

The perils of politics

Cruising Franco's Spain in 1949

Hugo Duplessis

After the rigours of a stormy Ireland in 1948, sunny Spain beckoned for 1949. But what about the politics? Spain was Fascist, ruled by the dictator General Franco. My generation had spent our teens trying to rid the world of dictators. Just this one remained. There was talk of more war to finish the job. Socialist Britain had broken off diplomatic relations, whatever that meant. Was Spain friend or foe? Surely the world was now at peace.

A bigger problem was the formidable Bay of Biscay that we would have to cross the get there. But what an adventure that would be! There would be sunshine in Spain, wine as cheap as water. Who would take any notice of a small boat? These extracts from my log of 1949 describe a few incidents where they did.

Crimson Rambler has been described often before, but may now be forgotten. (Being now the most senior member and when these events happened I was the most junior, that is very likely!) Briefly, she was a small red cutter of no particular class, just a 26ft five tonner, in



Crimson Rambler

which I had invested my Naval Gratuity. Built in 1914, she was old even when I bought her. (I liked to say 'experienced' rather than 'old' as she looked after her adventurous young owner so well). In 1930 a previous owner had found the mast and rig from a six metre yacht going gash and stuck this lovely 45 ft McGruer hollow mast and sails on the *Crimson Rambler*. With only a 21ft waterline, she was certainly fast, but too fast for a cruiser. So before I had cut it down to a more conventional size.

Rockall Sails had just developed a process for dyeing sails. I chose blue.

Now with my red hull and blue sails I had a colourful and distinctive little boat. Some Club members didn't approve. 'Making the club look like a bloody circus!' Sadly the process could be used only on cotton sails. The new synthetic fibres did not absorb dye and the idea soon died.

By 1949 rationing had eased, but was still difficult. In these days of unlimited fattening and worldwide supply of exotic fruit to local supermarkets, it must be difficult to imagine the problems of storing ship for a month or more in those days, not least because home rations were for only one week at a time. The phalanx of lawyers in the RCC, however, had discovered every loophole. A registered British yacht was a ship and therefore entitled to the same treatment as the *Queen Mary*, although for rations we had to accept the more modest status of passenger rather than crew. Even so, they were gluttonous compared with life at home.

In my case, however, there was a problem. The boat was unregistered. She was not a 'ship', she was a only a 'boat'. Nobody had bothered to register such a small Solent based gentleman's fishing boat when she was built so many years before. (The Registrar laughed when I first tried). But we got over that somehow and the Ministry of Food gave special approval for six weeks' stores. That meant I could buy ship's stores from Buckles, the chandler in Southampton.

The main advantage, apart from the quantity, was being able to get in advance long lasting stores and tins which were impossible to obtain from a local grocer, or even from Fortnum and Mason. Storage could be a problem, but tins could roll around in the wet bilges for months without spoiling. A speciality were the big Huntley and Palmer tinned fruitcakes. Great stuff for night watches. Mother's WI (Women's Institute) lessons now produced well filled Kilner jars from the garden too. Bottled bunny stew, however, was not a success.

There was no food rationing in Spain, but there was a severe shortage of money - British money - to pay for it. The foreign travel allowance had been increased from nothing the year before to, I think, £10 for 1949. Even allowing for inflation you can't live long on that.

So despite living on a boat with our own accommodation, there was no chance of living off the land and certainly no hope of many good meals ashore. We had to start with enough stores to last the whole cruise and all planning revolved around that. Can you imagine life without a credit card? Of course there was always the black market, and a fat wallet is accepted anywhere, but that was not our world.

My crew this year was Peter Daniels, another student from Southampton University and also ex-Navy. He was a keen photographer with a good camera. (I was still using Morther's 1912 Kodak VPK.) Sad to say, I have lost his photos. He had not been cruising before, but became an excellent sailor and was good company. He could cook too.

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The cruise was written up for the 1949 Journal. These are a few extracts from my memoirs. Suffice to say that we managed to reach Spain. Well, you can hardly miss it, even with my navigation using a borrowed sextant in one hand and Claude Worth's *Navigation and Voyaging* in the other. In theory, the middle of the Bay of Biscay with nothing to hit within a hundred miles in any direction should be the ideal place to learn navigation. I was still on Lesson 1 when land appeared a full day before it should have done. I shut the book, packed away the sextant and sailed towards it. Perhaps I really should have started my lessons before I left home. It was those damned exams. But now I was surprised by how long it took. Was it a mirage? The trouble was that being a flatlander I had never seen proper mountains before. I had not realised we could see the 10,000 ft Cordillera Cantabna from far out to sea, a hundred miles away or more. They were even fifty miles inland. As it turned out, my navigation had been rather good. It was just that I had no faith in it. That must be Lesson 2.

