

Here follows an account of the “Dash for the Sun” by Ian Fisher and John Clogg in *Black Sheep* (435), which replaced our planned second week of National Shrimper Week 2007.

Saturday lunchtime – Arrived at Port du Crouesty feeling very pleased with ourselves for having had such an easy journey on the Brittany Ferries overnight passage from Portsmouth to St Malo. Puzzled by the lack of Shrimpers afloat, we were soon briefed on the horrors of the first week. All but the most hardy had gone home, and a further week of bad weather was forecast.

John – “We should find somewhere with better weather. What about the Med?”
Ian – “OK, let’s go this afternoon.”

Over lunch with the last of the drowned rats from Shrimper Week, we received a tip-off that there is an attractive group of islands lying just off the Côte d’Azur between Hyères and Saint-Tropez, so, deciding that all further planning could be done en route, we put our destination into the ‘sat nav’ and set off at 15:00.

22:00 - stopped overnight near Bordeaux at a French version of Travelodge. It had wireless internet, of which we made good use to add some detail to our plan. A set of synoptic forecast charts confirmed light winds, i.e. the isobars were widely spaced over the whole of the Mediterranean, but there was a puzzling green blob over our proposed destination indicating very strong winds. As we couldn’t think of an explanation, we decided to ignore it!

We arrived at our destination (Le Lavandou) on Sunday afternoon after an easy journey on the excellent French toll road system, but we were too late to make enquiries about launching and storage facilities. Instead we found a nearby campsite halfway up a mountain and camped in the boat amongst the tents.

Monday 08:00 – Took the boat to the first boatyard we found in Le Lavandou and made arrangements for launching, storing the trailer and for a marina berth.

A local, Victor Varnish (as he became known to us on account of the quantity of *Deks Olje* he was applying to his 30’ open fishing boat), came to admire the Shrimper. He was to be a regular visitor for the rest of the week, coming each day after his day job, initially for varnishing duties, but later for a chat and to just sit and stare at the Shrimper.

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We later found out that by the end of the week he had already made enquiries with the French importer and was looking forward to a low-maintenance future.

By noon we were afloat, in possession of charts from the on-site chandler and were fully briefed with local knowledge from Victor. We also now understood the significance of the green blob on the synoptic charts – the Mistral!! – forecast to blow at Force 6-7 from the west all week. The plan then was to make the marina in Le Lavandou our base and day sail to the various islands.

Our first destination was Île de Levant, an island lying about 4nm off to the south. For the time being the sailing was perfect; a pleasant Force 4 on the beam, clear blue skies, indigo water, 30°C temperature and a classic French Riviera coastline drawing away from us.

Île de Levant is a very attractive hilly island, with small houses clinging to the rocks above the harbour. However, as the forecast wind hadn't picked yet up we decided not to land and instead turned to starboard to explore Île de Port-Cros, another 4nm to the west (see photo opposite). The inside of the harbour wasn't visible until we had passed a rocky outcrop, but once we were able to see in it was perfection!. This was what we had come for – stone houses, palm trees, purple bougainvillea, turquoise water, silver sand and beachfront bars. Best of all there were freely available pontoons to land on.

We congratulated ourselves on our decision to come to the Med and headed for one of the beach bars to reflect on the last 48hrs and on what it must have been like in Brittany at that same time. After cocktails, ice creams and a wander round, we set off back to the marina at Le Lavandou before the Mistral arrived.

By Tuesday the Mistral was definitely with us, so we took a trip by car to Saint-Tropez, investigating other launch sites and bases for a possible future Shrimper Week, followed by a trip round the bay at Le Lavandou under a scrap of jib. On Wednesday it was still Force 6 or so from the west, so we made a downwind trip eastwards, hugging the coast and anchoring for lunch in the shelter of one of the many coves along this part of the coast. We motored for the return trip as the wind seemed to have picked up a little more. By now we had realised that the wind was much lighter in the mornings, so a plan was made to set off for Île de Porquerolles (10nm to the west) early the next morning, running back before the stronger afternoon westerlies.



Thursday - Two or three hours of motoring into a Force 4 got us to our destination in time for breakfast. Once again, first-class mooring facilities with no charge for visitors!

Île de Porquerolles is another very attractive island that is popular with day trippers from the mainland. Most seemed to hire bicycles to tour the island, so we did likewise. By early afternoon the wind was building up, so it was back to *Black Sheep*, motoring half a mile or so out of the harbour into a very strong westerly until we could turn east and run back to Le Lavandou under half a jib.

Once back in the marina we repeated what had now become routine - cockpit aperitifs in the warm evening sunshine, chatting to passers-by who enquired about the small black British yacht amongst the masses of white French motor boats, followed by dinner in one of the many pavement cafes and restaurants.

Friday was spent getting the boat out of the water on to its trailer and breaking the back of the journey to an overnight stop at Lyon. We arrived at Caen via Paris

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mid-Saturday afternoon. Again, not the most obvious route to London but we were stuck with Brittany Ferries tickets

Would we do it again? Yes. The journey would have been much shorter via Calais, and although it is still 12 hours of driving, the French toll road system is not busy and makes for relaxing driving. Travelling at a steady 50-60 mph it is rare to have to overtake anyone and most of the time one has an empty road stretching away in front. The service areas are a world apart from those in Britain, and there are plentiful low-cost overnight lodges that don't require pre-booking. Cruise control, sat nav, a Landrover Discovery and a Bryn Bird trailer also helped.

I would probably want to spend longer there another time. Early June or even May would be a good time as the weather is good but the busy French season has not yet started.

For sailing, the area is an ideal cruising ground. The islands are all within easy distance from one another and are protected to the west by the peninsula of Hyères. There are plenty of stopping places, which range from protected anchorages in deep coves to the excellent harbours and marinas in the many seaside villages. If the Mistral does blow, there is good shelter and one's sailing plans can be adjusted to mitigate the worst of it.

But there are also beautiful beaches and all the other attractions expected of a sun, sea and relaxation holiday.



Ian Fisher – *Black Sheep* (435)