

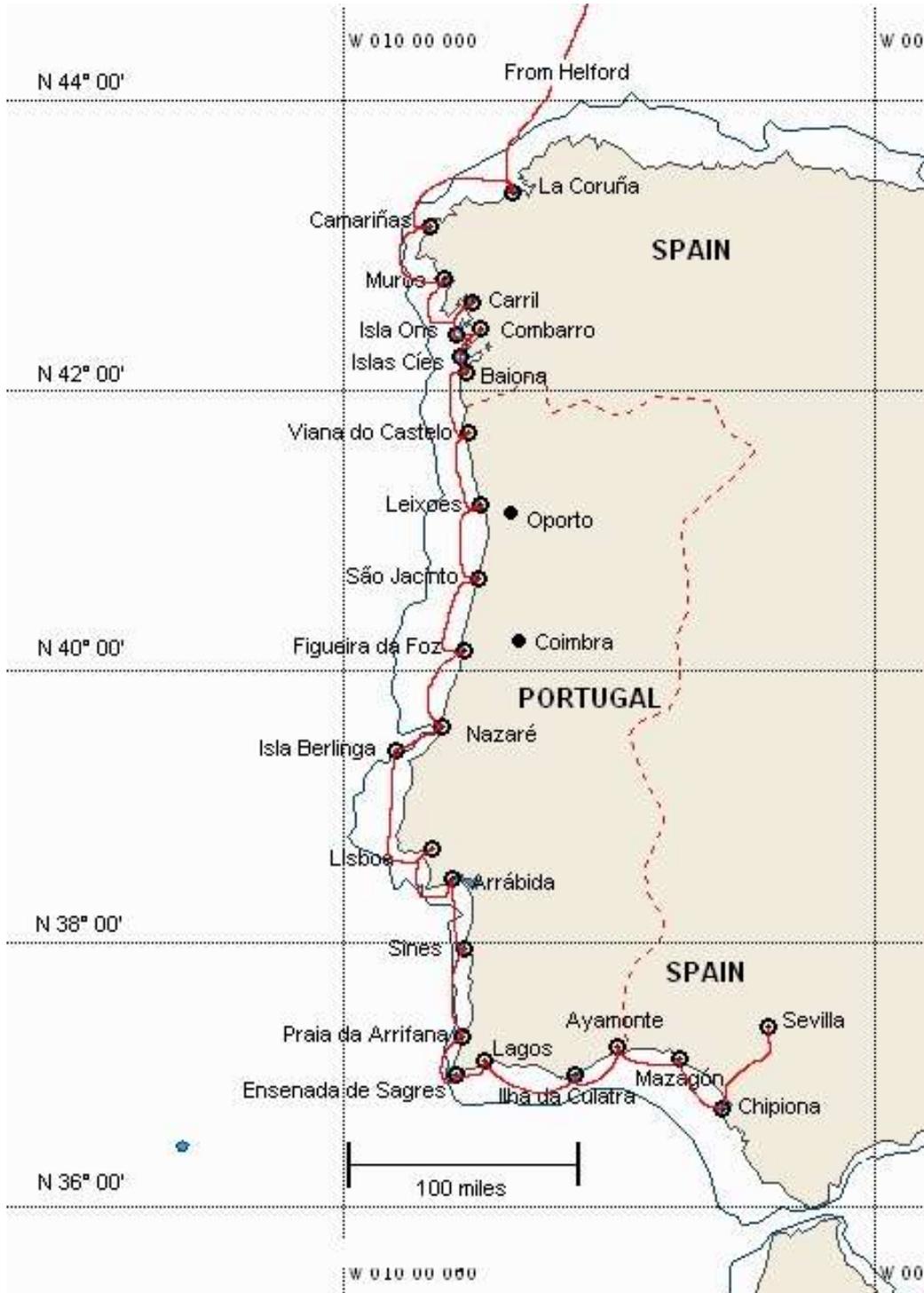
Tapas and Tail Winds

The Iberian Cruise of Mina²
July and August 2006



Tim Barker

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My preference is the higher latitudes but my pact with the Downstairs Skipper (whose preference is warm, sandy beaches) was that after a couple of years of northern cruises, we headed for the sun. And a deal is a deal. After over-wintering in St Katherine Docks by the Tower of London, *Mina*², my cutter-rigged Oyster 485, was ready to go down river to Gillingham for her annual haul out prior to our departure for the Mediterranean. However I received a letter from the St Katherine Docks harbourmaster saying that due to the outer gate having fallen off its hinges, the lock was inoperable and would remain so until further notice. Although the letter was dated 1st April the harbourmaster was not renowned for his side-splitting sense of humour so I telephoned to find this was no hoax.

