

Island hopping home

From the Gironne to Plymouth

Hamish Southby-Tailyour

Awarded the Claymore Cup and Dulcibella Prize



Hamish Southby-Tailyour

number of different plans just to get to *Equinox*, let alone to get her home, were legion and now lost in the thicket of stress that was April to July 2021. The numerous changes, checks etc. are politely summarised as 'you could not make this up'. Suffice to say that it was not easy, and as a result only Jacob (my 15 year old son) and I had made the journey, sadly leaving my wife Clara, daughter Heather and our dog Tresco in England. But then some luck ...

A great friend had coincidentally, and for us fortuitously, planned to visit his home in Greece and being on a flexible schedule rejigged his arrangements to sail with us on the

Having left *Equinox* ashore in Mediterranean France after a wonderful, fun fuelled, memory making sabbatical in 2019 (RC60) we had a plan to return to her in the spring of 2020 to start a phased cruise home but obviously all plans were now challenged by Brexit and voided by Covid.

So we had *Equinox* transported by road to Port Bloc at the southern entrance to the Gironne river and it was there, after just under two years apart, we planned to be reunited. The



Island hopping home



Equinox in Port Bloc. A lot still to do

same Plymouth to Roscoff ferry. He had a van, and whilst we were his excuse to take a detour to see some old friends, he was our opportunity to load up with food and kit far beyond what we could possibly have personally carried. So we made it to France, arriving in Roscoff on 28 July and onboard *Equinox* that evening.

We found her dry, much to our relief, as once whilst ashore in the Med she had flooded to above the sole boards, as a result of the cockpit drains blocking with leaves and the downpours finding their way below via the engine compartment hatch. Thankfully my sister, living in the Pyrenees, had managed to visit in 2020 and had removed the through hull log so at least *Equinox* could then drain and whilst doing so she reported 48°C in the saloon! *Equinox* now needed a lot of love.

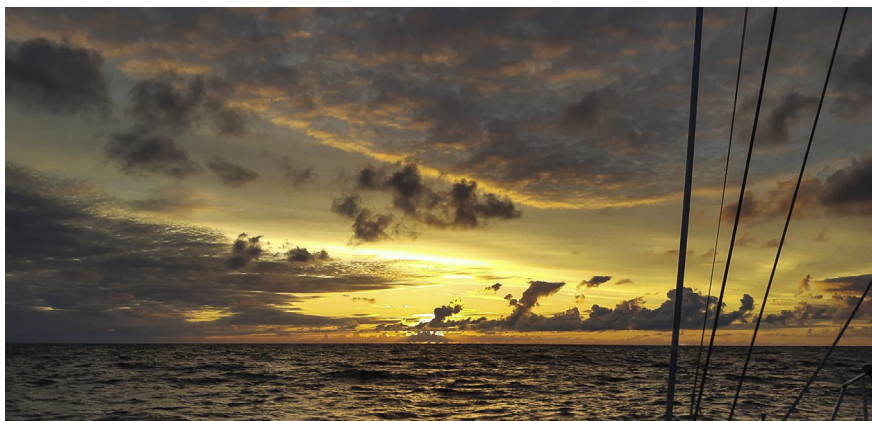
So after a wonderful night of restorative company and great food at our friend's friend's home we set hard to work.

We had a deadline as the owner of Port Bloc was selling and so we had only two days to get her ready for launch and the mast prepared for re-stepping. We had brought antifouling from the UK but it was blue. In a red can but blue. "It is only for the fishes" the yard owner commented. *Equinox* was never about cosmetic beauty; just good dependable practicality. And so we worked hard between the rain showers and intense sunshine, with no shortage of jobs to satisfy any meteorological nuance. Unfortunately the mast had been badly prepared and now had a destroyed mast head light fitting and radar reflector, so crudely removed that we could not reattach it. We also had the amusement of having to remove a well established wasp's nest at the truck.

After various jobs she was ready to be craned in. The mast followed within a matter of minutes with yet another, new to me, method of lifting. Once stabilised, at the end of a long day, the delightful yard owner arrived onboard with his children, welcomed by some beer in the evening sunshine, explaining that we were his last lift after many years. He was complementary about *Equinox's* practicality, which obviously went down well, and a pleasant evening developed as we were momentarily distracted from the vast visual list of tasks.

A new engine battery was easily obtained by bike from port Medoc, other jobs and challenges were listed, confronted and ticked off. Once again we were fixing things in exotic places (aka cruising) and all felt familiar. Jacob spent a few sessions

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Finally heading north

up the mast re-reaving a number of halyards and the lazy jacks. We also had to jury rig the radar reflector off the starboard spreader thanks to the previously mentioned nautical butchery.