It was after dark when we entered the harbour of San Esteban de Pravia and promptly ran aground on a heap of coal. Some fishermen appeared from nowhere and towed us to a nearby quay. In no time it had turned into a party. It looked like being a good night until there was a sudden hush. The fishermen melted away as a khaki figure appeared on the quay above, wearing what looked like part of a black kitchen stove on his head. More to the point, he was attached to a rifle. The Guardia Civile had arrived. He came on board. Neither of us spoke Spanish. He had no English and seemed to be waiting for reinforcements, so we just sat and stared. We were hungry and tired, and he was blocking the galley. We shared what was left of the non-stop ocean stew.

After an hour or two of this, more men appeared. Gold braid. An officer. Orders. We must move across the river to another quay. At once. Immediately. This looked like being a long, long night. It had not been a smooth Biscay crossing. We had been hove-to for a day and a night, and even tried out the sea-anchor for the first and last time. I badly needed my bunk, on which he was sitting. Peter was already asleep.

I knew only one word of Spanish. 'Mañana. Mañana!', I said crossly.

It worked like some magic incantation. The guard disappeared. The gold braid left saying he would send an escort at 0800. He hardly needed the order not to move.

San Esteban turned out to be the sort of harbour I would have avoided had I known. It was a dirty, ugly little coal port serving the mines inland. By day it looked even worse, with coal dust everywhere. I believe it is now a smart resort and boasts a marina. First to appear was our interpreter, Toni, accompanied by his small white woolly dog with a red collar and a bad temper. Toni was a student who had learnt English as a refugee in the docklands of Liverpool during the vicious Civil War only ten years before.

His English could best be described as ‘unsuitable for polite company’. In due course, which in Spanish meant nearer to eleven o’clock than eight, the fun started.

A smart Naval rating and a petty officer arrived to direct the yacht to a cleaner quay, with steps and a hand rail, after which they remained on deck. The first visitor to enter the cabin was the Harbourmaster in a white uniform with gold braid where it mattered. He was a large fat man and occupied half the cabin. It had been a struggle to get him in. I hoped to God we could get him out again. There were forms to fill in and he had brought a burly assistant to do so.

‘Tonnage? Papers? Why have you no papers? Every ship has to have papers. Without knowing tonnage how can we charge harbour dues?’

This problem was lost in the bad tempered confusion after the Harbourmaster, with one arm stuck in the galley, upset a jar of raspberry jam over his white trousers. The Port Medical Officer, who by then had joined the party, was convinced it was blood. He was a fussy little man with yet more forms and problems.

‘Why had the . . . er . . . ship got no deratisation certificate? How many cases of fever? How many childbirths?’

A plain clothes official of unspecified status also had questions which seemed to be very important. We assumed he must be the secret police, the equivalent of the Gestapo. He was a tall man and as the boat had been built long before the demand for standing headroom, he was either bent double or standing with his head through the main hatch, which was, of course, what we did on small yachts. But then he got very confused because he could not see who he was talking to.

‘Are you a Communist or Socialist? Why have you come here? Pleasure? You call sailing in a . . . thing like this pleasure?’

Last to arrive were two Customs officers who insisted on rummaging in the lockers that the others were still sitting on.

By now the cabin was getting rather crowded. At one stage, I counted eight bodies. It may have been more as some came and went. Toni had to sit on the floor with his little white dog, which clearly did not approve of the company. I could not see which officers it had bitten or how many. Toni was having a difficult time translating the wrong answer to the wrong question from the wrong person.

The Guardia, now present in force, had taken up position on the steps to check on and list everyone coming on board. This was a wise move as there must have been a platoon of them and the weight of rifles alone would have sunk us. But just how all those self-important officers managed to squeeze into what was a six by six foot box I just do not know. From my position forward I could not see; but I did notice the petty officer in the cockpit looking rather anxiously over the side at the water beginning to

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lap over the deck edge. *Crimson Rambler* had been built in the more elegant years, long before the fashion for high freeboard 'floating caravans'. In cruising trim, freeboard was barely nine inches at best.

Crimson Rambler was a small yacht by any standards with her 26ft length and six foot square cabin. The fore cabin was far too small and uncomfortable for entertaining, and anyway was full of sails and stores. It did have a hatch, however, which could be used as an escape. Peter and I, of course, had to be somewhere on board too, so I made sure we were close to that hatch. When the ship went down, as seemed likely at any moment under this load of humanity, the fat Harbour Master in particular, there was one thing of which I was sure. There would be no gallantry about the captain being the last to leave this ship.

I was getting worried about how we would ever get them off. It had been a struggle to get the fat Harbourmaster in. If he got stuck they might have to take my precious boat to pieces.

We were saved by a local custom. Siesta time, and they all melted away leaving just one man on guard, dozing in the shade. After that they forgot about us, and were probably glad of the excuse.

We were told later that this reception was because of the amount of cigarette smuggling from Tangiers into Southern Spain using small vessels registered in Gibraltar, and therefore British. Hence my arrival in the dark with a Red Ensign had attracted such unwelcome attention. I was warned that it would be repeated in every harbour.

Fortunately I resisted the temptation to go straight home because in the next harbour, Cedeira (pronounced like two hiccups), all I had to do was to fill in a post card sized form that asked about my main armament, my auxiliary armament and the number of torpedo tubes.