To cut a long and frustrating story short, we were all trapped inside the dock and it was a month before any boat could enter or leave. By this time, I had lost my slot at Gillingham which meant a further two weeks delay. Whilst my plans were thwarted for an extended cruise down the south coast to the West Country and the Scilly Isles, visiting for perhaps the last time all our old favourite haunts before permanently heading away from home waters, we still had plenty of time to get to Falmouth for the Biscay crossing, scheduled to start on 9 July. Actually the jumping off point turned out to be the delightful Helford River as none of the marinas in Falmouth could accommodate *Mina*² in her last week before departure.

In the days prior to our Biscay crossing I had been monitoring the weather patterns and all looked quite benign with forecasts of a moderate southwesterly veering to the north to give us a gentleman's wind to La Coruña, 430 miles away on the northwest tip of Spain. Arriving a day early to get everything prepared, my first indication that the forecasts were a little out was the train from Truro to Falmouth juddering to a halt as a tree had fallen across the line. By the time I got to Helford it was blowing a full gale and continued to do so until the arrival on board, just a few hours before our scheduled departure, of Richard Close-Smith and Venetia Kenney-Herbert, both RCC members, who were to make up the ship's complement for the passage. Venetia made sure she arrived first in order to grab the best bunk, which she deserved given that she had also brought along all the food for the passage, including one of her famous fruitcakes (this time even more moist and alcoholic than ever).

Venetia also brought on board the logs of the *Little Eila* RCC, Edward Bourne's Contessa 32 on which Venetia and Richard had cruised to the rias of northwest Spain in 1974 and 1975. These logs (one of which was awarded The Romola Cup in 1975) set the standards of excellence by which I felt our cruise was going to be measured. Comments in the log like "Venetia's noon position [by sextant] put us only a couple of miles from our DR position" was impressive enough for someone with no fewer than five GPS receivers on board, but more impressive still was the fact that, during the 1975 cruise, *Little Eila* was steered by hand or windvane; she had oil lamps for

navigation lights and, during her three week cruise, she didn't have the engine running even for a minute. Reading these logs was humbling but, at the same time, inspiring. (There are downsides to this degree of purism – on one occasion they sat motionless for eleven hours within garlic-smelling sight of the quayside before a zephyr wafted them ashore to the then closed restaurants).

I, too, had this romantic idea that when God's own energy is wafting us across the seas, I am doing my bit to save the planet. But in truth, all the while *Mina*² is positively humming with all her electric lights, navigation instruments, radar, radio, stereo and computers (not to mention the electric kettle, toasters etc). Also, in practice, when coastal cruising and having to hit crew change deadlines one does use the engine a fair amount. And then you have to add to that the number of flights which my guests take to join me then get home again. Taking last year's cruise round the Baltic as an example, I used 2000 litres of diesel and my guests between them took no less than 60 flights. I have calculated that the CO² emissions from these two sources alone amounted to a staggering 20 tons. If I am to have any pretence at living an ecological existence on the boat then I will have to add to my cruising budget the cost of offsetting these obscene CO² emissions – about £150 in the case of last year's cruise.

