

## Pierrette's cruise to northern Spain 94

6th June saw 'Pierrette' away from Glasson. As usual there were plenty of jobs undone, but at least this year we were not still connecting up the electrics as we crossed the Irish sea. Not that all was well. The wind stuck to the forecast, and blew firmly and resolutely from the south west. Liverpool on tack; Port St Mary on the other. No way to make progress for Spain. We stuck it for an hour or two, then turned back for Piel.

Next day was a bit better Ð not a lot, but just a bit. Pinching the wind and often motor sailing we could nearly point the Great Orme, Greyish, coldish Ð not nice, but by evening we were in Menai, carried the tide through the Swellies and fetched up for the night in Abermenai at the west end of the Straits.

7.00am start next morning was planned. What a hope! First of all our (nearly new) engine wouldn't start. Prodding around inside without success Ð and then realise the alternator was hanging off, the main attachment bolt having fractured. Much gloom, falling way behind our tight schedule, thoughts of having to return home, and Spain feeling a long, long way away.

But it is marvellous how fortunes can change. The first surprise was looking in the list of Volvo Penta agents. They are scattered thinly across the country, but there was one with an address in Caernarfon just two miles away. We sailed across to Caernarfon and walked up a street looking for a shop who might direct us to the address. The first shop we came to was the Volvo Penta agent. Soon after midday the engineer was on board, by 3.0pm all faults were corrected (no charge!) and we were away. By 7.0pm we were rounding the Llyn peninsula. It was cold. The WSW wind was well forward of the beam. But we were going the right way. Anthony, Mick and myself stood two hour watches through the night, and dawn found us tacking to clear the islands off the Pembroke coast. A long grey day across the mouth of the reefing cringle yanked clean out of the mainsail leech. By dawn we were rounding Lands End, and by midday securely berthed inside the dock at Penzance.

Mick left and Robin and Mike arrived. And oh! how conditions can change! The sun came out, the wind went northerly, and by dusk the next day we were creaming along in mid Channel, spinnaker set and everyone happy and well fed after a day of warm sunshine and gentle seas. Early morning and we were through the Chenal du Four, midday and through the Raz de Sein, late afternoon and we had just enough tide left to scrape into Audierne, where the town marina is literally in the centre of the town. Brittany, croissant and cafe on the quay, warm sun Ð and none of the midsummer crowds. It was beginning to feel well worth the trip.

It stayed like that all down Brittany Ð and indeed across the Bay of Biscay. We called into the Ile de Glenan (where they invented the very idea of sailing schools) and then Le Pallais in Belle Ile. Both were quite enchanting in the early summer sunshine.

There were no crowds, no pressure. The last time I was in Le Pallais in August we could not even get into the harbour! This time there were perhaps six or eight visiting yachts. Everything was interesting, everyone was happy. Leaving Belle Ile to cross the Bay the sun still shone, and the wind, though fitful at first, still came in from northerly directions. The sea was moderate and we could cook proper meals. Sun tans were beginning to take over from boiled Ð beetroot reds.

Forty miles out from Bilbao the weather spell was broken when heavy clouds to the south developed into squally thunderstorms, and we had a reef down for the first time since Penzance. It was an exciting last dash, but by dawn the hills on the Spanish coast were emerging from the murk and the low grey clouds. Bilbao did not look beautiful, the weather did not look beautiful, but nothing could stop the elation of having completed a 250 mile passage, and having got to Spain on schedule, just less than two weeks out of Glasson.

Thereafter we never had a good sailing wind for nearly a thousand miles. But also from then on we had four weeks of almost enchanted cruising, following the north coast westwards as far as Cape Finisterre. This is not the Spain of the tourist brochures. It is a coast that is mostly pretty, often rugged with mountains not far inland, dotted with little ports but few yachting facilities, usually warm but never Mediterranean hot, purely Spanish with hardly a foreign tourist in sight. There are small marinas at Gijon and La Coruna with very reasonable charges and apart from them we never paid a charge during the four weeks.

Almost always the wind was too little or ahead. There can be a vicious swell, though we only met it during the first week. A combination of swell and a light head wind is a killer. Winds mostly come from the northerly sector in summer, and, although gales are rare, the passage of depressions dictates the weather in much the way it does at home. Harbours can easily become inaccessible if the swell and the wind drive onshore, so that is not quite a lazy coast free of tensions.

Crews came and went during the four weeks. At one time we had three of the five Development Officers of the British Amateur Swimming Federation on board! Anne Marshall-Lee, formerly a member of GSC, was down for two weeks. In total I think fourteen people shared in one or another part of the eight week cruise and a variety which sometimes seems among the richest aspects of our cruises.

Castro Udiales, San Vicente, Ribadsella, Luarca, Gijon, Navia, Santa Maria de Ortiguera, Corme, Corcubion, Finisterre, Camarinas, Ribadeo, San Ciprian and such a lot of places we had never heard of. Some harbours almost derelict, many full of gaily painted fishing boats, some marvellously pretty. At San Esteban Anne and I were whisked away in the middle of the night to a fiesta up the coast where crackets like artillery shells split the night sky. At Ortiguera we came back to the boat and found a bag of fish tied to the rigging 'for supper'. At San Vicente we celebrated Pippa's birthday with what must have been the best sea food dinner ever. And marvellously this coast is not over developed, and has hardly any tourists apart from modest numbers of Spanish holidaymakers. The millions who flock to Spain come for the sun, and on this coast the sun is not guaranteed and so it remains a little backwater, almost a secret corner of Europe that the crowds pass by.

However, mid-July came and it was time to head north again. Things did not auger too well when, gybing off Cape Finisterre, the mainsail split across three foot of sail just below the first reef. Coming on top of the cringle pulling out in the Irish Sea I got the idea that we were being told something. We motor-sailed back to La Coruna in the headwind and the first north-easterly for a month and managed to get in the sail repaired in the day (but at a price!) by a marquee manufacturer.

There must always be some anxiety about starting a Biscay crossing, over 500 miles direct to penzance. However, there was little rather than too much wind and we motored for about 350 miles out from La Coruna. Irritating yet, noisy yes, but at least you feel you are going in the right direction at a good pace and without much discomfort. When the wind did at last fill in it was of course from dead ahead. But we had sunshine all the way, sailed through the middle of the Tall Ships fleet who were heading for La Coruna on a reciprocal course, and were back in England after four days and nights at sea, enjoying a slapdash English breakfast at a pub by the harbour.

Another 150 miles across the Irish Sea to Arklow, and we finally got the message from the mainsail. Finishing in a run in force five to six over the offshore banks with attendant short seas we gybed for the harbour and the main split right across from luff to leach. It didn't gently tear one second it was there, the next it had exploded in to ribbons right across. Fortunately it was below the second reef (the first reef was pulled down at the time), so for the rest of the voyage the main was two reefs down. Arklow, Howth, Donaghadee, Rathlin Island and back to the grey skies and the grey waters. A last stop in remote Loch Tarbert on the west side of Jura (one of my favourite anchorages) and, on the last day of the cruise, the weather forecast there was force seven to eight from the south west. But nothing could stop us now, and we tore up the Firth of Lorne at 8 and 9 knots, in through Cuan Sound to Kilmelford Yacht Haven where 'Pierrette' was to remain for the rest of the summer.

2280 miles in the log, eight weeks all but a day away from home, quite a few bits and pieces to sort out and repair, a new mainsail in urgent need but a jolly good summer's cruise.