

Islands in the stream

Around the Western Channel

Mac with Lucy Armstrong

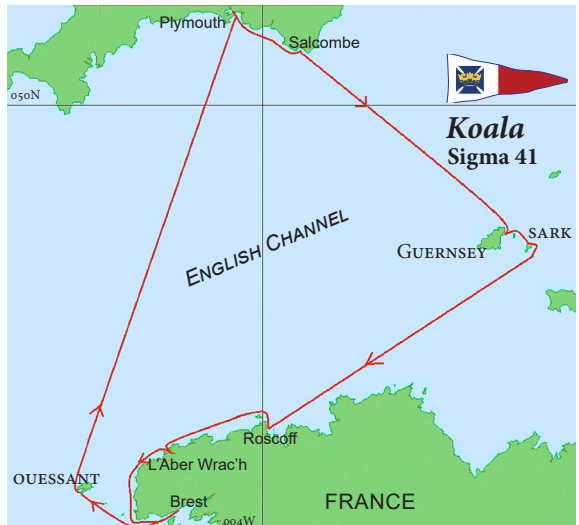


All we had to start with was a few weeks off work, a rough plan, and a weather window. That was enough. As it turned out taking our three week holiday in May proved to be the best decision of 2023 as the main summer holidays turned into a damp squib.

Our initial plan was to wander for a week with a small flotilla of work colleagues wherever the weather took us. The weather set fair for a passage

south and east from Plymouth so we hatched a plan to go first to Salcombe and then to Guernsey. We had a seasoned crew booked and enough beige food and hearty fare stashed away to keep them happy for a week. John Shirley my office mate of 15 years and an ex Ocean Youth Club 1st mate is utterly reliable, and Scott an Army colleague whom I have sailed and served with for almost 25 years is as steady as a rock. Then at the last minute, my friend, colleague, and RCC member Rory Rickard decided that he had nothing better to do that afternoon and ‘would be delighted to enjoy a short sail down to Salcombe’.

“Do you have a sword on board” was the question as we passed the breakwater on the afternoon of the Coronation. Rory appeared with a bottle of Pol Roger, Cuvée Sir Winston Churchill, kindly donated by a pilot from the US Airforce in return for undisclosed previous diplomatic hospitality.



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Sabrage of the Pol Roger by Rory Rickard with a bread knife

Clearly I didn't, but the trusty breadknife was deemed appropriate. With a well-practiced flick of the wrist the top of the bottle cleared the guardrails and we were able to toast the King in the appropriate fashion. Our holiday was off to a high standard and that was to be the bar set for the rest of the first week.

On arrival in Salcombe we had intended to join up with the rest of the RCC drinks party but were highjacked by Royal Naval Sailing Association friends almost as soon as we crossed the bar. There was promise of dinner at Salcombe Yacht Club which was already booked and they had some empty seats. We were delighted to oblige, and I can report that the food and hospitality at the yacht club were exceptional. This was followed by an impromptu, rather late night back on our boat, spinning stories and making inroads into the Jura malt. Predictably Rory stayed on board. When we slipped the following morning at 0430 to head to Guernsey we made sure that he had some form of identification and then submitted the obligatory Customs declaration. He was now coming with us and all he had with him was the clothes he arrived in, his debit card including his military ID card, and an empty Pol Roger box. The wind kindly filled in from the west and we had perfect reaching conditions as we raced across the shipping lanes to get into the top of the Little Russell and into St Peter Port in time for afternoon tea. We split into two watches and caught up on some well-deserved sleep.

There then followed a three day window of slightly poor weather with pretty strong winds, intermittent rain and cool temperatures. Our aspirations of sailing on to Sark and Jersey were paused, and we made do with catching up with friends, walking, cycling, and sampling the considerable culinary delights of St Peter Port. An unexpected pleasure was the annual Guernsey Liberation Day on 9 May with parades, bunting and fireworks.

The 11th dawned fair. Scott and Rory needed to get back to Cornwall. We packed them onto the short flight back to Exeter, and John and I sat in the sun quietly

savouring a herbal tea and the prospect of a couple of days of detoxification. It had been quite a busy week! The flotilla was breaking up anyway with most heading to Alderney and then back to Dartmouth and Salcombe, but we had enough time to have other ambitions. John and I slipped away from the crowd and headed to the far side of Sark to have a day exploring the island. We picked up one of the visitors' moorings in La Maseline and landed at Creaux Harbour. We hired two bikes and explored the length and breadth of the island. Unfortunately I have to report that the lovely restaurant La Sablonnerie on Little Sark was closed and I am led to believe that La Madame has not been so well. I do hope that she is better for 2024 and we can visit to sample the best lobster I have ever had. Fortunately we had been foraging for stores on Guernsey so we had plenty of nice things back on board.