But back to the purist principles, at 2010 on Sunday 9 July we raised the mainsail, sailed off our mooring in the Helford River, cleared the Manacles, hauled down our Cornish courtesy flag, and on starboard tack beat as close a course for La Coruña as the now moderated F4 wind from the south-southwest would allow. At 0400 the following morning we tacked to steer due west. As we did so, the fog came down and it stayed with us for the best part of a day. At 1500 we were approaching the northeast bound shipping lanes to the north of Ushant and, with visibility less than 100m, the radar picked up a large vessel bearing down on us at an alarming rate. Having seen its distance reduce from 3 ½ miles to 1 ½ miles in less than five minutes, I bottled out. On went the engine, port 90° and we hammered at full speed out of the way. After 10 minutes, when the unseen leviathan was undeniably past us, I turned the engine off. As the engine died Richard said, rather primly I thought, "We wouldn't have done that on *Little Eila*". "Indeed not", chipped in Venetia, "we would have taken the bow wave head on and then scraped our way down the hull fending off with the spinnaker pole, rather than turn the engine on!". My feeling of humiliation and failure was tempered only partially by the relief that I was still alive.

At dinner time the first of Venetia's masterpieces appeared, Faisan de Biscay, the pheasants having been shot by the talented Mr Kenney-Herbert who was also responsible for all the vegetables on board, picked so recently they were still screaming.

Our rhumb line from Helford put us 30 miles off Ushant but in the event, with all the tacking, we passed close by the islands (an impressive sight) at 2200 on Monday evening, and easily within mobile phone range. So I surprised Maria (the absentee Downstairs Skipper) with a farewell telephone call, having forgotten to call her the evening before, as promised. By this time the wind had, as forecast, veered to the west F4 and we were, for the first time, steering a course for our destination.

The night was pure magic. As the wind continued to veer, we found ourselves beam reaching at seven to eight knots in a F5, the full moon reflecting its silvery light off the slight waves. As the night wore on the wind continued to veer and after a

substantial breakfast on Tuesday morning, with the wind now coming from the north, we broke out the cruising chute which stayed up for the next 24 hours whilst dolphins played around our bow wave.

I love a good passage more than anything and this passage was good passage by any standards. The conditions were so perfect that there was an enormous temptation to go starboard five degrees and just carry on until we hit Madeira or the Azores or, like Bernard Moitessier, miss the whole lot and go on for ever. But our spouses would be waiting for us on the quayside in La Coruña so we maintained our course.

Since our close encounter with the unseen leviathan the day before we had seen no shipping, but at 0700 on Tuesday morning we were buzzed by a naval helicopter which swooped around us before screaming off again, and later in the morning we also received a visit from an executive plane which give us a wiggle of its wings before heading off for the mainland.

At 1000 we fell off the edge of the world. This is the point at which the continental shelf plummets from 100m to more than 4000m and this – with luck - was where we were to see whales which was a great ambition of mine. Two years earlier I had taken *Mina*² to the continental shelf north of the Lofoten Islands in arctic Norway where one is also “guaranteed” to see whales and I suppose we had. After a full day motoring along the shelf we had seen two miniscule puffs and two miniscule flukes, both about two miles away. It seemed on this occasion, after four hours of scouring the horizon for any tell-tale blows, that my Lofoten whale experience might have been an epic experience as, on this occasion, we saw absolutely nothing. Even the dolphins had deserted us. By now I was getting tired so descending the companionway to retire to my bunk I said to Richard “Call me if you see a whale”. “What, like that one over there?” said Richard, pointing. On cue and no more than half a cable off our starboard beam, there was a fountain of water coming from what looked like a large brown-pink granite island. Not exactly Orlando SeaWorld. There were no obliging somersaults or fluke slapping, but it was a whale – my first proper whale – and I retired to my bunk a happy man.

Lunchtime, and Venetia spoilt us with a delectable selection of cold meats, cheese and a beetroot salad, the beetroot having been dug fresh from her kitchen garden. (The beetroot had an extraordinary effect on me later – for a while I was convinced that I was bleeding internally!)

The wind remained light and from the north for the rest of the day, and even though at times our boat speed slowed to less than 2 knots we were in no rush. Just as well because there was no chance I was going through the humiliation of turning the engine on again. So we drifted slowly southwards over the majestic Atlantic swell.

