

# California to Cantabria

## *Quicksilver* Comes Home

Mike and Hilde Gill

The hardest thing about a protracted peregrination is coming to the decision to do it in the first place. Especially for parents and grandparents, cutting loose is not straightforward. Arguably the second most difficult thing, especially after six intriguing years, is how to craft the last year of a voyage in a way that makes it a stimulating ‘final movement’, and with its own natural coda, rather than an anticlimactic delivery trip



*Quicksilver*, and Mike and Hilde Gill

home. This challenge is of course more about attitude and emotion than about cruise planning. How well we addressed it, we hope emerges in the following pages.

It was with some difficulty that after

twelve days we extracted ourselves from the delights of San Francisco Bay. We were well looked after by family friends and the Sausalito Yacht Club, and the views of the city from our anchorage off the club were spectacular.

On 6 October 2016 we managed to sail most of the 27nm under the Golden Gate and down to Half Moon Bay. We spent two nights there, delighted not to be troubled by the wash of passing boats, the only drawback of the Sausalito anchorage. Away from the urban throb, Half Moon Bay is laid back, with good walks on the cliffs and a friendly thriving yacht club on the beach.

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The prevailing winds off the California coast are northerly, and often there are plenty of them. Of the nearly 4,000nm down to Panama, this was the section where we had least expected to have too little wind. This year though was quiet, and the 63nm passage to Monterey was the first



San Francisco from Sausalito

of many requiring excessive use of the motor. There, we were confronted by the stink and rasping barking of the hundreds of sea lions which have colonised the harbour. Their polluting effects were magnified by a wide-spread, algal red-tide. As we approached the anchorage, a large 'installation' of black wet-suited horizontal boarders paddled past us. We were definitely in California. Ashore, Cannery Row of Steinbeck fame, and a sad monument of unsustainable fishing, is well got up. Monterey has hordes of tourists. Round Point Pinos a few miles away lies Stillwater Cove, a kelp-ridden little inlet, surrounded by mansions and golf courses. We spent a peaceful night there before motoring the entire way to San Simeon, past Big Sur, a rugged, arid, mountainous stretch of coast. A little



further south lies our favourite on this coast, Morro, to which unusually we could sail. Its entrance, dangerous in a swell, is guarded by a 600ft high volcanic plug which gives the place its name.

It is a secure harbour, where you can anchor, though the tidal stream is fierce. The yacht club is welcoming, and we were lent a car to visit Hearst Castle, the hilltop mansion of William Randolph Hearst. The extraordinary feat of building this lavish extravaganza on top of a mountain, at a time when many were suffering the effects of the Depression, left us with a mixture of tastes in our mouths. Morro has a modest, uncrowded feel to it, rather different from the hype and bustle of Southern California.

The hurdle is Point Conception, where the coast changes direction from north-west/south-east to west/east, with a predictable, and sometimes furious, acceleration zone. Just round it is Cojo anchorage, where we came to a determined halt in calm waters, delighted to get round the Point without hassle. However, within two hours, we were surrounded by spindrift as



Morro Rock

an offshore thirty-knot wind increased to forty knots. Even as Mike went forward to let out more chain, we started to drag. We dragged again on re-anchoring; kelp was everywhere. Retrieving the anchor, the shear pin on the anchor winch sheared while we still had thirty metres of twelve millimetre chain out. By then it was blowing very hard, with *Quicksilver* uncomfortably heeled over, broadside on to the blasts. In rapidly failing light we eventually managed to retrieve the chain and anchor, using a line onto an electric sheet winch. We were a good mile or so offshore by then - thankfully the wind was offshore. In darkness and with about sixty square feet of foresail, we shot off at seven knots or more in the direction of Santa Barbara. Of course it all moderated within two hours or so, and we ended up motoring the last bit into Santa Barbara in the small hours, a tad knackered.

Santa Barbara is an elegant town, and we felt really hot for the first time since southern Japan. However, the absence of a social safety net hits you in the eye; there are significant numbers of homeless and mentally ill people wandering the clean streets, begging outside expensive shops.

We spent a couple of days exploring the Channel Islands, where, though close to many mainland marinas, we found quiet and often beautiful anchorages, at least during the week, before heading, again under power, to Marina del Rey west of Los Angeles. There we met up with Francis Hawkings (RCC) and Carla, his wife, who had heroically received large

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numbers of parcels on our behalf from Amazon to allow us to restore *Quicksilver's* topsides once we were hauled out in a few days' time in



Diablo Cove, Santa Cruz

Mexico. A brilliant meal in a vegan restaurant seemed a fitting taste of life in LA.

