

Gibraltar to The Canaries – a Short trip into the Atlantic

Best Buddies is a Swan44 that was entered in the Atlantic Race for Cruisers. She needed a delivery crew to get her to Las Palmas in time for the race start at the end of November. Bob Tuckwood, Bob Myers and I were invited by Mike, the skipper, to partake in the delivery trip. Having covered our arrival in Gibraltar in a previous report, this is the daily diary of the journey from Gib, which hopefully will provide information that may prove useful to Mariners that follow in our wake.



The Rock, gateway to the Atlantic

Friday 30th October

Having arrived in Gib in good order we now had a few days to relax and enjoy the delights of the Rock before saying goodbye to Debbie Tuckwood, who had to return to work in the UK, and setting off for the Canaries.

After heading over to the Jury cafe to get online (Queensway marina did not provide any WiFi) we did a bit of sightseeing, with shopping for tax free electronics proving popular. The first night we decided to have fish and chips as we were on UK soil (almost) and so ate at Ray's, one of the many fish & chip outlets in Casement Square.

Saturday 31st

With bad weather forecast later in the day Bob M and I went off to the Gibraltar museum which proved very interesting. Bob T and Debbie took a bus up the Rock and Mike went off to buy a new Apple computer. In the afternoon we all settled in a pub to watch the rugby final, a thrilling game between NZ and Oz. Afterwards we had a fantastic curry at Raj's, just next to the marina.

Sunday 1st November

The bad weather continues but I took a bus to Europa Point and got soaked whilst the rest got their kit sorted. Once back at the boat it was mayhem, the strong winds creating surges that were making all the boats in the marina move about quite violently. On Best Buddies the bathing ladder had struck the pontoon and come apart.

The boat next to us had damaged its gangplank and parted a rope and many others were not fairsing much better. The marina staff seemed unable to sort it all out but we got on with prepping our boat for next week and I lifted the gangplank on the boat next door so it was safe from further damage.



The Gun at Europa Point with low cloud covering the Rock

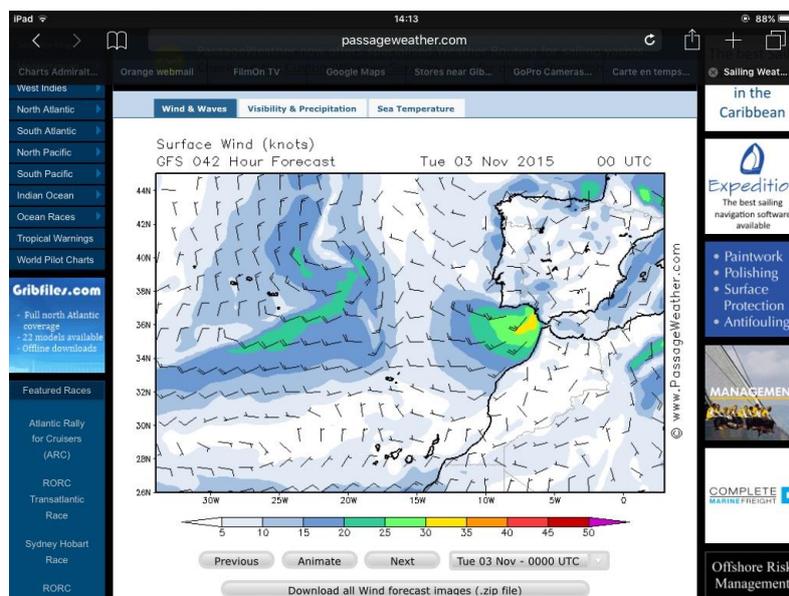
In the afternoon we met in the Jury cafe for a check on the weather forecast on the Internet, to have a coffee and cake and to discuss next week's plan. The weather showed a deep low moving off overnight then further strong winds later on Monday. Given the recent gales and the subsequent rough seas together with a forecast F6-7 on Monday night, the weather looked unfavourable however, Mike was under pressure from the owners to get Best Buddies to Las Palmas as quickly as possible for race preparation. We agreed to have another look in the morning and make the decision to leave then, with the impression that if the forecast was still bad we'd delay.