By Wednesday morning, the wind had veered right round to the northeast and was now beginning to freshen at last. As the day progressed, the wind continued to strengthen: F5, F6, F7 and by midnight we were belting along at 9 knots with a gale of wind on our port quarter (at one point gusting to over 40 knots). The northeasterly waves were now competing with the westerly swell and throwing up a confused sea – but *Mina*² was taking it all in her stride as she raced for the finishing line. She even gave us a sufficiently stable platform on which to enjoy the last of Venetia’s culinary delights at dinnertime – Poulet Espanol avec Choux. After dinner, Richard offered to do the washing up but embarrassed himself by having to ask how to drain the water

from the galley sink. It was clear that after three full days on board he hadn't until now been anywhere near the washing up. (This actually played into our hands rather well as Richard felt morally obliged to do all the washing up for the following week!).



Richard thinks breakfast in bed is fun – until he discovers the washing up!

At this point I have to make a small confession. The one thing I forgot to pack when I left home the previous Saturday was a small piece of orange plastic – the cartography chip with all the charts for the whole of the Iberian peninsula (I can sense all you diehard paper chart traditionalists reading this with rather smug “I-told-you-so” expressions on your faces!). Whilst Maria now had the chip sellotaped to her passport to make sure she didn't leave it behind when she flew out to La Coruña to join us, I was rapidly approaching a rocky lee shore in the dark with nothing more than a very large scale chart of the whole of Biscay and the chartlet of La Coruña harbour in the pilot book. Not ideal but with all the waypoints programmed into the GPS it was more than sufficient for the purpose, and at 0545 on Thursday morning, with 480 miles under the keel at an average speed of just under 6 knots, we sailed in the dawn light onto a mooring buoy in La Coruña harbour. Passage time 81 hours 35 minutes. Engine hours: a shameful 10 minutes.

We caught up on our sleep for a few hours on the now stationary boat, before casting off our mooring and moving into the Dársena de la Marina to tidy up, and then to see a bit of the town before awaiting the arrival by plane of our respective spouses - the “brackets”. Anthony (Venetia's husband) and Maria (the Downstairs Skipper) turned up over the next 24 hours, but Essex (Richard's wife) was not able to join us until Sunday by which time we would have started moving round the coast. The logistics of getting Essex from the airport to a small fishing village up a remote ria appeared complicated. So Richard was awaiting Maria's arrival with even keener anticipation than I, in order to exploit her fluency of the Spanish language. I was sent off to the airport to meet Maria and by the time the Downstairs Skipper was piped on board Richard already had the two Brompton bikes out to take Maria off for “a quick bike ride to the bus station”. Four hours later they returned, Maria in a state of catatonic shock. She is a cautious cyclist, normally restricting herself to deserted towpaths, reluctant to cycle down even quiet side streets. Whenever she hears a car, however distant, she dismounts to let it pass. It transpired that Richard's usual military map-

reading skills had on this occasion deserted him and he had inadvertently led Maria onto the main La Coruña to Santander motorway. It took Maria days to recover.

After exploring the town with its magnificent square, and houses with glassed-in balconies, we took the tram to the Torre de Hércules, the famously oldest working lighthouse in the world. Having worked up an appetite climbing to the top of the lighthouse and then walking back to the marina, we ate in one of the many restaurants in the Old Town that display their fish and seafood in refrigerated windows overlooking the pavement.



Torre de Hércules – the oldest working lighthouse in the world.

We awoke early the following morning, Saturday 15 July, for our first coastal leg to Camariñas. With 48 miles to cover and a very light northeasterly breeze I was allowed to use the engine for a good part of the way, not least to minimise the journey time for poor Anthony who was suffering from the long Atlantic swell and euphemistically “finding his sea legs” over the guard rail for most of the passage.

We arrived in the little fishing harbour of Camariñas just in time for their annual Festival of the Sea when all the fishing boats are decked out with green branches and bunting, take on board hundreds of revellers and then career around the harbour to the ear-splitting accompaniment fire sirens, fog horns and rocket fire-crackers. A fun fair was being thrown up on the marina hard for the festivities to continue into the evening and, joy upon joy, a full sized rock concert stage with the biggest sound system you’ve ever seen. So the village was certainly lively. Just as well. Whilst the Ria de Camariñas is undeniably beautiful, the village itself is undeniably ugly.

Amongst the funfair attractions was a bungee assisted trampoline. Once harnessed to the bungee lines, you were able to leap miles into the air. It looked great fun and

appealed to the child in me. I persuaded Richard to join me. Richard was given the go-ahead but I was dismissed as being “demasiado gordo” – too fat. What an insult. And then the music started. It was ear-shattering and entertained us in our bunks until 0430 the following morning.