It was mainly a sail down to Newport Beach, a beautifully protected nook, with hordes of single storey, shore-side residences, each with its own dock. In 1954, the Pyes in *Moonraker* beat up to the Yacht Club, 'our favourite club in all our travels, where we received a warm welcome'. Our experience was otherwise, but spirits were restored in Dana Point, a few miles south, where they could not have been friendlier.

A nine-hour motor brought us to Mission Bay, a well-protected anchorage just north of San Diego. From there we could explore the city and its environs. San Diego has good public transport, and we bussed up to La Jolla beach, down to Coronado del Mar Hotel, also on a beautiful beach, and around the city. It is an impressive natural harbour, but badly affected by two airports too close to the city centre. The military one is even noisier than the civil one, of which we became aware when we moved into the anchorage next to the Yacht Club. This is described by some of its members as a drinking Club with a sailing problem. We were well looked after, although pleasant Happy Hours on the Club's deck can be rudely punctuated by jet roar.

We left for Ensenada, Mexico, a month after leaving San Francisco, and spent ten days on the hard there, having *Quicksilver's* keel repaired, following an encounter with a rock in Alaska in July. We were impressed not just by the quality and price of the work, but by the friendliness of all the yard staff. The US Presidential Election result was announced while we were there. Being English became a particular advantage.

The Baja peninsula is dry, relatively empty, and poor. It does, though, have one or two good harbours, and several partially sheltered bays. Our first was San Quintin, to which current and motor helped us more than wind. At last we had a cracking sail with twin headsails down to the San Benitos Islands, another 130nm south. We got to Canal Peck in the approach just as a small moon rose enough to show us the way in rather more accurately than CMap did. We anchored off the village in the small

hours of 22 November. By Thanksgiving we were in Tortuga Bay. Together with one or two other cruisers, we celebrated with a basic meal, but served with some verve at Maria's, a beach restaurant, run by three Marias.

The passage to San Juanico was on occasion boisterous. The spinnaker had only been up a few hours when the racking and seizing around the halyard cringle, replaced by Mike only a few months earlier, found it all too much, and we had to retrieve the sail from the water, fortunately without damage, and just before dark. Slabs and rolls followed, and it was a quick 165nm trip to what was a well-protected bay. Scores of fishing boats were already there, sheltering from the blustery, and by then wet weather.

Bahia Santa Maria, another 95nm south, is only a degree north of the tropics, but after a fast run down there, we still felt cool. It is a pretty bay. Two boats first met in Japan, but not seen since Alaska last year were there. Together with new fellow sailors we all had much fun, both there and in Magdalena Bay, twenty miles on. Puerto Magdalena was as tatty and impoverished a settlement as any we had seen on this coast, full of old car wrecks and refuse, but it afforded a good anchorage. The contrast with Cabo San Lucas, our next stop 165nm south at the tip of the peninsula, could not have been more stark. As we hurtled closer with a following



Baja coast

wind, we were soon surrounded by fleets of little motor boats, out for a day's fishing. Less attractive was the rash of holiday apartments stacked on the cliffs. As we rounded the Cape itself into the resort, we were treated to mass tourism on a grand scale, and at considerable volume. The loud speakers on the tripper boats seemed to compete. We anchored off the beach, just before the crescendo of 'sunset cruises' built up, most of them steaming rather close to us. Next morning we declined to pick up fuel on discovering there would be a surcharge of \$70 just to tie alongside the fuel pontoon, a practice that seems to be increasingly in vogue, at least

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in Mexico. Instead we set off for Los Frailes, a lovely open bay at the entrance to the Sea of Cortez, with a beach, cliffs and mountains behind. Just before sunset, at exactly the same time on both the evenings we were there, and for five minutes or so, dozens of mobula rays jumped several feet out of the water.

We enjoyed a wonderfully fast, broad reach across the south end of the Sea of Cortez. We were sorry not to explore it, as we were keen to find a place further south to leave *Quicksilver* for a month over Christmas. We made our landfall on the Mexican mainland at Mazatlan. The Club Nautico is essentially now closed, except for wifi and a shower. However, the walk into the old town is rewarding, and a lunch in its heart, the Plazuela Machado, is even more so.

