

18 months and 1,800 miles

Spain to Greece

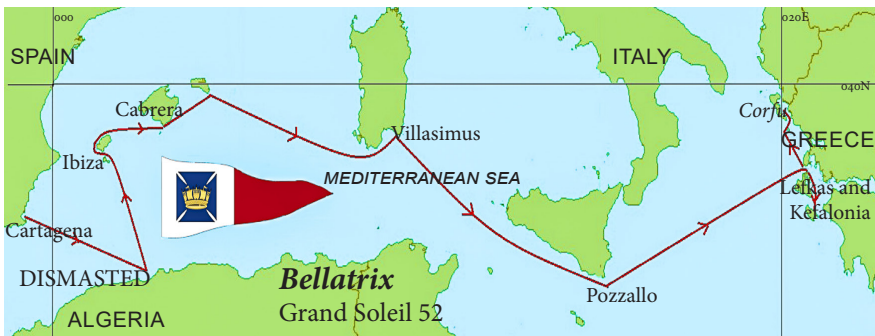
James Baker

Slipping Cartagena after an extended summer exploring the Spanish coast and Balearic Islands, we were bound for the Ionian via Licata, Sicily hoping to make landfall there in time for the Rugby World Cup final. With a solid W4-5 forecast for the next 24 hours, before backing more southerly, we had the kite up abeam Cabo de Palos and settled into our watches for the 750nm to Sicily. We had delayed our departure for 36 hours to pick a favourable weather window.

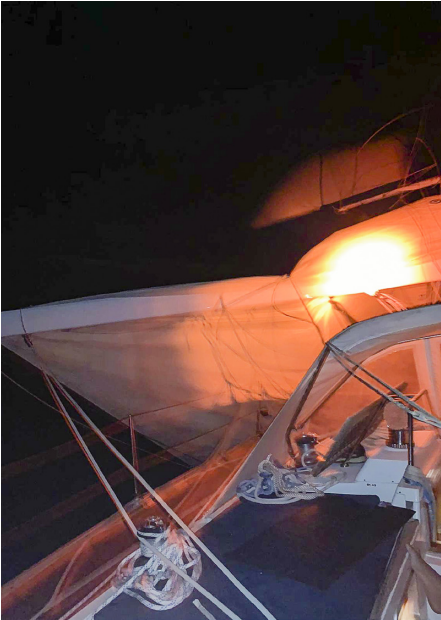
Before losing phone signal we called home and reported 'textbook' sailing conditions; we caught a tuna and Alex's culinary skills produced delicious ceviche as the sun began to sink behind us. The night was inky black, no moon and once clear of the Spanish coast no ambient light. We enjoyed phosphorescence and made good progress averaging dead on nine knots through the night.



Bellatrix abeam Cabo de Palos near Cartagena



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Looking forward from the helm

At 0400, I came on watch and while the autopilot was coping fine, I enjoyed helming *Bellatrix* as she charged along on a run making south of rhumb line in anticipation of the wind heading us.

At 0500, the staggered watch system meant Richard went off watch and Alex (my nephew) joined me in the cockpit. We peered into the blackness looking for the first glow of sunrise which we confused initially with the loom of lights reflecting on the low cloud above the Algerian coast. The breeze was a good F5 as forecast but we were all happy at the progress and *Bellatrix* was romping along.

A massive bang, followed by deceleration and the awful graunching noise of twisting metal is not an experience I ever plan to repeat.

Looking forward in the pitch black, I could see the remains of a mast, the mainsail now in the sea below the boom and the spinnaker back filling around what was left of the mast. The starboard chain plate and the rod rigging were swinging around beside the mast, the backstay and adjuster had flattened the push pit and bimini where I had been standing just seconds previously.

The off watch crew didn't need waking; they both emerged from their cabins still unsure if perhaps we had been hit; the four of us donned life jackets and foul weather gear, got the life raft into the cockpit, grabbed the 'Grab Bag' in anticipation of potentially having to abandon the boat and then I went forward to inspect the damage. The VHF was no use, so I had no immediate way of alerting anyone nearby.