After two years away it had taken a while to remember where all the spares were stored and how certain idiosyncratic systems worked. But, as is strange with time, after only a few days living onboard we felt as if we had never left, the intervening years melted away and our reality was *Equinox* again.

We left Port Bloc with the advice to be well clear of channel 2a buoy before the ebb set in, so we slipped our lines after an early lunch three hours before highwater and headed out into the Bay of Biscay.

The wind was from the southwest with squally showers so we sailed until the narrow part of the channel where we were headed, but once 2a was to starboard our course turned north and we were freed again. We coasted along the western Locking it to Le Palas, Belle Île



Island hopping home

shore of Île d'Oleron and thought of heading in for the night; but the weather, whilst not warm, was settling and everything appeared to be working, so we sailed on into the dusk towards Île d'Yeu.

Arriving at 0800 in the morning we anchored just south of the entrance to Port Joinville and I slept for two hours. Feeling refreshed and still in favourable weather we pushed on to Belle Île, after a romping six hours the wind was dying and we were having to motor sail to keep our heading. Jacob let the anchor go in 4m off the beach in Port Yoc'h, calm in the lee of Belle Île just after 2200.

The weather was predicted to veer to the North for eight hours and so it did; increasing to a sustained F5 leaving us fully exposed but we were confident that with 40 meters of chain down, all would be well. The challenge was the other boats more than the swell. After many had left the now slightly uncomfortable anchorage we decided to do the same and seek some calm from the lee shore in Le Palais to the north west. We brought the anchor aboard and after two minutes of motoring, just off the headland, the battery charging alarms started sounding. The alternator belt had snapped and now the engine was inevitably overheating with its associated alarms all sounding. With the engine off, the anchor was dropped in 8m. Within five minutes working together we had the belt replaced, but we now discovered a fouled anchor. At least it was holding with the rocky lee shore just over two cables away. It took a good while but with some responsive boat handling from Jacob at the controls, as we pitched heavily in the waves and myself only narrowly avoiding serious injury from the snatching chain, we got her free. It is in these times that the sunken foredeck of the Moody 33, whilst in my opinion not that visually appealing, provided real security whilst working forward.

Spot the cardinal

The welcome calm of Le Palais was shattered as we had to dive out of the way of a ferry whose wash was pirouetting us alongside a moored yacht, it made it look like a perfectly executed plan: it was far from that! The tide duly rose and we locked into the inner basin, resisting requests to turn as the wind with rain squalls were due to build considerably from the west so facing into it was infinitely preferable. We were collectively



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Hamish and Jacob enjoying tapas on the dockside

packed in with some excellent and frenetic boat handling by the two young women in the capitainerie ribs, described by our new French neighbours as like two stunt women in a Bond film.

Le Palais was busy but fun. In the height of summer, now the rain had passed, everyone was enjoying the sunshine, whiling away pleasant hours sitting on the slipways and the edge of the quay with tapas and a glass of something; changing their pace of life to enjoy some island time. I set out on the Brompton to visit three mechanics, one chandlery and two automotive garages. Sadly, I can report that there was not a single legally obtainable 1000mm alternator belt on the island. Every other size was easily available from a number of outlets on that August day.

Whilst the weather was not that settled all was calm on the social front until the next tide brought in a well loved and used wooden boat with a large and lively young crew (dredging up some not unpleasant memories) to moor outside but one to us. At 0230, at the height of their party, a highly predictable event occurred. One of the crew fell through our bimini ripping out the port window. So my morning did not get off to good start (again a polite synopsis of my feelings). With no option but to mend it, a joint project ensued allowing Jacob and me to spend a couple of hours together playing pass the needle and, whilst not beautiful, the repair is standing up well. Once that was completed I got to recommissioning the outboard. New fuel was bought, mixed and poured into the tank, only for it to all pour out again. On stripping it down the leak was identified as coming from a split fuel tank. I removed the tank from the outboard and put it in the metaphorical 'too hard' basket to wait for another day.

The lock gates were opening and we were released from the sardine-like environment of the inner harbour, grateful for the two days of shelter but pleased to be able to move again and headed north west in the company of a little old blue racer-cruiser towards Île de Groix.

