

12 Days and a Portuguese Warship

by Ian Sharples

It was another afternoon of deliberation at Orchard Cottage trying to decide where Suzi would be taking the family Sharples this summer. Scotland, or Wales on the family cruise, when we received an interesting telephone call asking if we would be interested in sailing a 40 foot Dutch Ketch from Port Napoleon in the south of France as far as we could in the direction of Preston. Tony, the boat's proud new owner explained we had only two weeks and Gibraltar or somewhere in Portugal would be a reasonable destination for this, the first leg of yacht Blackwatch's journey.

I explained to Barbara that if we were to accept, this would be no holiday. There would be many long hours of pretty dull sailing and lots of night watches, so if she did not want to come I would understand, (all the usual macho skipper stuff). The reply, you must be joking, I'm not missing out on this one. Oh well Suzi was going to miss the family cruise once more.

The crew, who we met before flying out, were Tony, Albert and Jim; all very keen but had no sailing experience. Not a problem says I, you will have after this trip (tongue very firmly in cheek). We arrived in Port Napoleon on Friday afternoon. Tony had been there since Wednesday preparing the boat and I had to check out the boat sails etc. We were to set off on Saturday morning about 10am. All seemed in order however there were no reefing lines in the main. "What's a reefing line said Tony?" This is going to be a very steep learning curve, I thought. After sorting out the reefing system we finally set off down a very narrow channel. About three quarters of a mile out we passed a fisherman stood in about two feet of water, I hastily checked the chart table for the umpteenth time, just like S.Bank with sunshine!

Tony wanted to make the best use of time so we would sail straight across the Gulf of Lions with the intention of sighting the Spanish coast the following morning. We maintained an hourly plot on our chart; all electronics were working well until we were about 50 miles offshore. The next plot was a little puzzling; it put us somewhere in the Spanish mountains 20 miles inland. The chart plotter, GPS, and laptop all decided to fall out with each other and I remember someone telling me the importance of keeping a regular plot. The question was when had the technology decided to tell us lies? As we were basically sailing a straight course we maintained this, plotting an E.P each half an hour until we either got a visual fix or sorted out the wonderfully well-equipped wheelhouse. Now, as Barbara said this seemed like an excellent time for a cup of tea whilst I searched through my luggage for Suzi's hand held back up GPS (phew!) I never leave home without it.

Pretty soon we had an accurate fix and confidence was restored. Jim and Albert got to work to sort out the laptop and GPS. As the trip progressed I would find these two excellent in all things electronic. We settled down to our first overnight sail and at 8am we sighted the Spanish coast and continued sailing through Sunday passing Barcelona at

about 9:30pm. After our second overnight sail we arrived at the Gulf de San Jorge at 7:40am and from here we made the relatively short trip to Vinaroz arriving at 2:00pm Monday, our first stop.

After a very pleasant evening ashore sampling the excellent local seafood and occasional glass of wine we fuelled up and were on our way by 9am. Late afternoon brought us our first visit by the dolphins, they played right under the bowsprit; you could almost touch them, a truly amazing experience. We continued overnight past the Cabo de Palos and the longitude changed from east to west, all instruments in the wheelhouse in agreement this time. After the fourth night sail we intended to make our second stop at Almerimar marina, but the navtex forecast gales from the west so we changed to Agadulce in the sheltered waters by Almeria and were tied up by 1pm Thursday.

On Friday the gales had passed through (or so we thought) and the forecast gave SW 4-5 occ 6 easing 3-4 later, so eager to get on our way we set off towards Motril. Once we had left the sheltered waters of the bay the weather quickly blew up to a SW 7, so in with the first reef. The supposed wave height was no more than 1 meter, what a laugh! The 7 became an 8, gusting 9, so now 2 reefs in the main, full mizzen and a scrap of genoa. The boat had no problem with these conditions. After checking out two supposedly safe anchorages we finally arrived in Motril 10 hours and 42 miles later. The crew had coped superbly but I was shattered.

Saturday, we left Motril at 10:30am bound for the safe anchorage of Puerto de Soto Grande. This would enable us to make the passage through the straights of Gibraltar in daylight and make best use of the interesting tides. It was also our first experience of anchoring on the trip, in the dark (3am) made even more interesting as we didn't know if the anchor chain was fastened to the boat.