On deck, the situation was mildly concerning. The starboard through deck chain plate had pulled out and it appeared the bolts had simply given up. The rig had runners and check stays which had caused the mast to twist and sheer. This led to the deck being littered with shards of twisted aluminium which did a good job of cutting my feet, hands, knees and legs as I crawled between the twisted rod rigging and assorted debris laying across the boat.

It was evident the rig needed to be cut away and, like most skippers, I had my 'Rig Cutting' box in the locker for just such an occasion. In it was a large battery operated grinder and cutting discs, Felco rig cutters and a hefty hacksaw. All items that seemed indispensable during the many years contemplating such an incident. Crawling back along the deck in the dark, getting cut by the shards, soaked as the

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boat rolled and pitched, and getting struck by the 14mm rod rigging, I began to think 'Plan A' maybe wasn't the best option.

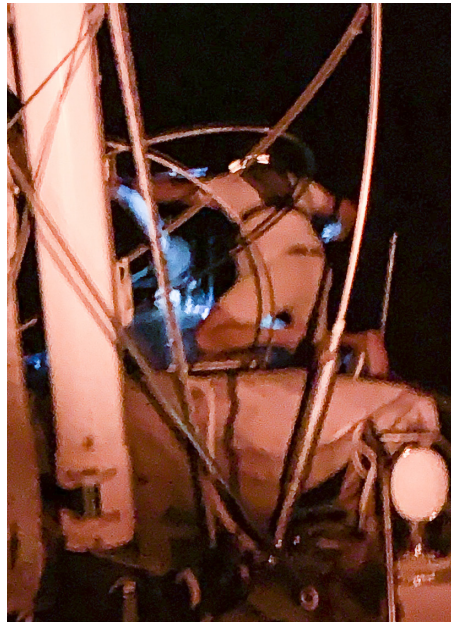
Richard, who had previously crossed the Atlantic with me and is always a source of humour and perspective in these sort of situations, must have sensed my unease. "Why not just unpin the rig as if you were taking the mast out?" His suggestion was definitely a lightbulb moment.

We unpinned the backstay above the adjuster and then went forward to work our way from the forestay aft. I think we established there were a combined 24 'things' attaching us to the rig, ranging from the obvious halyards, sheets, guys and reefing lines; to the less obvious antenna, lights and radar cables – each one

needing to be cut in order to try and get the mast away from the hull. By now it was just beginning to get light and as I made my way back along the deck trying to get control of the violently swinging chainplate, I was thrown forward and out under the guard wire only managing to stay vaguely attached to the boat by a stanchion which caught me under my right arm. With my feet in the Mediterranean and my arm at an uncomfortable angle I wasn't quite sure how I would get back on board, but some strong arms (belonging to Richard) hauled me back over the toe rail.

Once the furling gear and forestay were off and we had jettisoned some of the spinnaker lines, the mast began to collide with the hull with considerably more force. This was perhaps 30 mins after the dismasting. I took the decision to message my brother, Jonathan Baker (RCC) via IridiumGo! and ask him to notify Falmouth that we were going to activate the EPIRB and to advise them of the nature of our predicament. We felt the rig was likely to breach the hull and it would be nice to know that if that happened there might be a vessel in the vicinity.

It was still early in the UK and by the time he saw the message (0630) Palma SAR had dispatched a helicopter to our position; I later learned the helicopter was airborne 11 mins after the EPIRB was activated. One remarkable part of this event was when Jonathan spoke to Palma, they put him through directly to the pilot who was already airborne on his way to us. It was extremely useful for the pilot to know what he was on his way to. Using the Iridium text service, with Jonathan as relay, we were able to explain what was happening and that we were not in immediate



Sorting the rigging, mast and chainplate mess

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danger although the situation was a little sketchy. The pilot also asked us to monitor the handheld VHF (which hadn't initially occurred to me) and that he would be on station in 30 minutes. Alex – Jonathan's son – managed the Iridium messaging and it was reassuring to be in comms with someone ashore.