Close hauled with a single reef in a large Atlantic swell, left over from the previous two days and foreboding of more wind offshore, but in the sunshine, we enjoyed four hours of great sailing; highlighted by crossing tracks with Eric Tabarley's

Island hopping home

schooner *Pen Duick* back lit in the afternoon sun heading south perfectly balanced under full sail with a single reef in the main.

We arrived in Île de Groix's Lock Tudy enjoying the lee of the island and picked up a fore and aft mooring in the outer harbour. Strong westerlies were forecast and the shelter was welcome. Having just squared away, there in the entrance, arriving under sail was the little blue racer cruiser from earlier that day. We gestured that they were welcome alongside and so began a delightful 36

hours in the company of her owners, newlyweds Yieve and Matilda. Our supper together was not entirely a success due to some error on my part in translation, the



Crossing tracks with *Pen Duick*

Entering Île de Groix



Hamish Southby-Tailyour

curry and rice idea became a risotto, but we shared stories and local beer. *Equinox* was a home again. The night club in the old lifeboat station provided excellent dance music (for those of us clubbing in the 90's) but it went on a little late and finished just after 0700 on Sunday morning.

The following day continued as the night had been, with strong gusts and showers, so we walked together across the island to see the F7 piling up the seas on the southern coast at the aptly named Pointe de L'Enfer. We continued our walk to take in the charming, if rather exposed, Port Saint Nicolas. Yieve had grown up locally and he had many interesting stories to share of this fascinating little Brittany island as we scrumped various fruits on our walk back home.

On returning to our boats we collectively decided, after some wonderful local saucisson, to improve on the previous evening's meal. Matilda and Jacob cooked up the best carbonara I have had for a very long time, complemented by a very pleasant bottle of red gifted, as a small token of regret, from the young man who had crashed through our bimini two nights previously. Yieve taught us a new card game, and we shared some French and English maritime poetry and some single malt that had improved all the more after two years onboard. They left our raft the next day gifting *Equinox* a Breton courtesy flag as a gesture of good memories.

The harbour started getting busy again in the afternoon but not as crazy as Belle Ile. Still waiting for our *fenêtre de Meteo*, I pulled out the 'too hard basket' and set to work trying to repair the outboard's fuel tank. Using my hot knife,



abrasive and some epoxy, I effected a repair and modifying the flange a little to accommodate the fix. All was reassembled and after an idle two years the outboard purred into life. The reason for the tank splitting, I am fairly certain, was the expansion of the fuel fumes in the Mediterranean summer cabin heat and so another lesson learned for the future. To finish off the main jobs I spent an enjoyable hour in the afternoon sunshine feeding all the thirsty teak some much needed oil.

There was a hail in French from a local whom we had met previously. He had seen Jacob sculling the dingy earlier, and asked whether he would like to try his skills in a world championship sculling dinghy! Well obviously the answer was 'yes' and

Island hopping home



Jacob skulling a world championship sculling dinghy

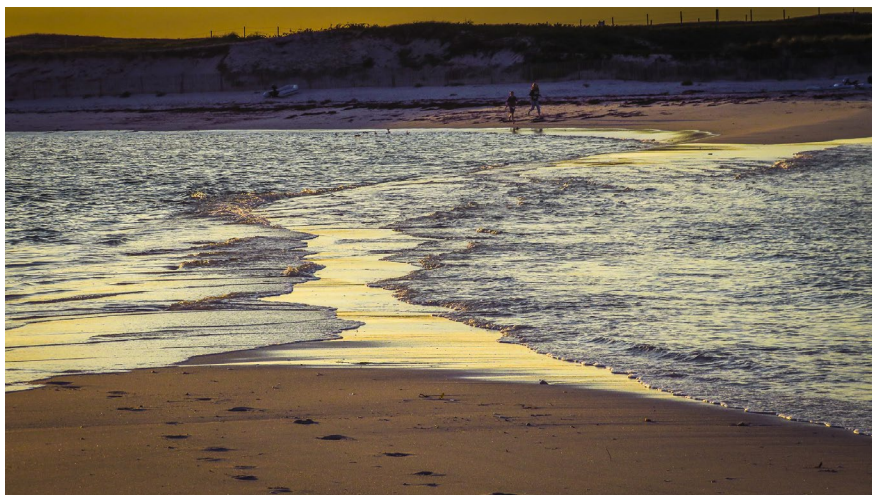
Jacob promptly received, gratis, an hour's tutorial and practice from one of this year's entrants in the world stern sculling championship race around the island.