Later that afternoon Bob M and I went on a re-supply shopping trip with two tours round Morrison's (not cheap but convenient), We emerged from the store into a deluge, the passing storm depositing a vast amount of rain that was overwhelming the drains. We took an interesting taxi ride through the flooded town trying to make it back to the marina. With extensive flooding and cars floating in many roads that were under several feet of water the 1km journey took nearly an hour and we both got a thorough soaking just getting from the taxi to the boat.

The next few hours were spent drying out the boat as the hatch in the heads had been left open and the downpour had filled the bilges with fresh water yet again, the third time this week they had needed emptying for varying reasons.

We opted for a quiet night in, expecting new crew member Audley at 9 pm, but he'd not shown by the time we all retired. Bob stayed up on Debbie's last night to meet him although, given the continuing rain, he forgo the original plan to meet him at the airport. We were woken at 2.45 as Audley had arrived only to fall in the water trying to get on the boat. As he and his bag were soaked, the next hour was spent getting Audley and his kit dried and stowed as best we could.

Monday 2nd



The forecast for midnight Monday, not a good time to leave the Straits, especially as an intense storm had passed over Gibraltar 24 hours previously, leaving behind heavy seas.

The disturbed night led to a late start the next morning with the expectation of a free day due to the weather. However, Mike decided that we would set off, as the boat could handle it and 24 hours of discomfort was considered worth it to get away from Gibraltar.

After prepping the boat for the 600nm journey we had to wait for Bob T to return from dropping Debbie at the airport. Unfortunately Debbie's flight back to the UK was delayed for 2 days after all the weather disruption of yesterday, which had left aircraft and crews dispersed around Europe. Having failed to get any sensible plan out of the airline Bob had to abandon Debbie to sort out her own revised travel back to the UK (Debbie subsequently arrived home 2 days late after travelling via Malaga and Paris).

Two hours later than planned we set off as a pod of porpoises passed by going in the opposite direction, a sign maybe that we were going the wrong way? However, the seas were not too bad, until we got out of the lee of the Rock and into the Straits. The wind was all over the place, the effect of the mountains making it unpredictable, and the usual adverse current made progress slow.

With insufficient fuel to motor all the way to the Canaries Mike was keen to keep motoring to a minimum so we headed across the TSS, hoping to get into calmer waters and then sail west. A favourable wind picked up so we started to sail across but the wind veered and we ended up tacking in the TSS.

Finally clearing the TSS to the south, the Tacktick instruments started giving bad information then finally packed up completely, the AIS going offline just before a high speed ferry crossed in front of us. The conditions were quite challenging, proving a baptism of fire for new crew member Audley who, having been given the helm for some practice, started to show signs of sea sickness, finally succumbing and retiring below for the next 48 hours. There was a bonus though, his decision not to have the fish stew, prepared before departure, left plenty available for the rest of us to have as a ready meal overnight.

The forecast rain and wind arrived bringing building seas and a strong wind warning being issued on #69 from Tarifa with SW F7 expected in the next hour. We continued into the dark with full sails set making poor headway into increasing seas, with the apparent wind now increasing to gale force. I took the first night watch but all the crew were up, apart from Audley, he no doubt lying in his bunk wondering what he had signed up for.

We gradually reduced the foresail but not until the conditions became marginal was the decision taken to drop the main. In a heavy sea with the boat pitching and rolling this small task took all of us quite a while to achieve, with Bob T now succumbing to sickness after the heavy physical challenge of taming the mainsail.

With the heavy breaking seas making for a rough ride it was not pleasant down below but Mike stayed on watch as we drifted along in and out of the TSS and I retired to bed to grab what rest I could. When I woke for my next watch I heard Mike on the radio telling passing shipping that we were in the TSS but effectively not under command and they had to take avoiding action - not a pleasant situation.

As we were being driven towards an anchorage we decided to motor gently south to get into clear water. Making just 1kn and trying to avoid crashing the boat off the breaking waves made for a very wet spell on the helm but at least all the white water made it easy to see the worst of the waves! Everyone was over tired but the seas remained high and it was unsafe to have single watches, so extra demands were put on the crew for the rest of the night as we doubled up on the watch bill.