Isla Isabela, 90 miles south, is called the Galapagos of Mexico. The southern anchorage is a good place to stop in the fine conditions we were



Croc on a rock - La Tovarà

by then enjoying. The island is home to hundreds of thousands of frigate birds, blue and brown footed boobies, and some sizeable green iguanas. The water was at last warm enough for snorkelling to be a pleasure, and despite little coral, there were plenty of fish.

Forty-five miles further on lies the beautiful, if shallow, Matanchen Bay, which we had to ourselves, and from where you can take a boat ride through mangroves up to La Tovarà springs to see extraordinary wildlife. From there it is a short hop down to Bahía de Banderas, well provided with marinas, visited by large numbers of yachts and people from further north, which afforded us a convenient place to leave *Quicksilver* for a

Christmas flight home.

We returned in late January to head for a rendezvous with our son, Tom, and his fiancée in six weeks' time in southern Costa Rica, 1,700 miles away. With much motoring we reached Bahia Tenacatita, a large bay, frequented by a multitude of US and Canadian boats. Nearby La Manzanilla, an attractive little town,



seemed almost overwhelmed by expats, many apparently having taken up permanent station. The brilliant blue skies and lovely climate explained why. On 4 February we found a pleasant little resort, Cuastecomates, used mainly by Mexicans, most of it specially designed for those with a disability: the pavements for example have runnelled patterns to help blind people feel their way with a stick and provide smooth travel for balloon-tyred wheelchairs, suited also for travel on the beach.

None of this bit of coast bowled us over, though, especially given the lack of wind. After one or two uncomfortable night stops in open bays, we made it, still under power, to Zihuatanejo, where a large fleet of US and Canadian boats had gathered for the annual 'Sailfest'. This raises thousands of dollars to build and improve the local schools, mainly by giving the large number of shore-based North American tourists trips around the rather pretty bay. It is a noble cause, and we joined in, offering *Quicksilver* as a cruise ship. The town of Zihuatanejo is attractive, and boasts some excellent restaurants and great music. Friendly as our fellow cruisers were, by 16 February we were ready to say good bye to 'gringoland', and headed south. Acapulco has developed a dreadful reputation for violence, so we made the 350nm trip down to Huatulco in one hop, mostly at last under sail. Disappointingly tourism seemed just as intense as further north.

Ahead lay the Gulf of Tehuantepec, noted for its classic mountain-gap winds, originating on the Caribbean side, and where *Moonraker* took a real

beating in 1954 in a F10 ('the strain on the rudder - the helm was lashed down - was severe'). The weather forecast looked favourable, so we needed little encouragement to move on, but Murphy stuck his oar in: just as we approached the fuel dock, the throttle cable snapped. To our relief, a new one of the right length was quickly procured, and we were delayed only a few hours. The Gulf is 230nm across, and the advice is to sail close inshore all the way round, and even closer should it start to blow, but we reckoned that the weather was stable enough to risk taking the shortest route. We got away with it, tying up in Chiapas Marina less than two days later, and having been able to sail most of the way.

Having avoided a *Tehuantepecer*, we now faced *Papagayo* territory. It also is a 'jet' wind, caused by trade winds accelerating through a gap in the Cordillera mountains near Lake Nicaragua. All was calm off Guatemala for the first two days of the 450 mile passage to Costa Rica. However, as we approached the Fonseca Gulf, we were well reefed down and hard on the wind till past its entrance, which gives access to the other three of the four countries we did not stop at: Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. A little further south the Papagayo returned and pushed us determinedly off the coast into a stopping, uncomfortable sea. We managed to claw our way close in again, and after a calm spell, found we could lay Bahia Santa Elena at the top of Costa Rica, but in an increasing and much gustier wind. We had little sail up by the time we stormed into the bay on a close reach, just under four days after leaving Mexico. It is a huge, uninhabited, but well protected bay, apart from the Papagayo bullets. They had us dancing nicely around our anchor. We stayed a day, despite the wind, to do some jobs and to rest, foolishly encouraged by a beautifully calm period for an hour or so on our first evening there. The forecast was for several more days of Papagayo, so on 3 March we gritted our teeth and shot with tiny headsail down to Cabo Elena. Then hard on the wind, with three slabs in the main and even less headsail, we raced along at over six knots with a full, fortunately offshore, gale across the deck. We spent the night in peace in Bahia Guacamaya, but next day as soon as we reached Tamarindo Bay, it was clear that the Papagayo was back in full swing. Again under a tiny rig, but this time on a broad reach, *Quicksilver* seemed entirely unfazed by the churning white spume and spindrift surrounding us. Despite a contrary two knot current, at noon the log reads 'Goodbye Papagayo', and we motored the very last bit to Bahia Carillas, another 55nm on our way. After an overnight stop in Bahia Ballena, and two days of making as much use of the feeble land and sea breezes as we could, we got to Quepos. However, we were yet to land on Costa Rican soil, let alone to clear into the country. To do so in Quepos, though a port of entry, would have cost, it turned out, \$500 just for an agent to arrange a visit from customs from another port. So we pushed on to Bahia Drake, a lovely open bay on the

