

Pierrette - South to the Sunshine

This year's cruise with "Pierrette" did not start or finish anywhere near Glasson so I don't think it was a GSC cruise. However I think a brief account might be of interest to some - particularly anyone who might be tempted to steer the same course.

Having cruised a little around western Europe and feeling the need for some sunshine I have conceived a plan for a cruise by stages around the Mediterranean for about four years. The first stage - for 1996 - involved getting from Kilmelford in Scotland to the Balearic Islands in the western Med.

The start looked anything but auspicious. South to south-west winds and grey skies had been the order of the day for about two weeks before we left Kilmelford in early June and two days late., "Pierrette" sails to windward as well or better than most cruising yachts, but if you really want to make progress there is no faster way than to roll the headsail, strap the main in hard and motor sail. Six knots at 30 degrees off the wind is noisy, uncomfortable, wet - but makes effective progress. We did quite a bit of that down the Sound of Jura, down the North Channel, down the Irish Sea. A wet rough night delivered us to Arklow, weary, but with much of the lost time made up. A nights sleep, and then a 140 mile passage to Penzance starting Friday morning could put us back on schedule to arrive in Penzance by Saturday.

Schedules are hard taskmasters. I could well do without them, but most of the people who come sailing with me come for a week or two weeks holiday. They have to book their holidays, and they have to book their travel - and my part of the bargain has to be that I try to get there on time. At least we were on time at Penzance, and ready and waiting in the dock when Stuart and Crispin and Tyrell arrived for the passage across Biscay.

But then we had to use up two of our days in hand waiting until a break in the strong south-westerly appeared in the offing. It was Tuesday afternoon, and a veering wind was promised, when we headed out into a murky misty channel with low scud flying overhead.

However it was not the weather which was to provide the drama. Fifty miles out, and just as darkness was falling, a bang like a gunshot announced the failure of the rigging screw on the roller reefing forestay gear. Unrestrained the headsail unrolled, the sail and stay leapt about in the force 5 to 6 wind, and the mast was ready to tumble. At least it stayed upright till we could pay off down wind and take stock.

I knew all was not lost. It would have been but for the fact that exactly the same mishap had befallen us five years ago. Since then I had made provision for an emergency forestay. I knew we had the gear to save the situation if we could get it rigged. In fact it took 80 minutes to lash the broken stay, to get rid of the genoa, to rig the emergency stay and to get the no. 1 jib set - 800 minutes of frantic effort which left us totally exhausted. But there was also an exhilaration in knowing that we were still in business and, far from needing the lifeboat, were back on course, sailing fast in a wind that had indeed veered, and with no apparent reason why we should not continue.

By Friday we were in the very pleasant marina at the Real Club Nautico in La Coruna. We had put about 420 miles behind us in less than three days. The wind

reached force seven as we approached the Spanish coast, but otherwise had been 5 to 6 most of the way. We were very pleased to be there.

North west Spain is an excellent cruising area in itself. Deep rias, fishing villages, wooded hilly scenery, off-shore islands are all a delight. There is no heavy tourism. We enjoyed sunshine and brisk breezes, sea-foods of all description, swimming, sailing, exploring ashore. Lage, Finisterre, Muros, Corrubedo, Caraminal, Combarro, Islas de Cies, Vigo a week of lingering well spent. We even discovered that Spain could be efficient. Coming into Vigo harbour Sunday evening the throttle cable broke. How long to get this fixed in Spain we wondered? A week? Two weeks? By 11.00am on Monday morning I had located a Volvo Penta agent, obtained the new cable with immediate service, got it back to the boat and fitted it. Lucky it wasn't Glasson Dock!

Beyond the north west of Spain the coast is not of outstanding interest, and I planned to visit a few places of note rather than every little harbour. And there can be few places of note more worth a visit than Porto. A few miles up the river Douro the old city has a quite fascinating old waterfront, virtually no facilities for yachts except a quay - but no charges at all. The city is beautiful, and when you have done that you can indulge in as many tours of the ancient and famous Port houses as your legs can stand - there are free samples at the end of every tour!

Lisbon also is a fine city, although the facilities for visiting yachts are not terribly good. The marinas that can cater for visitors are well out of the city, and the only basins close to the city centre are dirty and unattractive. And yes, if you would visit a port around the coasts of Spain and Portugal now you mostly have to meet the expense of a marina - the harbours authorities want the yachts in the yacht harbour. However, the charges now mostly seem to be standardised, and are neither cheap nor outrageous. Having said that Lisbon and the navigable area further inland are obviously a marvellous sheltered water area for small craft.