Festival of the Sea in Camariñas

Notwithstanding our interrupted night's sleep we were up early for the long and beautiful walk to the lighthouse on Cabo Villano before it got too hot. Allegedly you get stunning views from the top. I say allegedly because half way there we walked into the clouds and, on arrival at the lighthouse, we could barely see the top of it, let alone the panoramic views. It was nevertheless a lovely walk. (Be sure to take the coastal path. If you miss it on the way up, it is sign-posted on the way down).

We eventually left for Muros at 1315. Not as far as our first passage but at 38 miles it was still a respectable distance for a day sail, rounding Cape Finisterre on the way. We managed to sail most of the way and we arrived in Muros at 1945. We anchored outside the picturesque fishing harbour just as the finishing touches were being made to a very familiar looking funfair and mobile rock stage which had moved during the day from Camariñas. Yes, it was Muros turn to have their fiesta, in honour of the Virgen del Carmen.

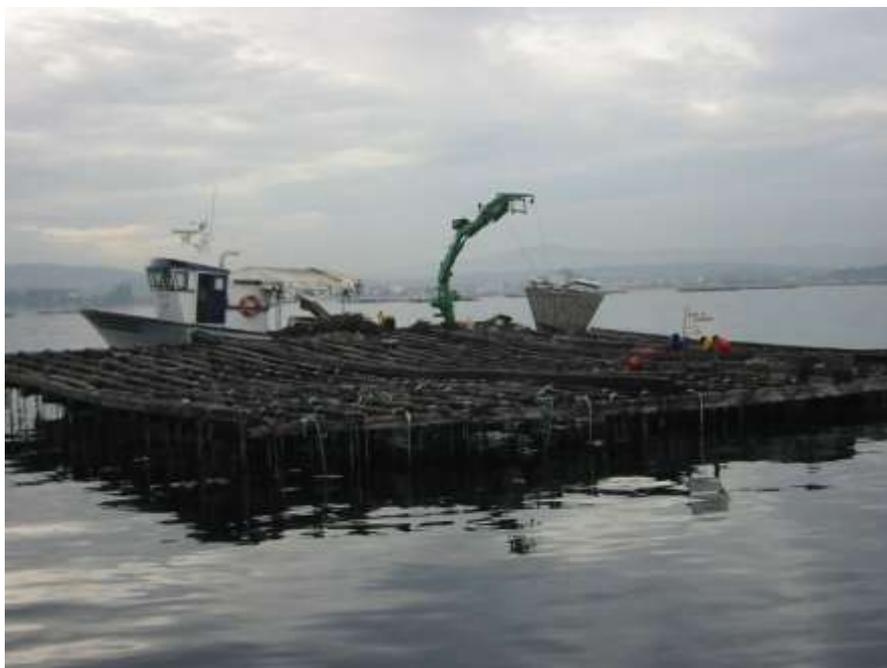
Muros is a very pretty village, clearly quite prosperous at one time, with charming colonnaded pavements along the waterfront. It is popular with a better class of tourist which ensures a high standard for the many restaurants, one of which we patronised for the evening. Galician cuisine is largely based on seafood and fish – and what seafood! Shell fish of every variety; crabs and lobsters, and succulent squid and octopus - a gourmand's paradise. Having successfully rendezvous'd with Essex, we were enjoying a coffee outside a café after dinner when there was the first volley, right in front of us, of what turned out to be one of the most spectacular fireworks displays we had ever seen, enjoyed from the comfort of our ringside seats.

We knew what was coming later so, before the rock band struck up, we returned to the boat with a view to hitting the digestifs to the point of unconsciousness. It didn't work: we had another sleepless night made all the more uncomfortable by the developing hangovers!

The following day, Monday 17 July, having paid our respects to fellow RCC member Mike Gill who was anchored close by, we moved a couple of miles further into the ria to the anchorage in the Ensenada de Bornalle for a lazy day of swimming and Maria's first beach (one of the areas of hopeless incompatibility in our marriage is Maria's love, and my loathing, of swimming and beaches).