edge of the Parque Nacional Corcovado, an area of old-growth, tropical rain forest. Our excitement was tempered next morning by the arrival of a cruise ship, so we sailed round the Osa Peninsula into the Golfo Dulce up to El Golfito, an old banana port, enjoying a modest tourism-based renaissance. Clearing in could not have been simpler. All the necessary papers were prepared and stapled together for the three mandatory offices by the immigration officer, and the whole process took less than an hour, and cost not a penny.

Tom and his partner Steph joined us in Puerto Jimenez a few days later for a windless exploration of the northern Golfo Dulce in a fruitless search for coral and good snorkelling. Amongst some impressive thunderstorms, for which the area is well known, the highlight was probably Casa Orcaqueida, a remarkable private botanical garden by the beach, created by an American couple over many years, and much visited by botanists from all over the world. We were surrounded by scarlet macaws and other unfamiliar bird life. After a four-day car trip inland, we were forced to celebrate Hilde's birthday on board, surrounded by loud thunder, spectacular lightening and battered by torrential rain.

On our own again, we decided to make it to the Panama Canal in one go, expecting it to be another windless passage, which indeed it was. The only breeze was as predicted off Punta Mala at the entrance to the Gulf of Panama, another spot noted for its jet winds, so we were relatively lucky not to have a fierce headwind on top of a strong contrary current. We had timed our Canal transit for April both to allow the risk of 'Northers' to diminish on the Caribbean side, and to give us time to get out of the hurricane zone without missing out entirely on stops in the Caribbean. The wait for a transit had been reported as just four days, but when we got our allocated date, it was initially for four weeks later - the very end of April. In the event we had to wait two weeks, which was bad enough. Worse still, barnacles accumulate rapidly in La Playita, the anchorage on the Pacific side, which required a major attack on the hull in rather dirty water.

After a rapid single-day transit and a short stop in Shelter Bay on the Caribbean side, it looked as if we might have a slant to Grand Cayman Island, 600nm away. The north-east trades are indeed supposed to veer and moderate by late April. We had wanted to stop in Providencia, off the coast of Nicaragua, but it was well to leeward of the rhumb line. Also Providencia now charges over \$100 a head for entry, which seemed a lot for a four-day stay, and worse, there had been some nasty instances of violent piracy off the Gorda Bank, to which we therefore wanted to give a good berth. We were half-way after 48 hours, having hardly had to touch a sheet, but then it clouded over and rained tropically for half a night. The breeze withered, and never recovered, so we had the motor on for most of

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the rest of the passage.

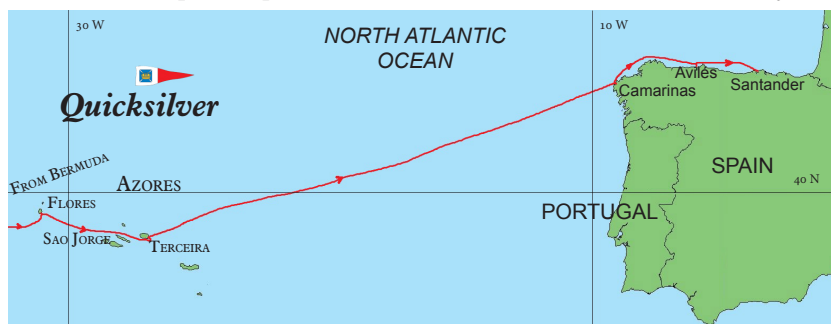
Georgetown, Grand Cayman's capital, provides free moorings off the town, some of them directly over gardens of very healthy coral, with good snorkelling. Ashore it is a curate's egg. High-end tourism has become established on account of a long and spectacularly white-sand beach. The people are very friendly, however, some awful housing sprawls around the edge of town. On this tiny island with 60,000 population, there is gridlocked, mainly SUV, traffic every rush hour. Obesity is widespread, so much so that many of the kids seemed unable to perform their routines during a kids' Carnival parade. The wind and swell went round to the southwest, making our mooring very uncomfortable, so we took *Quicksilver* up into North Sound near high water, and anchored in the peace of Governor's Creek, surrounded by mansions, while we waited for a new part for our wind generator to arrive. (It still does not work, even with the new part.)

