

Lanzarote or Bust

Jason Lawrence

It had been an exciting year on board *Slamat*. Having completed the Round Britain and Ireland passage in late July I felt 'well sailed' and settled down to some local fun with the family and friends. Days spent swimming and using *Slamat* as a platform were fun, but as the evenings started to draw in I was feeling like another sail.

In mid-October I scrubbed the summer weed from the hull thinking about warmer climes. I had no real plan, but felt a call to head south. I remember leaving Cowes on a past occasion in late September, catching the first of the cool north-easterlies, heading across Biscay and on to adventures further south. I started thinking about *Slamat* sitting in Cowes all winter: what a waste of time and tool.

Biscay was the problem. With the shortening days opportunities to safely head south before the close of play were declining. Where would I go, Spain? I knew of good, but not warm, places to keep *Slamat* in the rias .

The Canaries are beautiful, with warm and rewarding cruising. Wouldn't that be fun. I knew people in Lanzarote who could help find a temporary home for *Slamat*: a bridge we could cross later. Without any real plan or commitment I started looking at the weather. With Lanzarote as a destination it looked like four weather patterns would need to interact over a 14-day passage: the Channel, Biscay, Spain and Portugal and the last 600 miles to Lanzarote. Once through Biscay the pressure would be off. If things turned sour I could always pull in.

By late October Biscay was opening up. A mid-Atlantic high pressure system was pushing north, Spain and Portugal looked good and further south was settled. If I could get to Ushant then there was a chance. I started to think about getting *Slamat* ready. I had the spray hood re-stitched and installed a third battery to double the capacity of the house bank.

By 1 November the weather looked even better. I had a narrow gate to get to Ushant before the next front came up Channel. If I was serious I could do



Author and skipper

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it, get into a settled Biscay and I was off. I would need to discuss this with my wife! With the attractions of Christmas cruising in the Canaries, Amanda warmed to the plan and started cooking meals to freeze. I prepared *Slamat*, stowing food, fuel and water whilst attending to small jobs.

With the weather confirming its intentions, it looked like departure after

the front on Tuesday 7 November. I would then have a 60-hour gate to get deep into Biscay before strong weather affected the whole Channel and northern France. I would be on the edge of it in fresh NW winds, but with stable conditions to Finisterre and beyond. It was extraordinary that the four weather systems were in alignment. We all knew that I had some challenging sailing ahead. I took the boys to school and



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with farewells said, Amanda dropped me down at the river to start another adventure.

At 1530 I started the engine, dropped the mooring and motored down river in the rain and wind. The wind had yet to clock, so with three reefs in I motor-sailed down Solent through a lumpy Hurst and out into the Channel. The wind eased a little and the barometer was rising; we were off on starboard tack.

The 20-year-old pressure cooker was on its last legs, but I managed to get it settled with chorizo and bean stew for dinner. Thank you Amanda. Sven, the wind vane, needed adjustment. The control lines finally



Autopilot opened up

chafed through, so I installed their replacement whilst using the autopilot. In the heavy rain I noted the autopilot was malfunctioning and would not switch to standby. This was more significant.

With Sven back in control I disassembled the unit to find plenty of water inside. The rain must have penetrated the housing. I have a new autopilot on my wish list, but was hoping the current unit would see me through. Starting the Webasto heater I placed the circuitry in the hot air to slowly cook, drying it out. On testing it wasn't perfect but could sort of hold a course 'under supervision'. Sven would be doing all the work, so I wasn't that worried.

After the summer months it seemed the wind was more erratic, prone to variations in pressure, causing constant sail adjustment. I spent the evening reefing and shaking reefs in the miserable conditions. Starting to see shipping I was altering course, adding to the work of sail trim. I was looking forward to some steadier wind and clearer seas. The Navtex picked up the forecast at 2200. Gales in Portland/Plymouth now ceased, but still ongoing in Biscay. This was the gate I was looking for. I should be able to get through Biscay at the end of these strong winds before the next expected front.

The wind, still strong, started to back slowly making for fast sailing. I managed a few cat naps in wet, cold oillies, but each mile west gave me hope of better conditions further south. There were plenty of fishing boats about, and with west-bound shipping it made for a busy night. By 0800 the third reef was out, and although still dodging shipping, it was a beautiful, sunny morning. I was glad to be through a cold, wet, sleepless night. The wind was still F5, but clocking, so just aft of abeam, roly but fast.

By lunch time the wind had eased, the last reef was out. I settled down for my first ship's lunch, sandwiches and soup, then looked again at the

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autopilot. It had definitely taken a good soaking. I spent another hour drying it in front of the Webasto, making repairs to the housing and fashioning a protective waterproof cover. With no noticeable improvement in performance I consigned it to restricted duties in emergency.