The other feature of the cruise down this coast that we much appreciated were the steady and favourable winds. From Finisterre down to Cadiz we were rarely short of wind, always the wind was between west and north, and we had some spanking good sails. Away from Lisbon at 6.30am we were round Cape St. Vincent and at anchor before midnight - over 117 miles away, and an average speed of 7 knots.

On the border of Spain and Portugal the Gardiana river permits navigation over 20 miles inland. With sun-baked hills on either side, up a muddy brown river, with never a sign of the tourist attractions and developments on the coast, we motored up to Alcoutim - a very Spanish village barely disturbed by the tranquil comings and goings of a few very leisured yachts. One had been there for over a year!

However, past Cadiz our luck with the weather changed. Motoring away from the port we in the windless heat of late afternoon we noticed a catspaw or two on the water ahead - soon to be followed by a surface definitely ruffled from the south east. Within five minutes it was a force 5. As we turned into Sancti Petri a few miles on it was still increasing. Next morning there was a lot of wind - we went out to have a look, but with the wind instruments showing 41 knots from more or less ahead the outlook did not look fun and we turned back.

This was a Levanter - the dreaded wind of the Gibraltar Straits area. It blew for a week. The forecasts from the Straits were for winds of force 8 to 9, gusting 10 from the east. Twice we attempted progress in the early morning, but both times finished up in winds of nearly force 8 and only a few miles made good. So mostly we sat it out in Barate, a dusty little fishing port some 500 miles from Gibraltar, kicking our heels with frustration. Geoff Greenwell, who had been with us for two weeks had to call it a day with his promised passage to Gibraltar incomplete. And the remorseless schedule, which demanded that I be in Minorca to hand the boat over to my son and daughter plus friends for their holidays, began to look increasingly shaky.

One day it seemed a bit lighter, and, keeping close to the shore and with the wind angled a little off-shore, we thrashed down to Tarifa at the southernmost point of Europe (did you know this is where "tariffs" come from? Their origin lies with the Barbary pirates of this coast) Again it was nearly force 8 by the time we got there. We thought to try again on the morrow, and crept around the corner towards Gibraltar - and found only a failing force 5. By the afternoon that had gone and we were motoring into a calm harbour.

Thereafter the winds were from ahead, and either light or non-existent. To make up the lost time we settled into some long hours of motoring, and were thankful for a reliable motor. Though I actually the Spanish south coast less of a pain than I had expected. Anticipating the high rise hotels and the ballyhoo of the Costa del Sol we found we could view the high rise from the distant horizon and could visit smaller Spanish ports and anchor in sun drenched coves well away from the crowds. The only mistake was to try to visit Malaga. I thought the commercial port might be quite cheap. Apologetically the harbour staff indicated they would have to charge us merchant shipping rates - about 30 for an overnight by a dirty quay with no facilities! We moved on.

There was no time left for more of the Spanish mainland after Cartagena so we motored on through the night to Formentara, the first of the Balearic Islands. We arrived at 4.30pm. I immediately phoned my wife Margaret, who had been kept at home to earn the money, and asked her if she fancied trying to get to Majorca where we would be on the morrow. At 4.45pm she phoned Carnforth Travel. By 5.0pm she had booked a ticket (Manchester Majorca return for 69) By 6.0am she had checked in. By 9.0am she was in Palma, Majorca. We weren't - we were plodding across the glassy flat sea till 5.0pm, when happily we all met up in Port Andraitx.

There wasn't too far to go after that. Around the majestic north coast of Majorca, across the Minorca and around the south of that island to Mahon. John and Helen and friends arrived on the quay about 11.00am. We were just a bit late - by about 10 minutes actually. Not too far out after 2250 miles!

We returned to Majorca for some sailing with some French friends in October. After that "Pierrette" was laid up at Bonaire, near Pollensa, and will remain there till next early summer. Then I hope to take her a bit further, spending June and early July exploring some of the coasts of Sardinia, Sicily, Italy and Malta, finishing the season on the Ionian side of Greece. A lot of planning to do and crews to find over the winter. I am often looking for crew - if anyone at Glasson is fed up with Piel Island how about giving me a ring?

Alan Welbank