

# Windsurf Cruising

James Grogono

## *Awarded the Dulcibella Prize*

The nearest land was four miles away. I was in the middle of St Brides Bay, West Wales, sitting on a windsurfer and enjoying the sensation. Four miles behind lay Solva, my departure point, and the same distance ahead lay St Brides Haven, where the car was waiting. The Pembroke coastline was four miles to leeward. All these landmarks were hazy at this range. There was no other craft of any sort out in the Bay.

A friend had asked me to lunch at his cottage in Solva. I was on holiday with my family in Dale, the other side of the Bay. I spent that morning windsurfing round the bay. The wind was too light to move the board well. My friend had me in his sights with a telescope. I was struggling towards the end, and he sailed out to escort me in.

During lunch I could see that the wind was increasing, and with it my excitement. I declined alcohol, and also an offer to be taken home by car with the equipment on the roof. I put the board back in the water, and sailed out through the high-sided harbour entrance. I had a couple of false starts, when gusts of wind tweaked the rig out of my hands. This trivial mistake had later repercussions.

Although the wind was up, W4-5, with two to three-foot waves and occasional white horses, the windsurfing conditions were not difficult. I had a rigid, six-square-metre sail, light in the hand, and a joy to use. The board was a Mistral 'Equipe', a long board, with ample buoyancy to support my weight. I could thus pull the rig up from the water, with no need to resort to a 'water start'. When using a modern short board, otherwise known as a 'sinker', a water start is the only option. The sailor swims out along the mast and hoists the rig into the wind. The force of the wind then lifts him onto the board. My attempts at this manoeuvre mostly end in failure, with lungs full of water. More importantly, my long board had ample buoyancy to act as a life raft in the unlikely event of gear failure. If need be, I could jettison or roll up the rig and drift or paddle downwind four miles to the shore of St. Bride's Bay. This explains my feeling of confidence.

I pulled up the rig, hooked on, and was away. The sensation is similar to skiing. As speed builds up the board skims across the surface. Steering is instant and responsive, achieved by tilting the board with the feet.

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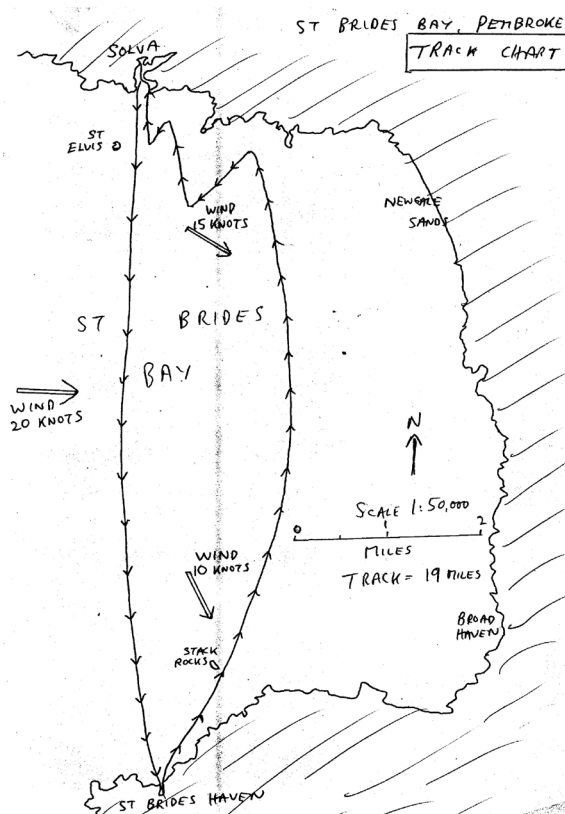
Footstraps lock your feet to the board and a slight tilt to windward causes the edge of the board to bite into the water. The board luffs towards the wind. A slight tilt to leeward has the opposite effect. One can swoop amongst the waves, picking the best track to avoid 'moguls'. One soon



learns to sail 'downhill' all the time. If there is a regular wave pattern, one can often catch the front of a wave and hold it, like a wave surfer. The experience is addictive and exhilarating, and not very tiring, as most of the force of the wind is taken on the harness line, as in the photo above.