In the interim, we worked to clear the rest of the rigging, lines, cables and sails that were attaching us to the 25m spar still crashing into the side of *Bellatrix*. The rig finally relinquished its grip on us a matter of minutes before the helicopter arrived. We waited to ensure there was no entanglement around the stern gear before starting the engine. Thankfully the rig did little irreparable damage to the topsides, but the deck, toe rail, stanchions and dorade vents all took a hefty beating.

The pilot offered us tools and, of course, to take us off the boat. But by now we felt things were under control. One member of the crew had a reasonable cut to his foot, but overall, morale was improving and we were definitely not in any immediate danger. The communication with the pilot over handheld was very reassuring. He remained above us, on station for about 20 minutes and relayed messages back to the UK and Jonathan. He also wanted to be certain we were OK and to know where we would be likely to make land fall; a quick squint at the chart showed Ibiza 115nm north of us which seemed the most sensible option compared with Algeria, noting that the insurers expressly forbid sailing in Algerian waters.

With the engine now engaged ahead and most of the clear up completed, we tidied up what remained of the halyards, sheets and guys. We managed to rereg the

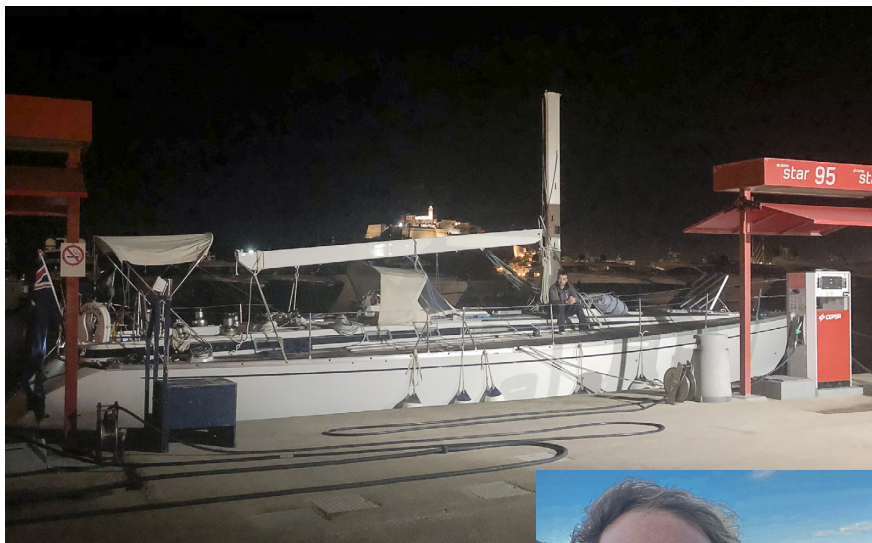
Underway under power (courtesy Palma SAR)



James Baker

bimini and even managed to find the remnants of the Spanish courtesy flag which was rehoisted above the push pit.

As the enormous rush of adrenalin and the demands of the previous few hours subsided we settled back into watches and to get some rest as we motored north in a F5 beam sea rolling in a most peculiar manner.



Alongside Botafoch Marina, Ibiza

Ibiza is a whole separate story for another log. Collecting *Bellatrix* for onward travel complicated by Covid, travel restrictions, a communist government, an old boat and all manner of obstacles to overcome, but finally after ten months I slipped Botafoch Marina bound for Mahon via Cabrera to finish the rebuild and lay her up for the winter.



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There are numerous lessons to be learnt from the dismasting which perhaps go beyond an RCC log, but a few would be;

- check regularly for galvanic corrosion no matter how good the bolts look
- carry a climbing/bike helmet
- wear shoes in a major incident

- share some of the burden of responsibility with others on board. All of my crew were of medium experience and they all contributed in different ways; getting a delicious meal cooked, managing communications, helping physically shift the spars or just providing accurate torchlight while undoing bolts all played a part in dealing with the incident. We also had considerable luck; where the rig fell, how

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we were turned beam on, but downwind of the rig, the weather, the tools I had on board. Any one of these could have significantly changed the outcome.

Fast forward another six months to the end of May. I managed to get back to *Bellatrix* after another Balearic lockdown. She was almost ready to go to sea. After



Anchored in Cabrera, Spain

rebuilding bent stainless, damaged gel coat and teak; but overall *Bellatrix* felt in great shape as we headed off in unseasonably chilly weather but with a nice N4 to push us along.