We were welcome everywhere. We met very few yachts and seemed to be the only British one that year. As such we were a curiosity. Day and night there was always someone on the quayside just watching (and spitting, regrettably). Except during Siesta time it often became a small crowd. With an open cockpit and hatch there was little privacy, and it could be bit embarrassing. Many of them had some English and we picked up some useful Spanish, such as *aqua fuente*, a local brandy so powerful that we could use it to light the Primus.

When we reached Vigo, the Real Club Nautico offered us a berth in their private dock and the use of their facilities. They had a very grand club house that looked like a liner, complete with a red funnel.

After several weeks exploring the Rias of Galicia we were back in La Coruña preparing for the return voyage across the Bay of Biscay. We found the town busily preparing for the arrival of the great man himself, General Franco, El Caudillo (the dictator), on the way to his holiday home in the cool Cordillera.

Not for him the mere motor cavalcade, and what dignity is there in a helicopter, even if Spain had such a machine. No, he would arrive by sea, and in no ordinary ship, but the flagship of the Spanish Navy, the cruiser *Miguel de Cervantes*, followed like ducklings by the rest of his Navy.

The local Club Nautico politely warned us that it would be wiser for us to move out into the harbour as we would be in the way and might get damaged. It was soon clear why. All morning the long, wide quay filled up with company after company of soldiers in blue grey uniforms. It looked as if half the army was needed to greet the great leader. The uniforms and helmets had a strong resemblance to the German army of unhappy recent memory. The marching troops were goose stepping too. Yet this was 1949. Four years after VE day. Had we really won the war? Were they rising up to fight again in this far corner of Spain? Franco had wisely kept Spain out of our war, but it was well known where his sympathies lay

It was before the days of compulsory courtesy flags and fussy police fining or even imprisoning offenders. As a consequence I had never bothered, but now I could see that the few other foreign flag vessels were all flying them. Perhaps we should too. Our quandary was that Britain and the other victorious democracies had broken off diplomatic relations with fascist Spain. Should one fly as a courtesy the flag of a country with which one's own country was in some sort of discourtesy? Naively thinking the world was now at peace, I had never bothered to ask whether or not we should have gone to Spain at all.. As a student engineer, the niceties of diplomacy were not my subject. What did it all mean? I had no reason to be discourteous. Quite the opposite. Our initial reception was now just a funny story. It would only be polite. Upholding the honour of the RCC.

Then came the next problem: where do we find a Spanish flag? All the shops were now behind this military tattoo. We asked the Club if we could borrow one, but all their flags were in use, draped along the balconies, even their table cloths, as they 'Dressed Ship'. Back on board we looked for any rags or fancy dish clothes that could be cobble together to look something like a courtesy flag. Then at last the club boatman came out with a big faded bundle he had found hidden at the back of his boat store. It was a flag all right - a huge Spanish flag, as big as a blanket. The spreaders bent as Peter hoisted it amid much cheering and clapping and obvious approval from nearby boats.

He looked at it critically. 'Have you noticed, there is a sort of faded patch in the middle?'

'Probably some emblem. They used to have a king.'

'Those holes where the sun is shining through. They look too even and round for moths'

'Bullets?'

'The right size'

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'I suppose you're going to suggest those brown stains are blood' I laughed.

'Well. What do you think?'

'Oh dear. Some of those who cheered us did seem a bit overenthusiastic'.

'Clenched fists too'.

'Damn all we can do about it. Stuck here in the middle. A hundred thousand men on the shore. A hundred thousand guns. All pointing our way. Artillery too'.

'Yes, we are a bit out numbered'.

'Nothing for it. We'll just have to say our prayers and hope it was the right side'.

Whether it was or not, we shall never know. We did not spark an international incident and nobody frog marched us off to face a firing squad because the problem solved itself. At the very moment when my light signal line broke under the extra weight, all eyes were on the cruiser, trying to identify which of those small blobs on the bridge was the man who was the reason for it all. So nobody noticed when we really did insult the national flag (whichever it was) by letting it fall into the water.

By then we had spent several uncomfortable hours at anchor waiting with the other small craft. It was hot. Nothing seemed to be happening. There was some delay. Rumours. Troops were still arriving, each with its own band. As it got hotter, the rows of soldiers in their thick ceremonial uniforms were clearly uncomfortable. It should have been siesta. Gaps appeared in their ranks.

Then almost without warning the bows of the cruiser appeared from behind the old fortress on the point and made its way slowly across the harbour. The troops sprang to attention. The bands played the National Anthem, all together but each to its own time. Batteries fired a salute, which was answered by the ship. Every boat in the harbour blew its siren, as did the cars and buses. Crowds cheered, fireworks, and anything on shore that could make a noise joined in. Politics forgotten, we did too, Peter with a saucepan lid and me with the frying pan.

Because of the civil war and prewar politics, Spain had been slow to modernise. We had noticed that most of the fishing boats and other small craft were steam powered. Consequently as the ship docked and the noise at last died down, the harbour was littered with craft of all sizes and colours from trawlers and coasters to fishing boats and pleasure craft, all unable to move. They had literally run out of steam.