

Outward bound

I'd always wanted to do a channel crossing and so when the opportunity arose to take along someone who'd navigated the Channel Islands before I jumped at the opportunity. After careful planning and watching the weather forecasts anxiously we set off from Exmouth, our home port, at 16.30 on Sunday 11th July and set a straight course of 140 degrees for Alderney in a F3 SSW breeze. The outlook was generally light southerly winds for the next five days but, depending on which forecast you looked at, there was potential for gales later in the week.



Our crew of three, Malcolm Droy (chief navigator), my son James (survival expert) and myself worked a system of 3 hour watches; one at the helm, one as "deckhand" i.e. lookout/cook/navigator/cameraman etc and one off duty and this seemed to work very well once we'd got into the routine.



The first evening was easy sailing with a beautiful sunset and a sighting of dolphins (who managed to evade the camera) and very little shipping. It wasn't completely dark until about 11pm but by then we could see the lighthouse at Portland Bill on the port beam and Start Point lighthouse off to starboard reflected off low cloud.

The sea became eerily calm and oily and the wind dropped away and we resorted to using the outboard quite a bit to supplement the sails and keep our speed up to 3 or 4 knots. I was amazed to see phosphorescence in the wake; like thousands of little stars glistening in the bow wave. There was no moon or even any stars and by this stage we were using red head torches to steer by the compass (note: get illuminated one next time). The scary moment was as we approached the main shipping lanes with virtually no wind and I noticed that the red engine oil pressure light was on. Having failed to bring additional oil this was a bit worrying until I realised that the light was just the reflection of my own head torch!

As dawn slowly appeared we dodged around a constant stream of west bound shipping and then, after a gap, crossed the eastbound lane taking care not to rely on the radar reflector, navigation lights or the rules of the road. In the clear skies Alderney was very soon in sight although it appeared to take for ever to actually get there as what little wind there was almost on the nose.



We kept an hourly log (using GPS) and despite steering a straight course the tidal slippage, first to the east with the flood tide and then to the west on the ebb, was quite dramatic but over the course of the crossing it pretty much cancelled itself out. As a matter of interest, I subsequently worked out that if we had abandoned all the electrical gizmos and sightings and relied on dead reckoning only to plot our course we would have been 3 miles off (eastwards) by the time we reached Alderney.



The final approach into Braye harbour on Alderney is on 210 degrees so as to avoid the myriad tidal races and reefs that infest this area and we finally slipped into port at lunchtime. After going through the Customs formalities with the harbourmaster we made a dash for the nearest pub and I was pleased to see that they have proper “English” real ale. The island is a fascinating mix of French and English and very quiet – lots of electric cars.



We were moored on the visitor buoys amongst a bunch of large French yachts who admired the Shrimper and couldn't believe that we'd come across the channel in such a tiny boat. The 73 mile trip had taken 20.45 hours at an average speed on 3.5kn.

We rigged up a temporary boom tent to provide shelter for the extra berth and passed a quiet night. By morning the wind had picked up a bit and the Met Office forecasts were warning of gales in the Channel by the following morning so, not wanting to spend a week bottled up in Alderney, we refuelled and prepared for the return leg, finally casting off at 10.30. Despite using the outboard quite a bit (albeit mainly at low revs) we'd used under 4 gallons.



The Return

We set a straight course of 320 degrees and struck out for home in a F3 SSW breeze. The seas had picked up a bit but as we drew away from Alderney we settled into those beautiful long Atlantic rollers, gentle giants (on a good day), where you disappear into a trough and lose your horizon and then gradually climb back up again to get a view from the top of the hill.



To keep us going during the crossings we had hot meals aboard although we didn't eat (or drink) as much as we anticipated! By way of a trial we found the "just add boiling water to the bag" prepared meals beloved of campers and climbers much the easiest to prepare, eat and clear up. Hot dogs & cheese in pitta bread proved more difficult to prepare and to hold together when eating -

and of course you have to wash up afterwards.

As the day progressed the winds died back to F2 and we again used the outboard to keep the speed up so as to be sure to reach home before the weather broke. The voyage through the shipping lanes was uneventful and the sunset absolutely terrific. For much of the time we were out of sight of land with not even a ship or sail in sight.



The only excitement during the hours of darkness was suddenly being circled by a couple of frigates at quite close quarters – perhaps our tiny radar reflector makes a blip like a periscope and the Navy mistook us for a submarine?

After a rapid crossing we arrived off Exmouth in the dark at 3am but in the last hour the seas steadily built up to quite a heavy swell with some breaking waves and the wind picked up to F4/5. The entrance channel at Exmouth is dangerous to enter in a heavy southerly swell particularly when the tide is low and on the flow (which is exactly what we faced). We cruised slowly up and down on the engine until dawn and considered the alternatives. High water (when the entrance channel should be best) was not until 9am but by that time the weather might have deteriorated further. The nearest shelter was a 14 mile run SSW to Brixham across a difficult swell with the near certainty of being holed up there for a few days waiting for the gale to pass. Once the light was good enough, we edged up to the leading buoy and surveyed the marked channel. A line of breakers lead away across underwater sand bars to either side but there was a small gap in the middle with only occasional breaking waves. We battened down the hatches, checked our harnesses, increased revs and went for it. After a few hairy moments we were through the worst and we arrived back at our mooring at 5.30.

Exmouth harbour was deserted with nothing coming in or out and (poor planning here) we had to wait until 8am for the water taxi to start running and take us ashore but it was a relief to be back as the gales duly arrived as forecast. The return took 17.30 hours at an average speed of 4.1kn and had we used dead reckoning alone we would have been 2 miles short of the harbour. A long voyage, hard work but very satisfying and the boat performed beautifully.

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Demelza, Shrimper No.66