The first half of the journey passed all too quickly, without untoward incident. I put the rig down in the middle of the bay, not to rest, but to be sure I felt happy so far from land. The second half was a repeat of the first. I arrived at St Bride's Haven just 30 minutes after leaving leaving Solva, discounting the pause in the middle. The average speed for the eight mile crossing was thus 16kts, confirming the impression of a speedy passage. Later that day I was still on a high, and phoned my friend in Solva to thank him for lunch. I came down to earth on learning that my false starts in the harbour entrance had been misinterpreted by an onlooker. The Coastguard had been called out for a 'sailing dinghy repeatedly capsizing'. While I had been busy loading my board onto the car eight miles away a helicopter had arrived to look for me off Solva. I phoned and apologised to the Coastguard, and agreed to tell them of my intentions another time, although I would not expect help when on such a venture.

Another memorable windsurf cruise was a crossing of Francis Drake's Channel in 1978. This was early days for windsurfing, and also for bareboat charter. A charter yacht thus described was anything but 'bare', being so fully equipped that the crew could step on board and cast off. All



food and drink was included if ordered in advance. The word 'bareboat' applied to the lack of paid crew, a real advantage in our family, in which there was a danger of having too many chiefs and not enough injuns.

I put the idea of yacht charter in the Caribbean to my family. My parents and all their progeny were easily persuaded. My two brothers, with wives, and seven children between us made up a party of 14. We chartered three yachts out of Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. There were four skippers for three

boats. The spare slot allowed me to investigate windsurfer charter, with the idea of windsurfing from island to island ahead of our flotilla. This plan would allow me to be picked up if I came unstuck.

Our Christmas cruise in the BVI was a great success. The distances between anchorages were short, often with a lunch stop in one island, and a night anchorage in another. The two windsurfers were used many times when at anchor. I took children's rigs on the plane out, and windsurfing involved all party members between the age of three and seventy. My late wife, Catherine, was not known for her love of water, but even she was found sitting on a board with her feet in the water. She had found the best way of keeping cool in the midday sun.

There was no opportunity for windsurf passage-making until near the end, when our flotilla was due to cross Sir Francis Drake's Channel. The name might conjure up a rock-strewn, gale-swept passage near Cape Horn, but the truth is otherwise. The Channel lies protected by islands on all sides, and is only five miles wide. We had already crossed it several times in our cruise, threading our way through the Islands. This was before the

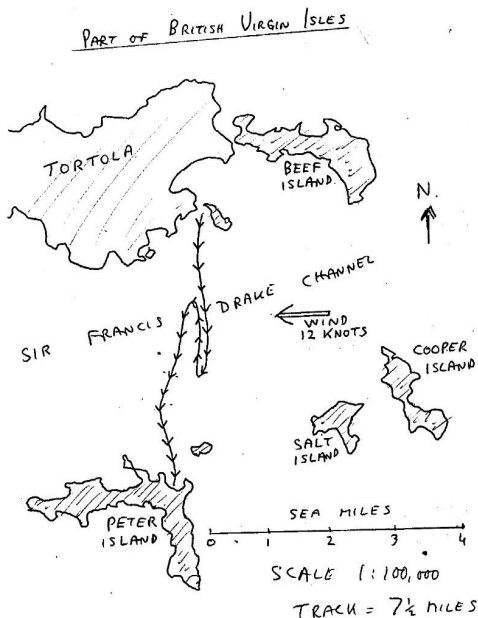
days of windsurfing with footstraps or harnesses (as in the photo left), but the journey was easily finished in an hour, in flat water, wind E2-3. I made



a short back track half-way over, to keep in touch with the supporting flotilla.