Tuesday 3rd

The morning broke with the boat making no way over the ground as we tacked back and forth. We were within 2 miles of where we were 12 hours previously, having only made 40 miles from Gibraltar in the past 20 hours! The wind had abated from a F8 to a more manageable F5 and we managed to start making progress down track but the heavy seas were making progress slow, an estimated 3 or 4 knots at best, the instruments still being off line.

Later that day I logged:-

Tuesday 1600 224° Arrecife 540nm - at last we are heading the right way!

Tuesday 2200 224° Arrecife 510nm – 5kn groundspeed, picking up as the seas abate.

However, after a good few hours sailing the wind dies and heads us, so the motor has to come on again and after the long night of motoring on Monday, without making any progression

down track, the suggestion of heading for Casablanca to refuel is raised. The question being, do we need visas and also, is fuel available?

Another consideration is that with the AIS not working, and my estimate of 5 or 6 days to get to the Canaries before we departed proving far too optimistic, I'll need to get a message back home about our slow progress, to prevent any concern over our delayed arrival.

As expected as we progress south, the wind continues to moderate and with flattening seas the night watch can be covered individually so a chance to catch up on sleep, even Audley appeared for an hour on deck for some fresh air.

My watch was very pleasant with porpoises appearing alongside as black shadows, leaving a dark splash full of phosphorescent bursts of light as they jumped out of the water. The break in the clouds let the stars shine through along with shooting stars that constantly burst overhead, one so bright it looked like a flare for a few seconds. At the end of my watch I sat with Bob T supping beer, eating crisps and telling salty tales, a half hour of peace after 40 hours of hell. I left Bob to enjoy his watch, with the prospect of a lovely sunrise to come.

The atmosphere down below, being rather rank with wet clothes, sweaty bodies and the ever present smell of sweaty feet, I open up all the hatches although, no one else seems to notice the aroma. But when I am handed a cup of coffee smelling of onions later that morning it's obvious that my sense of smell is keener than the rest, a real drawback until I smell gas as the cooker is turned on but the flame is not lit!

As the sun rises into a blue sky the opportunity is taken to shower, and position a couple of pairs of foul smelling shoes forward of the mast. Moral is picking up and now we only have the worry of whether we'll get fuel in Casablanca or get arrested as we don't have visas!

Wednesday 4th

A lovely summer's day, wind on the nose creating a gentle cooling breeze as we motor along on an azure sea. The only downside being that we can't get fuel in Casablanca, port control refused us entry as we were not pre-booked. They told us to go 25 miles NE to another port, the name being lost in translation. Being 4 hours in the wrong direction we opt to head for Port Mohammadia which is only an hour away and, having what looks like a refinery next door, could be a place to buy some diesel.

We received permission to enter and approached the unknown marina cautiously, receiving lots of friendly waves from passing fishermen. The Tacktick instruments are still playing up so we 'blind pilot' in whilst Mike tries to sort out the instruments down below and keeps up a constant flow of communications with Port Control. We reverse in and tie up to the 10 foot pontoon indicated to us by the marina manager so we could complete the requisite paperwork before being allowed to proceed to the fuel pump.

The staff proved very helpful but "paperwork has to be complied with" so it takes quite a bit of time sorting out our immigration, which involves having our passports confiscated, wondering what it will cost to get them returned?

Bob and Audley take the opportunity to go off shopping, assisted by a local who proved extremely helpful, driving them around and giving a conducted tour enroute. It transpired he