By 1530, with the sun low and a new chill in the air, we were some 65nm NE of Ushant. I could feel the oceanic swell for the first time. With dolphins about it felt that *Slamat* was moving into the Atlantic again. With easing winds we motor-sailed for a couple of hours through the east-bound shipping lane, boosting the battery charge and further testing the autopilot. However, it would not reliably hold course. With the motor off we sailed on SW.

There were still more fishing boats, but after midnight I managed a little sleep, but woke to find the sails flapping. The wind had eased and come round. Motor sailing again we pushed on towards Ushant. Hand steering, I rigged bungee and line to dampen the tiller. I could leave her for short periods and had a temporary solution for making coffee or chart work. 20nm north of L'Aberwrac'h, cell reception enabled a GRIB download. They showed NW 30-40kts in north Biscay on Saturday afternoon. I expected to be well south by then; all was looking good.

After a slow night it felt good to make Ushant at 0630 in light winds. Bearing away 20° the new waypoint was Finisterre. I called Amanda and had a good



Dolphins about

chat with the family. We were through the worst of the weather and, although exposed to an oncoming system, should be well south before its arrival.

We had perfect conditions in sun with NW4. Making good progress I was keen to put mileage under the keel. Setting our course east of the Finisterre to Ushant rhumb line, I hoped for little shipping. It had been extremely busy in the Channel with little sleep.

Later the atmosphere changed. It was overcast, a dark green Atlantic swell rolling through, a lone fulmar; it reminded me of my passages earlier in the

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year. There were dolphins around. I heard them while at the chart table. Within 5 minutes there were 40 or more dolphins on all sides, gliding in the swell, playing at the bows. The sky was darkening, but the barometer still rising at 1029.

We were making well into Biscay and I looked for a suitable point to transit the continental shelf into deep water. I always try a look for a point where the bottom shelves as gently as possible without mountains or canyons. Looking ahead it seemed we would start the drop off where most of the cables make the transit: not a bad spot. There was some north-bound shipping 10 miles to starboard so we were well off the rhumb line.

Dinner was easy thanks to Amanda: turkey and lentil stew. A good, hot, nourishing meal boosts morale and eases the work load. I would be cooking for myself later that week, but frozen meals for the first few days make all the difference. Night fell early and a deep darkness descended. With a waning moon it would be a few hours before any moonlight. By 2000 we had started the 40nm transit of the shelf where water depths go from 135m to 4,500m. Once over we could expect the swell to lengthen for a more comfortable ride. We were making 220° with 289nm to go to Finisterre.

With wind on the starboard stern quarter, full main and genoa, speed was 6kts. After the traffic of the Channel I was tired and ready for a good recharge. For the first time I pulled out the luxury of my sleeping bag and settled down to a much-needed sleep. We were well on the way; Lanzarote here we come.

I woke drowsily; something was not right. *Slamat* felt sluggish, quiet, with no bow wave. I went on deck. The moon was just up and in the little light I saw we were off course. I moved the tiller to port. There was no resistance; Sven must have released. No, that was not it.

With a torch I started to investigate. It didn't take long. Looking over the stern I saw that most of Sven was missing. This was a disaster! I looked again. No, there was definitely no servo blade or lower bearing. Shocked and not quite believing the situation, I tried to wake up to what had happened. I looked again somehow thinking I had made a mistake, that I had misread the situation. Slowly the reality dawned that we had a major issue which demanded a response. The situation had irreversibly changed and that I would need to make a balanced, calculated decision, accepting the consequences.

Disengaging Sven, I swung the helm round and hove-to. My mind started chasing for the cause but really I needed to make a decision. What was I going to do? I had two options. We had 250nm to Finisterre in easing conditions, but no helm relief. That would be over 48 hours, allowing 6-8 hours hove-to for sleep, and no redundancy if things turned bad. I could expect more wind round Finisterre and then I would need to pull in to make repairs or haul out. Either way it was looking like the rias and Lanzarote was lost.

Alternatively I could turn around. I was 100 miles SW of Brest with bad weather forecast soon. I would be close-hauled for 20 hours, and had maybe 36

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hours before the weather hit. I could make it. Twenty hours on the helm was physically possible and I would be in sheltered water before Saturday midday. Finisterre was attractive, but I would still have the problem and be further from home. Anything could happen in the next 48 hours. I had already lost the autopilot and now Sven. Brest would be hard work but achievable. Being a S&S, *Slamat* would be balanced upwind and I could get some relief from the helm. I would be closer to home, but would lose the weather patterns to take me South.