At 8am I had great satisfaction in finding the boat hadn't strayed from it's anchorage and we had our very first magnificent view of the rock of Gibraltar. We weighed anchor at 10:45 with our ETA for Europa Point being 1:30pm (HW+3) and this gave us 3 hours to make the transit through the straights. As we arrived at Tarifa the tide was just turning and we took the inside route just beating the tide and setting off for Trafalgar. We continued yet again overnight to Mazagon passing Cadiz and many hundreds of fishing pots en route. We arrived at Mazagon at 08:30 and made a flying visit collecting provisions, fuel, showers and 2 cold beers, being on our way again at 3:00pm bound for Portugal and Cascais (Lisbon) in approximately 40 hours, our final destination.

We enjoyed a pleasant afternoon and evening sail along the Algarve and passed Faro about 2am. The sea state had built up a little, now we were in the proper sea and also helped along by the previous gales. There were also many tuna nets which were lit by tiny red lights but could only be seen at the last moment. The next day we rounded Cabo Sao Vicente about 3pm and set our course for Cascais. The wind was now NW 4/5 so we were close hauled but making good progress. Jim, Barbara and I turned in about 11pm. At 3am it was our watch, so on with the coffee and the trousers. The navtex was once again forecasting gales later. Tony said we were now only making 4 knots as there was

considerable swell. Not to worry Tony we will be tied up in Cascais before the gales arrive I reassured him.

Tony and Albert were away to bed and Jim and I settled down in the wheelhouse. Barbara had a lie in which turned out to be a good thing. Shortly after, the battery light came on and the engine cut out. On inspection we found the engine room full of water. Tony had now joined us and was doing a fabulous job with the bilge pump. Now I am the eternal optimist when it comes to sailing but 3am, moderate seas, no engine, gales forecastAs I thought about the situation the VHF came to life, “all ships, all ships, all ships, this is Portuguese warship Hedra – we are currently carrying out naval exercises with a submarine, position ****N****W; all shipping is requested to keep clear for the next six hours. Now sometimes, just call it intuition, but I knew!....., Jim just check these co-ordinates will you. Yes, you’ve guessed it, we had just joined the naval exercise.

Tony had now cleared all the water from the engine room. It later turned out to be a failure in the cooling system but at this time all we knew was we had no engine, but on a positive note we had no more water coming in . We were still making way under sail but incredibly the wind was dropping so progress was almost non-existent. We were almost 7 miles from a leeshore so we heaved too in order to assess the situation. Barbara was now awake and preparing coffee, she is always cool under pressure whereas I...??

As I saw it we had two choices :-

1 - to wait for the wind and sail to Cascais. The problem with this was that the forecast was for gales, or...

2 - attempt to contact Lisbon and try to arrange a tow.

The second choice was the preferred option or at least the more cautious of the two. Attempts to raise Portugal or Lisbon on the VHF proved to be fruitless so we would have to improvise. “Warship Hedra, Warship Hedra, Warship Hedra, this is yacht Blackwatch”, and so on. We advised them of our situation and they said they would contact Lisbon on our behalf and send a vessel to keep an eye on our position. After about an hour we were being circled by a white over red light called Foxtrot 477. As it came light these lights turned into a huge grey search and rescue naval frigate complete with guns on the bows.

Foxtrot 477 contacted MRCC Portugal who in turn, finally contacted us and provided a name and number of a tug company who could help.

Contact was made and after an extortionate amount of money agreed they sent out a tug. Foxtrot 477 said they would have to leave before the tug arrived but they would contact us every hour to check our position. At approximately 1:30 pm the tugboat arrived, set up a tow and we arrived at Cascais at 6:30 pm. Not quite the arrival I had in mind, oh well next time maybe. We contacted the Warship Hedra and thanked them for all their help. They replied by saying it had been a pleasure and wished us all well.

We had sailed 1100 miles in 12 days; sadly the last 20 miles were on the end of a towrope. Would we do it all again?

ABSOLUTELY!!