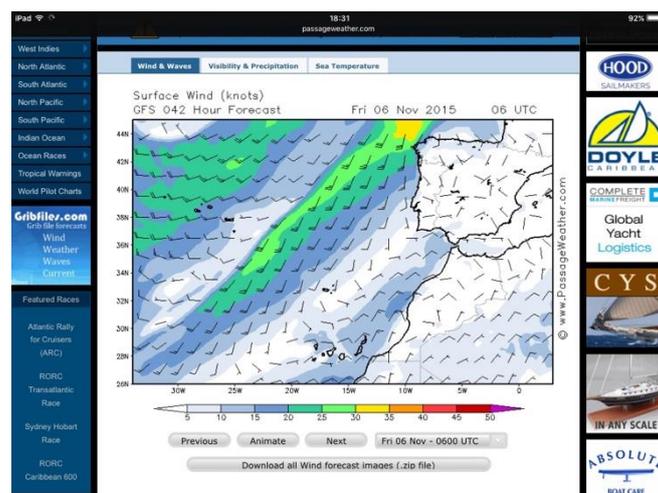
was a tour guide and had been showing a Norwegian yacht crew around Casablanca yesterday so was quite used to the requirements of sailors. Whilst they ventured into the unknown the rest of us got online to update loved ones with our delayed progress and get an up to date weather forecast.

Evidently the local town proved interesting if somewhat dirty with 6 foot unmarked holes in the pavement - not good with no street lighting or bollards to mark them out for unwary pedestrians. The supermarket was quite expensive but well stocked, the main items on Bob's list being toilet rolls and bottled water as the marina water was not recommended for drinking, so we never topped up the empty tank (there are two tanks on-board).

The fuel pontoon was next to the harbour office at the bottom of the gangway, difficult to reach in a 44 boat with a 2.6m draught however, with a rising tide (1.2 - 2.8 m range) we edged in and refuelled without drama. The passports were returned without having to pay any baksheesh but the harbourmaster (being a good Muslim) wanted a bottle of wine for payment of him doing his job. As I'd found a couple of decent bottles last week in Ceuta at a bargain price it was a small price to pay for his help.

We finally escaped at 2100, motoring into the dark under a lovely starlit night. The local fishing boats passed by as shadows as they did not carry any lights - quite disconcerting but I guess they don't get much passing traffic at night time. With little wind the sea had moderated and it was a lovely night for motoring. Having bought lots of salmon scraps (£1/kilo) in Morrison's back in Gib, I made another fish soup with mixed spices which proved a popular choice although, the fish heads did not seem to be to everyone's taste.

My watch was again spent studying the star studded night, interspersed with shooting stars, one which broke up with a trail of many golden tails. A lovely sunrise heralded a warm sunny day and after a few hours' sleep I enjoyed some peace sat at the mast, catching up on a book that had been neglected for the past week. Unfortunately I was succumbing to the cold that was spreading through the crew, with a sore throat developing and a general feeling of being unwell.



The forecast for the next 3 days, a following wind to Arrecife.

Thursday 5th

As predicted the 'normal' wind for this region kicked in and we were soon goose-winged and the engine finally silenced. By the time I was back on watch it had picked up to 20 knots and we achieved 10 knots boat speed as we surfed along in glorious sunshine. Bob M was at the cooker again, warming the last of the fish stew as a starter before serving up Rib Eye steaks as a main course. This was the last of the fresh meat so it's now tinned food with fresh fruit and veg for the next few days but with a decent wind we should be in Arrecife late Saturday.

Unfortunately at 2200 it's all hands on deck as the top rudder bearing has worked loose and there is sideways movement in the rudder stock. We have to reduce the load on the rudder and so lower all the sails. That job done we establish communications with the owners to let them know our predicament. With 270 nm to run we are not in a good position although, there looks to be a safe refuge, Essaquire, bearing 165/35 nm.

It looks as if the work carried out to fit a new carbon fibre rudder in Palma had not been finished off properly and with 4 of the 6 securing bolts loose, one of which is damaged and needs to be replaced and the others appearing to be of the wrong type, a temporary fix is achieved that should see us reach Las Palmas safely. Half hourly checks are instigated to ensure the integrity of the repair and we continue on our way under Genoa only so as to reduce the pressure on the rudder stock.

It proves impossible to get back to sleep as the boat is now rolling quite a lot so getting up for a middle watch is a relief, especially as the moon has yet to rise and a clear sky is studded with stars. As on previous nights, there is a constant display of shooting stars, one being so bright it illuminates the whole sky, bathing the boat in a bright light for a few seconds. As my eyes recover from the burst I see a shower of golden debris burning out directly overhead - quite magical.