The wind whilst moderating would still be fine on the nose for a course to be laid to the enticing Îles de Glenan to the west. The improving forecast released a pent up flotilla of yachts and we joined this collective move along the coast. We sailed in close company with three French yachts for much of the way in variable weather improving all the while. After an enjoyable five hours we were finalising our tack in towards Le Pie marking an easy entrance to this intriguing and beautiful archipelago. With the wind due to blow hard from the southwest in the night it was also the most protected place to be. The anchorage was packed and whilst I scoped out a spot with Jacob preparing the anchor with a tripping line, a mooring

The isthmus between Île de St. Nicolas and Île de Bananec at high water



Hamish Southby-Tailyour

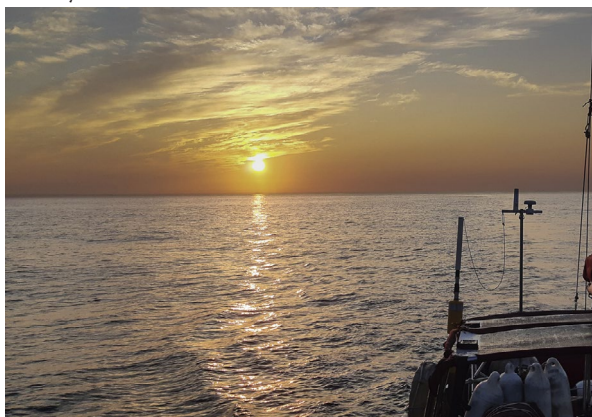


The isthmus just showing after highwater becomes a 15 foot high sand bar at low tide

just north of the tidal sandy isthmus joining Île de St. Nicolas and Île de Bananec became available. So for ease and rest we wove our way between the yachts. Jacob picked up the ring with our invaluable mooring tool, threading the ring with a warp from the safety of the deck. As the pilot suggests, you would have to choose your mooring carefully if you are over 10 meters LOA. The sun was trying to shine but it was cold for August in a predominantly overcast sky, but we took the dingy ashore and enjoyed a simple walk around the nature reserve. Only Jacob swam.

We decided to take a break from the push home and stayed a day with sunshine 'promised' from late morning. The promise was delivered and we unpacked the snorkelling gear and aired the asymmetric spinnaker. The lazy day continued with an easy lunch and time just sitting in the sun watching the French on holiday playing

An early start



with some fantastic aquatic amusements.

The weather was now set calm and after a quiet night we slipped the mooring before dawn and threaded our way out of the maze of moored and anchored yachts. Our course lay north west towards the Raz du Sein. As we rounded the Pointe de Penmarc'h we were

Island hopping home



freed more and it became probable that we would hit this famous tidal gate perfectly. And so we did in the light westerly breeze of the afternoon; sitting on a spring tide we were picked up and carried all the way to Camaret where we came alongside at 1800.

Approaching the Raz du Sein



Mooring on the inside of the outer wall of Vauban and starting to relax, I walked slowly up to the capitainerie to seek advice as to how to get to Brest by bus and ferry. We needed to visit Brest to have ourselves stamped out of Europe and, more urgently, find some alternator belts as we had by now destroyed our three new spares and were now on our last worn spare. After a brief Franglais conversation it transpired that this was going to be a logistical impossibility in a reasonable time scale with buses and ferries not really matching up so I made the quick decision to leave for Brest.

The reason for our haste was that it was now becoming clear that a perfect but short-lived weather window was developing for a crossing to Plymouth the next day. Returning to the boat at a run, dodging all the early evening fisher families, their gear and dogs spread along the length of the breakwater, we were on our

Hamish Southby-Tailyour

way again in under two minutes. We only had an hour of flood left, a dying breeze and were now very cautious about using the engine. So much so that I set up the lines for an alongside dinghy tow for immediate deployment if needed. I was going to enter Le Château on spec but Jacob sensibly suggested I call ahead. A very accommodating capitainerie found an easy berth for us. Much to our relief it was an easy manoeuvre to come alongside, keeping engine use to an absolute minimum. Nick Chavasse, whom we sadly missed by a few hours in Camaret, had correctly



Topsail schooner in Brest

suggested that it was more likely I would find belts near the marina further east but that was another two miles further; we would have lost the breeze and the flood and it had been a long day.

It was with some relief on our part, that a pragmatic Maître D allowed us to bypass the need for a pass sanitaire and the moules frites accompanied by some excellent local beer did much to restore and relax. Jacob and I then took a gentle walk to the outer harbour wall to look at the super yachts. Much to both of our surprise the dock on which they were moored had the same access code. So we had a close up view of a couple of stunning 100 foot plus gaff cutters in immaculate condition, amongst other less beautiful creations to our beholding eyes.