We had heard good reports of the south coast of Cuba, our next destination, and left in heavy rain on 1 May for Cienfuegos. For most of this trip we could sail, indeed we even had to put some rolls in the genoa for a while, but as we approached the coast, the wind died. Marina berths at Cienfuegos are painted blue. So now are our fenders. After Georgetown, this Cuban city was a delight - little traffic, a quiet central square, with local artists' studios occupying the fine colonial buildings forming it, and of course great music. The old Spanish town of Trinidad is easy to visit from there, though we found it very overrun by tourists.

We spent the next few days exploring the cays west of Cienfuegos, expecting protected anchorages behind reefs and lots of healthy coral. We found little of either. However, the aquamarines, azures, *eau de nils*, and turquoises of the sea were magnificent. The forecast suggested a few days of light winds before a long period of strong or very strong trade winds. So, a little disappointed, we made a dash for the west end of Cuba, and cleared out of the country at Morros, just round Cape San Antonio. Once out of the well-documented counter-current, we squirted down the Florida Straits, courtesy more of the Gulf Stream than of any decent breeze. Two and a half days later we anchored just before first light off the beach in Bimini, the most accessible of the Bahamas for those heading up the Straits. We went into the harbour later that morning just as the trades were picking up. After shelling out \$300 to enter the country, irrespective of length of stay, we found a nook in which to anchor in just enough water, but on a lee-shore. The island was a favourite of Ernest Hemingway in the thirties. Apart from a huge new development at the north end, the island has a pleasantly dilapidated feel about it. But it is expensive, and many of the locals were so obese they seemed barely able to walk. As the trades howled more strongly, so our lee-shore anchorage became less relaxing,

so on 18 May we ran down to nearby, uninhabited Gun Cay under a tiny staysail. We found much less shelter there than we had hoped, snorkelling or landing were out of the question, and the wind veered, making the anchorage untenable. So we returned to our initial anchorage off the beach in Bimini for a peaceful night.

By 20 May the trades looked more benign, and we set off for Bermuda, over 900nm away. Mostly this was a blessed passage. We were half-way after three days, with log entries such as 'calm sea, close reaching at over 6kts - bliss'. Then a front loomed, at least on the Grib files, and for the next two days it slowly became colder, greyer, and windier. Good progress was kept up. Not till 26 May though, as we approached the Challenger Bank, was it clear that the front had properly arrived, and we shot along the south coast of Bermuda in a developing gale. It was blowing hard by the time we tied up at the St. George's Customs dock, and the wind blew all our ship's and personal documents into the drink, fortunately in a



semi-sealed plastic wallet just as we were hopping ashore. A quick dip was required. The officials could not have been more understanding, when presented with sodden documents.

As well as a Tall Ships gathering in St George's, and the early races of the America's Cup, we were delighted to meet up with cruising friends from Panama, and to spy our first RCC burgee since Tasmania: *Suilven* arrived from New York, but unfortunately only the night before we left for the Azores.

The passage to the Azores was mixed. We made good progress on the first two days. The wind then fell very light, and a persisting contrary current made for modest noon-to-noon runs. Given the wildness of the weather further north in the Atlantic being experienced by the OSTAR competitors, we did not complain. We kept below 35°N to avoid the worst of a well forecast front. However, on 7 June we had to reduce sail throughout the day and it was clear we were in for a lively night. By midnight, and with only about a hundred square feet up, we were being blown rather quickly in the right direction by a full gale, and in a chaotic sea. Our noon-to-

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noon run on 8 June suggested a new sort of rate - two miles, per square foot of sail, per 24 hours. As the centre passed, sail changes were frequent, and progress slow in a lumpy uncomfortable sea, and by evening we were hard on the wind with three slabs in the main, unable to lay our course. The glass started to rise on 9 June, and the wind all but disappeared. We barely saw the sun for the next few days, and if it had not been for the spinnaker, the foul two knot current would have reduced our runs to less than 100 miles. 13 June brought a brief respite: 'Cloudless and beautiful. 11 days out and still we eat like lords,' the log reads - particularly remarkable since our refrigeration had packed up in Bermuda. Visibility deteriorated as rain arrived on 14 June. We were barely three miles off before Flores emerged out of the gloom. How different a landfall it would have been without GPS.