It was 0100 10 November, single-handed in Biscay with significant equipment failure. What was I thinking? Time to get out of dodge! With the wind NW5 I thought about what I would need over the next day. I reluctantly packed away my sleeping bag. Sleep would wait till we were safely tucked



Sven damage

up in Brest. Making a thermos of coffee I planned my course and sail configuration. I hoped I could balance the main and genoa for enough speed to average 5.5kts. That would get me into Brest by about 2200 Friday night.

With three reefs in the main and half genoa I came round onto 045° heading for Brest. What a difference from a few hours earlier: spray over the cockpit, lumpy and lively conditions, cold, wet and miserable. Settling down, I started to play with securing the helm. *Slamat* was balanced and with bungee and line I managed to dampen the wave effects on the helm. Watching the course I found I could get under the spray hood and just ease the helm by altering the traveller. This was much more sustainable; maybe I could have got to Lanzarote. With

an eye on the course, making small adjustments *Slamat* got into the groove and I started to think about what had happened.

Sven had served me well in the past and had covered some 3,500 miles this year with no problem. I guess she had picked up a long fishing line or some such thing. It was a fait accompli. I could fathom the reasons later. My next challenge was 100nm to windward before things got really bad. I just hoped for no other failures.

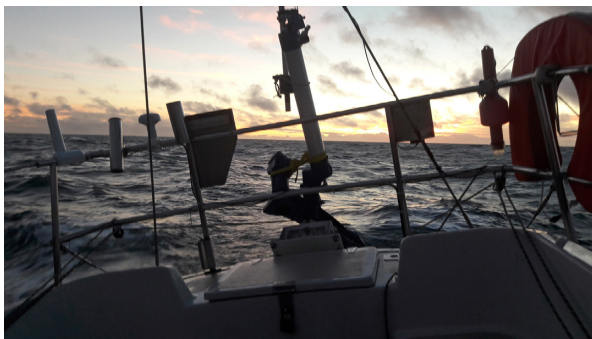
The wind was pulsing and showing powerful gusts, but *Slamat* was eating

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miles at 5.5kts and behaving well. It was wet and cold again, thoughts of tee shirts and shorts gone: AIS alarm, shipping about, back to work. With the dawn came a new energy. The sun came out and at 0800 I shook out the third reef. There were birds about, the faithful Fulmar, and more dolphins; I felt much less alone with a new hope. What a difference, the darkness of the night had lifted.

By midday the third reef was back in with worsening conditions. A few ships popped up and disappeared, the bird life changed with guillemots and kittywakes present. There were more dolphins of a different variety. Presently the coast came into view and pushing up towards the entrance I saw the Basse du Lis and then in the fading light the important Vandree cardinal, my turning point into sanctuary.

I had been thinking about where to hold up. I was tired and wanted to find an anchorage where I could stop and sleep. Camaret came to mind, remembering



Evening approaching Brest

a good anchorage from a previous passage. Turning the engine on in that deeping darkness of early night I slowly made my way into the Anse de Camaret. Things had changed in the years since my last visit and it looked like there was now a marina with a sheltered entrance. Slowly nosing around I couldn't be sure of the entrance. The floodlights ashore were blinding and the night dark. I couldn't clearly see where I was going. I would have to abort and anchor. Finding a clear area I dropped the hook and set with a good hold.

With anchor down, engine off at 1830, it was time for sleep. It had been a long 17 hours on the helm and I was exhausted. I downloaded the latest GRIB file to see the weather. Overlaying the data on the chart highlighted an immediate problem, one I had overlooked in tiredness. I had anchored on a lee shore with a gale forecast soon. Mustering strength, I knew what I had to do and pulled up the anchor, motoring out into the wind again to make my way down to the Moulin Blanc Marina and safety. I was sure I would have better luck with the entrance to that marina.

Setting up for a port-hand berth I made my way up the channel and into the marina. There was a port-hand berth open, bow to the west, so I secured alongside. It had been a long series of events, but being alongside in the marina felt good and I could sleep the sleep of the dead. We were well protected.

Waking mid-morning I was in no hurry to get up, but had plenty to do. From the cockpit I surveyed my surroundings. I had berthed alongside the

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commercial dock, so although fine for the night I could not get ashore. I would have to move *Slamat*. The wind had yet to pick up, so I pottered round to the next dock, ahead of the only other visitor. Tucked up again, I plugged in, allowing the use of the electric heater, kettle and toaster. After careful inspection of Sven, or what was left of him, I drew my conclusions.