Friday 6th

The weather is not as sunny and warm as yesterday but the fair wind continues to hold. The rolling motion of the boat has left everyone with a lack of sleep but as we progress towards our destination moral is good and we even have enough water for another fresh water shower, a little pleasure that's worth far more than could be imagined back on dry land.

The delight of a middle watch under a warm, starlit sky. With 100 nm to run we should be in Arrecife by late afternoon, barring any other problems. The wind continues to push us along at 6 knots and now back with goose winged sails the boat is well balanced allowing for everyone to catch up on some well needed rest. There are a couple of large container ships passing by but with AIS now back online and showing them as no threat there is little to do except watch the sky for shooting stars again and enjoy the peace as it feels as if the whole world belongs to me alone.

Saturday 7th

Next morning it's time for a 'fat boy breakfast', bacon and cheese omelette butties, as everyone but Bob M are up and about. Incredibly Bob does not wake up with the smell of bacon, evidently the first time that has ever happened!



Bob enjoying a downwind run in the early November sun

Flies and land birds start to appear around the boat heralding the approach of land. We are called by Palma control as one of our PLBs has activated, apparently the seal having been broken when the grab bag fell over and lay with weight on the button being sufficient to switch it on. Somewhat embarrassing, but at least the system works. On arrival a police lady turned up just to make sure we were all OK, I guess if a crew member initiated a PLB on a boat due to threats from other crew or highjack it would be a good way to get help on arrival!

After 650 track miles we arrived in Arrecife, a modern marina, and whilst there is no fuel available (2 hours down the coast) all the other facilities are pretty good. Audley assured me that hot water was available in the showers, but only if you are first in. Given the heat outside, a cool shower in the modern facilities was most invigorating and at the same time we managed to carry out a couple of clothes washes, definitely needed after 6 days at sea.

We made the mistake of eating at one of the marina restaurants, handy but not the best quality food. The marina appeared to be a favourite with the locals for a night out, unfortunately many of them not leaving until five the next morning.

Sunday 8th

Bob T and I went to explore around the old harbour, a lovely area for a stroll by middle aged paunchy couples, of which there were many from a couple of large cruise liners which had arrived overnight, so we fitted in perfectly. There were numerous harbour side restaurants that offered local fare at reasonable prices and appeared a better bet than those in the marina.

We were off at 1200 to avoid another day's marina costs (charges are incurred after midday) and had an uneventful last night at sea covering the 120nm to Las Palmas. The following wind died as we turned west at the bottom of Lanzarote and we were soon motor sailing under a dark sky. With no moon the Milky Way was a myriad of jewels in an inky darkness whilst the boat generated constant sparkles of bio-luminescence in our wake. There were also

occasional flashes of white about 10m off our beam, no doubt some creatures deploying distraction measures as they swam away from us.

Monday 9th

Las Palmas appeared as a large commercial harbour surrounded by industrial areas with several moored oil or gas rigs and two ferries heading for the entrance just as we glide in. Listening to the radio traffic on #9 it appears that there are many ARC boats anchored outside the marina but we head in hoping to get fuel. Unfortunately, there began over 4 hours of bureaucracy as we were told by the welcoming team in a RIB that we have to radio in to book a slot for fuel after we have anchored outside the marina.

We asked to go to our berth instead, as the anchor had been dismantled ready for the race, and once there were told we would be picked up in 20 minutes to be taken to the office for checking in. An hour later, being unable to get off the pontoon without an electronic key, we were getting rather fed up, the sticky heat in the marina being very oppressive. Having seen little activity at the fuel pontoon opposite we told the marina office by radio that we were proceeding to refuel.

There was a lot of gesticulating and shouting as we approached the pumps but not understanding Spanish we continued in, manoeuvring round newly arrived yachts that were also wishing to refuel but were receiving the same instruction from the welcoming RIB (to go and anchor) as we did.

Re-fuelling was straight forward, the bluster and hassle being generated by poor organisation from the harbour staff who appeared to want to control everything but had no decent procedures in place. As an example, at the office Mike had to get a ticket to get a place in line, he then sat for 40 minutes waiting his turn only to be given 15 sheets of paper that took about 40 minutes to fill in while the queue behind him grew with new arrivals. It would have been sensible to have issued the paperwork from the welcoming RIB so it could be completed prior to going to the office for processing.