As is the way with boats, it takes a day or two to settle into an offshore routine and I found I was perhaps more alert than previously given the dismasting was effectively the last offshore passage. Aside from some typical issues such as an alternator that gave up charging and an aft heads which decided to allow the sea to flow back into the main bilge, we had a wonderful sail from Mahon to the SE corner of Sardinia, where we anchored in beautiful waters outside the small marina of Villasimus waiting for the next round of fair winds.

Due to the vaccine roll out, neither of us was fully vaccinated and neither of us could properly work out how to manage 72 hour PCR testing to coincide with weather systems and landfalls. So, the executive decision was taken to ignore the restrictions and see what happened. In Sardinia no one took any notice of us, our paperwork (or lack thereof) or where we were from or headed for.

36 hours after reaching Villasimus a lovely weather system appeared that offered us decent northerly winds for the next 48 hours and we pushed off, bound initially for the Aeolian Islands. However as Med sailors know, rarely does the forecast match reality and we found ourselves with E2-3 veering slowly SW and increasing 4-5. And so we began beating toward Sicily, then on a nice fetch before easing the sheets and eventually being on a poled out run along the south coast of the island thereby sadly missing the Aeolians altogether. Our next landfall was in the south eastern corner of the island at Pozzallo; probably not somewhere I would rush to revisit. Again we ran the gauntlet of no PCRs or vaccine certificates but aside from a modest shrug from the port official, no one seemed at all bothered. They left us

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lying alongside a recently seized Moody 66 that had been ripped apart by the Police who had found €7m of cocaine...perhaps we were left 'on the naughty step'?

Eighteen hours in Pozzallo eating ferry terminal food and watching the comings and goings of the border patrol vessels, the migrant charity support boats and the coastguard launches reminded us how lucky we are not to be crossing the Med in very different circumstances. We slipped late on 1 June and had a windless 24 hours before picking up a N4. This part of the Ionian was surprisingly busy with all manner of freight, tankers, fishing boats and ferries regularly appearing close to us. AIS is an absolute game changer for these type of passages although some of the fishing boats chose to turn it on and off just to keep us on our toes.

Landfall on Lefkas with Kefalonia abeam was a treat as we charged into the bay of Vasiliki and dropped our hook under sail in blustery NW conditions. Greece and the Islands at the beginning of June were still largely off-limits to UK visitors and felt eerily quiet. We were the only boat in Vasiliki and the usual throng of windsurfers was nowhere to be seen. Aside from the everchanging and exasperating Covid restrictions we were also about to tackle Brexit matters with a non-EU registered yacht wishing to cruise in the EU having paid EU VAT; and throw in a Jersey passport for good measure.

As it transpired, Greek officialdom was pleased to see us. Again, nothing more than a shrug in relation to PCRs and vaccines; and the original receipt in Lira proving VAT had been paid 30 years ago meant we were through the administration process in a matter of minutes and given a ten year cruising licence.

Bellatrix and Alethia in the Ionian



I had to return home in June. The anchorage at Vliho was good. Whilst leaving a boat at anchor goes firmly against the grain, the team at Vliho YC was there 24/7 keeping an eye on all of the boats. She coped with a 50 knot storm and the new 40kg Manson embedded itself firmly in the clay basin.

Summer in the Ionian in a partially restricted Covid environment was a mixed blessing; notably fewer visitors, but with family and friends juggling paperwork we enjoyed some 600 miles to-ing and fro-ing between Corfu and Zakynthos. We spent a few days bumping into Heugh and Fi Symons (RCC) aboard *Alethia* between Lakka in Paxos and Kastos.

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As a relative new comer to the RCC it was our first sighting of an RCC burgee and we all enjoyed a few rum punches and a meal ashore in Meganisi.

Now *Bellatrix* is in reasonably good shape it is sadly time to lay her up but with the past 24 months behind us, we can enjoy planning for adventures further afield. Perhaps long winter nights this year will persuade me it is time for a Caribbean Christmas next.

Bellatrix back in reasonably good shape