The next morning we set off at first light around the top of Sark and then taking a WSW course in a building NNE breeze heading towards Roscoff for another crew change. We carried the wind and tide swiftly towards the west before the tide turned against us and the seas became shorter and steeper for a few hours. We gybed south and slowed the boat down a bit by dropping the main to make things more comfortable as we were not in a rush. Running parallel to the shipping lane we hardly saw another vessel and covered the 70 miles in just over 10 hrs arriving mid-afternoon. John was now contemplating the ferry ride back to Plymouth the following day, when my wife, Lucy would arrive. We spent a few hours cleaning and tidying the boat in preparation for the handover. It's always best to be well prepared for Admiral's rounds. We then treated ourselves to a well-deserved beer at the lovely brasserie at Roscoff Marina. And so to bed.

The following morning Lucy arrived bright and early. Almost too bright and early in fact as we were woken by a banging on the coach roof as we had not anticipated how early the ferry would get in and how quickly she would disembark and walk over to the marina. It turns out that the lovely brasserie on the marina also does fantastic continental breakfast, OJ and coffee so we relaxed and told tales until John was ready to leave on the late morning ferry return to Plymouth. Lucy and I really wanted to press on west and the tide was favourable, so we slipped out of Roscoff almost under the bow of the departing ferry and headed round the Île de Batz towards L'Aber Wrac'h. Frustratingly the wind died and we had to motor for about four hours getting there in the early evening. We are very fond of L'Aber Wrac'h and I am still a bit grumpy that we can no longer go there direct from Plymouth due to customs rules. It is always a delight and the perfect place to plan the jump round to the Chenel du Four. The next day was warm, clear and perfectly still. We decided to take the time to motor round to explore L'Aber Benoit which I had never been into, and from there took the inside passage west to avoid the worst of the foul tide. We popped out and suffered only a short period of foul tide before committing to the Chenel and being washed south in almost complete calm into the Iroise. The initial plan was to push on to Morgat to the SE, but we had seen the forecast of a very strong NE wind the following day so we opted to head to Camaret. After some

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careful tidal calculations we had decided that we could push on into the inner basin to shelter. This proved to be a good decision when over 30 kts arrived from the NNE and pounded the yachts on the outer pontoon and the few lunatics at anchor off the beach who were pitching in the steep fetch. We had a lovely stormbound day (it was bright blue sky and not a cloud in sight) walking around the peninsula admiring the German WWII defences, and the beautiful churches in Camaret. The old church



Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Rocamadour, Camaret

on the breakwater is a medieval shrine to the sea and sailors, and in the sunshine the newer 20th century church was a beautiful demonstration of stained glass.

Eglise Saint-Remi, Camaret



We ventured out in complete calm again the following morning and carried the tide in to Brest where we needed to get our passports stamped to check out of Schengen. We decided to tie up at the Château Marina and were met at the visitors' pontoon by a very friendly Frenchman who took our lines and turned out to be

Morgan La Gravière who was just back from winning the Guyader Bermudes 1000 Race. What a nice man! We very much enjoyed Brest, with a friendly and hospitable Douanes and marina, a beautiful cathedral, and a lively market in the centre of town.

We only stayed for the morning, and took the last of the ebb tide out of the narrows heading towards Île d'Ouessant (Ushant). The weather was perfect with F4 from the north giving us a fast reach south of Île Molène and nearby skerries. We arrived at the Passage du Fromveur as it was slackening, but still into an impressive 5kts of tide pouring down from the north. We were ferry gliding across the current, passing just south of La Jument and then passed more rocks into the calm of the Lampaul bay.

I know that this may be one of the few times that I am ever able to spend a night on in this bay which is open to the SW. The tides around the island are legendary and there is no way that you could stop if the conditions were not favourable. I can report that there are about six excellent visitors moorings in the head of the bay and from there easy landing at the pier. We were spoilt for places to eat out. The boulangerie in the village was only a short row ashore the next morning for fresh bread and patisseries for the journey home. We were only able to stay for one night



Marina du Chateau, Brest

before heading home to Plymouth. We set off into a light northerly and beat the 100 miles back to Cawsand Bay in just under 20 hours which is exactly what a Sigma 41 loves to do best.

It was a memorable three weeks of adventures with lots of contrast and lots of fun. The weather was mainly kind, and the accurate forecasts meant that we were able to choose our passages and optimise the boat for speed and comfort. Everyone had a great time and we hope to do something similar but different next year, but from Guernsey where we will be relocating in January.



Koala in Île d'Ouessant