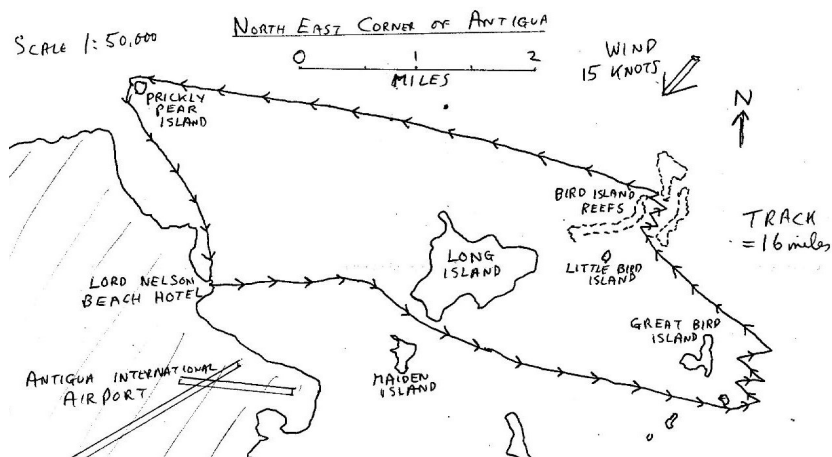
Another island-hopping cruise was also inspired by a magazine article. This described the delights of windsurfing off the north-east corner of Antigua. I persuaded my wife that we needed a winter break, and off we set. The hotel was right at the water's edge, the windsurfing conditions and equipment excellent, and after a short practice outing in front of the hotel I set off to sea.

I had bragged that I might circumnavigate Antigua, but the distance is far beyond a day sail. Nonetheless I set off eastwards from the beach, observed by wife and fellow guests. I then toured nearby islands, having an adventurous time with reefs, and encountering a large sea turtle well offshore. I could not imagine a creature less suited to the open sea, but I had an impression from the look in his eye that the feeling was reciprocated. Some time later I sailed across our bay well out to sea, not realising that I could not be seen from our hotel. I finally arrived at Prickly Pear Island, some two miles west, and briefly joined a BBQ there. I then sailed back to our hotel, arriving in from the WEST, having set off three hours before to go EAST. The Hotel guests assumed that I had achieved a speedy circumnavigation of Antigua. I quietly



disillusioned my wife, but may have forgotten to tell the other guests.

The Isles of Scilly also form a perfect archipelago. The advantage of any group of islands is that one can explore the middle islands, and those



upwind of the middle, while always having a refuge to leeward if things go wrong.

I knew little about the Scillies until our neighbours returned from a short holiday there. They spread out their maps, and told us of the beauty of the islands, and the fun they had walking and travelling from island to island in small open launches. My mind wandered, and I fear that I became inattentive; they were describing the most perfect windsurf cruising ground.

Within a few weeks we were booked into a hotel on St Marys, and I discovered that the *Scillonian*, the daily ferry from Penzance, would take my windsurfing kit as baggage. I then had a lucky break. In checking with the hotel that there was somewhere to stow my kit they put me onto their cook. He was a windsurfer, and he offered to charter his board for a token fee. There was a risk that I would not find it to my liking, but the advantage of travelling light outweighed this.

It was early June, and the Islands were enchanting. We explored St Marys on foot and by bike, and marvelled at the flowers and the beauty of the coastline. For two days there was no wind, but a NW2-3 then arrived, and we set off for Tresco, my wife on the open ferry, and myself somewhat wobbly on an unfamiliar windsurfer. I managed to sail close past the ferry half-way across, and received enthusiastic waves from all on board. Of course I was only waving at one person, and nearly fell off in the attempt.

Tresco was magical, the botanical gardens amazing and lunch excellent, but the wind was up, NW4. We skipped coffee and I returned to the windsurfer, Catherine to the ferry. I 'bagged' three islands in the next

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hour or so, mostly by landing on the beach, getting my breath back, and setting off again. The Scillies deserve a visit on their own merits, and are wonderfully unspoiled. A day's windsurfing while there was icing on the cake.

Windsurf cruising requires similar planning and safety standards to more conventional cruising. The guidelines are as follows.

Know your equipment intimately, and replace worn items early, especially the universal joint at the mast foot. Study weather reports, charts and tides just as for any other passage planning. Sail well within your ability in the given

conditions. With the exception of the helicopter episode above, the trips described, and a number of lesser ones, have not involved falling off, unless intended as a means of cooling down. Tell the Coastguard your plans, and tell them you have arrived. Always keep upwind of a refuge, against the unlikely event of gear failure, or sailor failure.

This is truly an opportunistic activity, to be indulged at short notice when conditions are good. In addition to the long trips described I have windsurfed at sea many times, but without fulfilling the definition of 'Cruising' – starting from A and proceeding to B and C before returning to A. Make provisional plans, and be ready to go. Carry a windsurfer as deck cargo when cruising in a more orthodox manner. At no time have I had problems at sea, wondering if I would get back without assistance. If in doubt, don't go.

