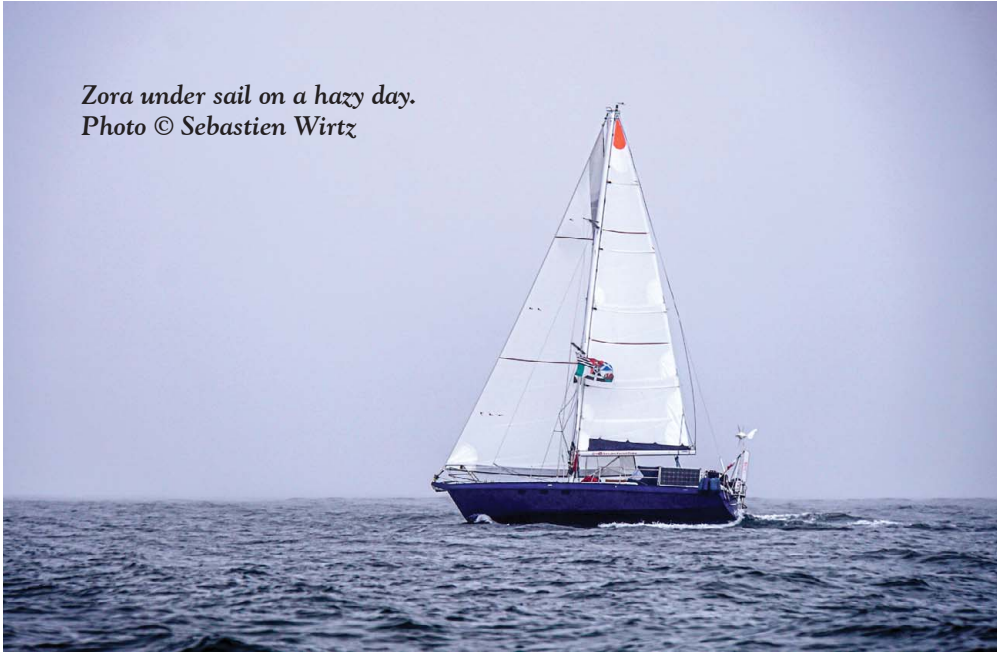


A happy skipper enjoying his boat

noon on the 16th were closing La Coruña. The previous night had been hard work, because again there was no wind and we'd had to cross the shipping lanes in the pitch dark. We were very happy to have made it, but our last little challenge arrived just as we were approaching La Coruña when we saw two orcas making their way over. Luckily they decided our rudder wasn't appetising enough and left us alone. Just after that the wind picked up so we hoisted the spinnaker ... and the top shackle promptly broke dumping the whole lot in the water. A fine welcome to Spain!

Next day we left La Coruña for Bayona, which took about 24 hours.

Zora under sail on a hazy day.
Photo © Sebastien Wirtz



There were some big swells and a light breeze so it was an uncomfortable night, but shortly after lunch we were passing Islas Cíes at the mouth of the Ría de Vigo with Bayona in the near distance. Once tied up in the Monte Real Club de Yates de Bayona marina we headed straight to the bar for pints and *gambas al ajillo* (garlic shrimp), feeling quite proud of ourselves for having made it so far, considering what the boat had been like just a few years before. Nick left shortly after, but we loved Bayona so much we decided to stay nearby for almost two weeks. We took a short trip up the *ría* and spent a couple of nights at anchor, before making our way back down to Bayona



*Can
you spot
Niamh?*

to wait for a weather window to get further south. There was a strong gale on the last night we were in Bayona and the Mini Transat fleet had to stop over while it passed. It was very cool to see the boats in person and to meet some of the skippers I had been following for a while, including Hugo Picard on *Team SVB*. On 3rd October we decided we really had to get further south before the winter closed in on us, so we headed off towards Portugal.

Viana do Castelo hadn't been on our plan, but I made the mistake of having chocolate for breakfast that morning resulting in awful seasickness. Anyone who has been to the marina there will know how strong the tide is in the river that runs across the entrance and that there is a bridge that you need to have lifted in advance. We tried for almost an hour to get the office to let us know if there was space, but being a Sunday there was no one around. Fortunately the bridge was open when we arrived, but I almost got it very wrong when I underestimated the tide, which swept us downstream and nearly into the bank. Thankfully the new engine had plenty of power to get me out of trouble and, with help from Renato who had seen us coming on AIS on his day off and came down to help us out, we berthed in the last free spot in the marina.

We spent the next two months cruising south down the coast of Portugal, stopping as often as we could and taking our time – I plan to cover the rest of our fairly eventful passage south in my next article. We hope to cross the pond and beyond in the coming year.