We tied up in the marina at Lajes, which, when Mike first visited in 1982, was just an open bay. In those days the island population of 11,500 was essentially self-sufficient.



Brass band, Velas, with Pico behind

Supplies had to be taken ashore from the occasional freighter, anchored off Santa Cruz, the main town, by small lighters, and then manhandled up the jetty. Now the population of only 4,000 is served by a port at Lajes, where hundreds of containers are delivered every month. Presumably everybody shops online.

After five damp days, we had an uncomfortable broad reach in a large north-westerly swell to Velas, Sao Jorge. There the weather improved. We toured the island with fellow cruisers, enjoyed a couple of fiestas, bought cheeses, ferried over to Horta, and met up again with *Suilven*. In Angra do Heroismo, Terceira, to which we had a great spinnaker run on 27 June, the ten-day, San Juanino fiesta was underway, and the streets were full of parades and music. We waited for a few days in Praia da Vitoria for a slant to Spain. We explored the island and watched a typical village *touradas à corda* (bull fighting on a rope).

For the first five days of the 850nm passage to Galicia we scarcely saw a white foal, let alone a white horse. Light head winds predominated. Hilde had tripped over hard on the pontoon in Angra, and was still in pain with

bruises and cracked ribs from a previous fall at sea, and Mike was afflicted with bad shoulder pain which had dogged him most of this last year. So this respite from temperamental weather suited us both just fine.

We anchored off the marina in Camarinas seven and a half days out on 19 July, having crossed *Quicksilver's* 2010 track. Camariñas, like much of coastal Galicia, has smartened up over the years. Time was when plainly dressed old ladies could be seen making exquisite fine lace sitting on a chair in the street. Now the lace is largely produced out of sight and sold



*Touradas à corda*

in expensive boutiques. The town is lively, a few old, wooden grain-barns supported by stone mushrooms remain, restaurants abound, and many are excellent.

We savoured our last month on board, enjoying many old haunts along the coast, and finding one or two new ones. In the past we had always steered clear of Avilés, as we believed it to be an industrial city in an industrial zone. Indeed it is, sporting no less than four huge blast-furnaces. Following an extensive and expensive programme of urban renewal, Avilés has become a fascinating place, with lovely architecture, spanning many centuries, and full of *chutzpah*, exemplified by the Niemeyer Centre inspired by the *De Stijl* movement of the 1920s. The 60-strong Mini-transat fleet came in from a race from Les Sables d'Olonnes, so the town marina was lively. A twenty-minute train ride took us to the city of Oviedo, also of huge historical importance. Several days later, we took another train to Guernica from Bermeo, in the Basque country much further east. We happened to be there on San Roca's Day when most of the citizens of

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Guernica eat a communal lunch off long tables in the streets to celebrate the return to friendship among neighbours and to pray for good health to the Saint who protected the town from the plague.

We enjoyed rediscovering how riddled the north coast of Spain is with different routes leading to Santiago de Compostela, making up the many tributaries to the famous *camino* for the pilgrimage to the shrine of St James. In pre-Christian times it was the shrine to Bridget, goddess of the sea

and hence the scallop shell has become the iconic symbol of the pilgrim. Many fabulous late Romanesque and early Gothic cathedrals and chapels line the route, of which the Santa Catalina Hermitage near Bermeo is an early example.

Exploring the north coast of Spain at leisure, immersing ourselves in culture ancient and modern, from cathedral and castle mount to the Niemeyer Centre in Avilés and the Guggenheim centre in Bilbao, helped to banish any sense that this last year was one long delivery trip rather than a fitting coda to an exciting seven years. Indeed when *Quicksilver* was hauled out in Santander on 23 August, we had been well reminded what a special place Europe is, and how lucky we are to have such a cruising ground so accessible. We are delighted to be back.



Santa Catalina Hermitage, near Bermeo