Shortly after going to my bunk we must have somehow hooked onto something significant, possibly a fishing line, causing the shear bolt to break on the servo blade. This should have released the load and thereby *Slamat*. However, the shear bolt breaking allows the blade to swing up causing 6 inches at the top of the blade to protrude forward of the main fork arm. Unluckily, this must have caught something solid, possibly the buoy on the line, causing the pulling moment that pulled the whole servo blade, fork arm and bearing through the housing and away. That would explain the forward slant of the remaining parts and their mount. Of course there is a grub screw on the bearing housing that was still there. Had that worked loose? If I had checked it, would that have averted the situation or made it worse? Was this a failure of attention to detail?

I was reminded that success is ultimately reliant on the smallest piece of the jigsaw, a split pin, circlip, or in this case a grub screw. I guess I was just unlucky, which on reflection was fine. I had had a whole barrel load of luck earlier in the summer, sailing round the UK. Current status: alongside and warm with a not too shabby restaurant within sight. *Tant pis, C'est la vie!*

Picking up my email I noticed a comment from a member on Facebook recounting his experience around Rockall. I wrote mentioning I was sitting in the Moulin Blanc with damage to Sven. By chance he had the same unit sitting in his garage, would I like it? It's strange how things work out.

The wind picked up and it was looking pretty wild out. I spent the afternoon thinking about the best plan of action. I considered leaving *Slamat* in Brest. The travel options were pretty involved getting to the Isle of Wight from Brest, let alone back again with parts and equipment. It would only take me 20 additional hours to sail back.

Looking at the GRIB data I could expect NE3, backing NW then W4 building from Tuesday morning. A Monday morning tide through the Chanel du Four would put me in a favourable spot by lunchtime, possibly home by Tuesday evening. A light-wind sail would suit, with a bit of wind to push me up Channel round the headlands when needed. I couldn't have asked for better, the plan was set.

I tidied up on deck and noticed a young family on the boat behind. I went to speak with them and learned that he was a fisherman working out of Brest and she a bee-keeper on Ushant, spending the weekends together onboard. I was intrigued that there were bees kept on Ushant. I understood it was a wild and windswept island. Apparently they are a special breed of bee producing a high quality honey. I filed this for further investigation. It sounded like a

good excuse for a sail. On a more practical note they also knew the code for the showers.

Sunday was a quiet day all around. Speaking with Amanda I outlined my plans, if all went well I would be back Tuesday evening. Returning to *Slamat* after another good dinner, I removed the sail cover and stowed below ready for an early start. We slipped lines at 0530, and motored down the Rade de Brest. It wasn't until 0830 that we entered the Chanel Du Four, finally with a fair tide. With the wind still in the NE we carried on motor-sailing. Tacking on a backing wind we finally turned the engine off, making 060° on port tack.

With little shipping between Ushant and the Channel Islands I can usually get some sleep. Approaching the separation zones north of Guernsey and on to the Bill is always very busy with little opportunity for sleep. With light winds, motor-sailing up towards Guernsey I managed to use the autopilot to cat nap and build some sleep. By 0200 we were sailing again with the wind abeam on a beautiful night. Orion was still with us and by 0400 I had the reacher up. *Slamat* was sailing beautifully up Channel in the mild clear conditions. Dawn saw us entering the shipping lanes, so dropping the reacher, I came up onto the wind for speed and angle. After a cooked breakfast, always good for morale, at 1000 I popped up the reacher again.

We were going well, but as the wind increased so the balance on the helm became more difficult. With a balanced helm I could use the autopilot under supervision. Encouragingly it seemed to be getting more reliable through use. Dropping the reacher we lost about 1.5kts, but life was easier; as the wind increased we would get it back. There were birds about. I had seen gannets and fulmars, but here I saw a great skua, unusual to see this large, brown sea bird as far south. I had last seen them approaching Fair Isle.

With the wind now a good F5 I poled out, goose-winged, a great stable rig for short-handed sailing. With one reef in and full genoa we were on course, balanced and fast. With the tide turned fair, it looked like we would make Cowes with wind and tide astern.

Dusk saw the Needles light ahead and at 1800 we were sliding through Hurst. I had spoken with Amanda and planned to berth in East Cowes Marina. This would be the last sail of the season so *Slamat* needed a good wash down and decommissioning for the winter. It also meant that I would be in my own bed tonight, not waiting for the water taxi in the morning.

Back in the shelter of the Solent I dropped the main, and with genoa pulling well, spent some time packing *Slamat* away. Having called Amanda from Egypt point, we made up the Medina and slowly came alongside, turning the engine off at 2000 14 November, Amanda waiting to take the lines.

We had been away a week, sailed some 683 miles and ended up where we started. All thoughts of Lanzarote, warm winds and clear skies had been left in Biscay, along with half a wind vane! Perhaps next year.