The next morning I was up early and rattling down the pontoons on the Brompton cycling off in search of alternator belts; my mind now fully focused on what the problem could be. The list of possibilities had all been ruled out. The belts were getting stretched out hot, subsequently losing tension and failing. It occurred to me, and I could well be wrong, that there may be friction generated from the corrosion on the pullies themselves.

So after a thankfully successful mission with the only mechanic's total stock of two belts in my rucksack I returned on board and set to the pulleys with

Island hopping home

varying grades of emery cloth. There was, to my relief, a surprising amount of mild corrosion on each pulley in the sectors exposed whilst ashore for the two years and in my non-engineering opinion certainly enough at 2000+ rpm to cause considerable friction. I worked all three pulley channels to a shine and fitted the belt. I can report that, after over 40 engine hours, everything appears well; so, treatment confirming the diagnosis?

We were now on track to catch the tide north and pleased to have previously recced the siesta times of the Gare Maritime. We arrived at the douane office just before déjeuner to have our passports stamped out of Europe, with the parting expression of utter exasperation from the officer at any mention of Brexit, obviously summing up the situation from his point of view, we returned to *Equinox* and motored out into the ebb.

As the RCC pilotage guide makes quite clear the tide is fierce in the narrows but we were ready for it and after a wild 40 minute ride with a light westerly wind against the spring ebb we were spat out ready to turn north into the Chenal de Four. The tide was slack, the sun was shining and we joined another flotilla of yachts enjoying the breeze which had now backed obligingly to the south. So with the perfect tide we hoisted the spinnaker for a while but then decided to goose-wing due in part to the proximity of the other yachts, but also we concluded we were too short handed to deal with any cock-ups.

We were then treated to a glorious sight, as there off to the west, with Ushant low behind them were the two gaff rigged super yachts, cruising in company under full sail clearly enjoying the conditions. The view got Jacob musing as to whether they were both had the same owner, who was therefore able to enjoy sailing on one whilst simultaneously admiring the other.

Gaff rigged super yachts, north of Ushant



Hamish Southby-Tailyour



12 miles offshore

noticeably enjoying the event with much leaping, body slamming and, on occasion, bursting the water's surface from below, sending small fish airborne and flashing in the sunlight as they fell back in scattered disarray. We were accompanied by a surprising large number of dolphin pods as we headed north that afternoon and evening. As the sun was setting, painting a perfect sky to the west, the breeze was building nicely to a solid F4 on the port quarter and we were enjoying an exhilarating surf ride towards home. The autohelm was faultlessly working away as the seas built. The final icing was

We continued north, now out of the channel, keeping a good offing in a light breeze from the south west and motor sailed for a couple of hours in sunshine, still in the company of the beautiful gaffers, to make the most of the favourable tide; all the while watching France slowly slip lower into the horizon.

Ahead the gannets were diving and soon the dolphins arrived excited at the feeding fun to be had. They were



Island hopping home



Jacob Southby-Tailour - anyone for backgammon?

provided after supper by yet more dolphins scattering shoals of fish in the bio luminescence.

AIS obviously makes shorthanded channel crossings easier but it really came into its own, as the spinnakers and single mast head lights of the various Cherbourg bound Fastnet fleet were bearing down on us throughout the night. By now, with good reason I was confident to allow Jacob a couple of hour long night watches giving me some much needed uninterrupted sleep. A grey dawn and channel

greeted us and whilst calculating that we would pass ahead of the latest Fastnet entrant a small pod of pilot whales appeared 200 yards to port on a collision course, heading with equal determination up channel. A nervous moment as they collectively dove directly under us and we saw no more of them.

The Eddystone light materialised out of the morning and slowly Rame Head became ever more discernible between the grey horizon and cloud over Dartmoor. We phoned Yacht Line, Q was lowered and we were home; Brest to the Plymouth breakwater in just under 24 hours.

Jacob called a friend who then watched us on the Plymouth Hoe Live Stream sail east around Drake's Island and on up river to the Tamar River Sailing Club pontoon situated just downstream of the always impressive Brunel rail bridge.

Arriving alongside we were welcomed by family. Within minutes Jacob, noticing one of his sailing instructors servicing a club safety boat and simultaneously realising it was Friday, dug out his wetsuit, ran ashore, launched his Laser and promptly joined the training session. We have never arrived on time, before or since, for Friday night sailing and so Clara and I were left to reunite *Equinox* with her mooring just downstream.