With a €125 deposit for 5 electronic cards we were released to use the showers and explore the marina area. From the marina the initial impression of the town is not good but once you pass under the dual carriageway that's next to the marina the old town starts to emerge with some lovely parks and historic parts to the north and a more modern business like area to the south (there is a supermarket, one block back about 10 minutes' walk to the south).

Having had some disappointing meals ashore during our cruise we decide to eat on board, giving the welcoming party for the ARC crews in the marina a miss. A stiff chilli after last night's vegetable curry seems like a good idea to try and frighten away the cold that is now taking hold in everyone. Dinner is fairly subdued as we are all rather tired. I took my drink outside to enjoy the surprisingly cool night air and when Mike returned from one of his many errands we had a de-brief on the trip, agreement being made that leaving Gibraltar on the Monday, given the weather forecast, had not been the best plan!

Tuesday 10th

The best decision on the trip so far, to take a sight-seeing bus around the city. There being a stop (no 8) 200 metres south of the marina we walked an unnecessary mile or more to get on

the tour in the heart of the city. For €18 you get an insight into the layout and history of the city which, being the 5th largest in Spain, is remarkably pretty. Having done the tour Audley and Bob M got off near Plaza Mortado de Mendoza (stop no 5) where there were many attractive bars and restaurants as well as the cathedral and a market nearby.

Bob T and I continued round to Playa de las Canteras (stop no 37) to enjoy a stroll along the promenade above one of the best urban beaches in the world (according to the tour guide). There were many surfers and sunbathers out making the most of the conditions, a lovely place to enjoy an ice cream before taking the bus back to the marina (you can hop on and off for 24 hours).

In the evening we headed over the road to Pier 19 for a gorgeous, if somewhat pricey, steak and chips. It being Mike's last night we treated him to his supper, only for him to admit to having planned to pay for the rest of us, as a thank you for our support. The restaurant also provided Wi-Fi, which being close to the boat, would have been useful to know when we arrived as it was accessible on deck. By 9pm we were all in bed, the rigours of the previous week having finally caught up with us.

Wednesday 11th

In the morning Mike headed off to the airport for his flight home and Bob M, having booked his return flight from Las Palmas on Tenerife, had to head off to the inter-island ferry. The rest of us wandered down to the Naval Museum which proved to be free to enter and well worth the €3 suggested donation. You have to take your passport for security purposes though.

In the afternoon we spent a good few hours regressing to our childhoods exploring the science museum which proved remarkably entertaining with lots of hands on experiments to remind us of our physics lessons in school, updated to reflect the knowledge of the C21st. The Cinemascope film covering the history of space exploration was entertaining, the commentary by Euan McGregor being more informative but less humorous than the Spanish narrative!

We took the sightseeing bus back to the marina, pushing the 24hr access rule somewhat, and settled down to a quiet night in using up as much of the food and wine that was left before retiring for another early night (showing our age with all these early nights).

Thursday 12th

Audley had an early flight so after cooking him breakfast we kicked him out so we could clean the boat. Ignoring the offer of a €35 taxi ride to the airport we caught the no 12 bus (€1.40) to the main bus station (Telmo) and then the no 60 direct to the airport, (€2.30). Arriving 3 hours before departure, as instructed on the web site and our tickets, we then experienced what appeared to be sharp practice with Thomas Cook extracting money out of some of the queuing passengers by informing us that check in would not open until 2hrs before departure, "but for only €17 each we could check in with fast track". Evidently the miss-information has been on the web site for 11 years and can't be changed, according to the travel rep, so given the number of passengers that paid for the fast track option it must be a good little earner for Thomas Cook.

30 minutes later the cattle class check in girls arrived and we proceeded through security, ahead of those who had paid the extra for Fast Tracking as they opened up a new channel just for us.

An uneventful flight that landed us back in a cold, wet and windy England. We were glad to be home but grateful for having had the opportunity to experience a sailing adventure that many dream of doing but few get the chance to experience first-hand. However, next time we will maybe give the Gale a miss!



The Approximate Track of Best Buddies