I had been given to believe that the rias of north-west Spain had been ruined by overdevelopment – garish holiday estates built along the entire length of the shoreline and the blight of wind farms on every exposed crest. Perhaps in comparison to the unspoilt coastline of a few years ago this may be the case, but as a first time visitor I was enchanted by the rias' majestic beauty and serenity. And for every person who considers wind farms to be an abomination there is another who finds them strangely beautiful and quixotic. I fall into the latter category. But however green and lush the hills appeared, they were clearly tinder dry. At any one time you could see the billowing smoke from a number of different hill fires; hear explosions as the fire services dynamited fire breaks and the constant buzz of helicopters rushing back to the rias to replenish the voluminous water bags slung beneath them.

No sooner had our anchor dug into the sandy bottom in 4m just off the beach, than all but I leapt into the anaesthetically cold water. Richard swam to the nearby rocks and harvested a crop of mussels for lunch. They returned to the boat stuffed into his swimming shorts, doubtless imbuing them with an unique flavour. They certainly tasted good enough when cooked *à la mariniere*. Half of Europe's mussels come from this area, grown on ropes which hang down from vast rafts, known as *viveros*, which are dotted all over the rias. Even locally however, the mussels are surprisingly expensive, so Richard's free crop tasted all the more delicious.



Mussel farming on the viveros

The beach was clean and had very few people on it. It was a perfect spot for the barbecue which we enjoyed that evening. As darkness fell, we could see on the hillside behind us the orange glow of a hill fire. The glow got brighter and brighter until we could see the orange flames licking over the crest reaching out for the next tinder-dry tree to consume. There was a constant stream of fire-fighting vehicles snaking their way up the hairpin track to the summit. The fire was contained, doubtless to the great relief of the owner of the large house which was nestled in the woods a short distance down the hill.

We awoke the next morning to fog, cloud and a brisk southwesterly wind. Sadly we saw little of the ria as we made our way out into the Atlantic again and fetched south round Cabo Corrubedo and into the intricate channels which form the entrance to the Ria de Aroso, first negotiating the Canal de Sagres, a quarter of a mile wide, and then the Paso del Carreiro, just over a cable wide. Luckily there were a few fishing boats making their way in and we followed their lead. Our destination was the village of Carril, right at the end of the ria and just north of Vilagarcia, where we were attracted by the descriptions of “a pretty little village with delightful bars and restaurants”. And how right they were. Having anchored just outside the small fishing harbour, we went ashore and later dined at a rather smart (and expensive) restaurant on their vine covered terrace overlooking the ria. Excellent.

Whilst Carril may be the smart place to dine out, it is still very much a working village and it was here that we saw our first fish market. Almost every fishing harbour down the entire coast has a (wholesale) fish market on the quayside. The fishing boats come in and load their catch into trays which are wheeled into the market and weighed, sold by dutch auction, and taken straight off to the fishmongers or restaurants. All very quick and very efficient.

Other traditions also die hard and we saw a number of men walking along with a light carrier bag whilst their black-garbed wives walked behind with a 10 kilo sack of potatoes balanced on their heads. Vive la difference!

With a comparatively short 30-mile leg to Combarro, we allowed ourselves the luxury of a late start the following morning (Wednesday 19 July). We weighed anchor at 1100 and, after anchoring briefly in a pretty little bay at the extreme northwest tip of Isla de Arosa for a late breakfast, we curled round the corner and into the Ria de Pontevedra, leaving to starboard the pretty Isla Ons which we planned to visit the following day. When we arrived at Combarro we laid our anchor just outside the harbour entrance but after two attempts without getting a purchase we picked up a vast mooring buoy close by. Judging by the size of the enormous rope warps this was where the QEII ties up, so we felt quite secure for the night.

Every pilot book, tourist guide and log that I looked at in preparation for the cruise had described Combarro as “a gem”. And indeed it is. The old part of the village consists of narrow cobbled streets lined with pretty flower-festooned granite houses leading down to the water’s edge where stand the traditional stone grain stores perched on their rat-proof mushroom-shaped stone legs. At the top of the village stands a beautiful Romanesque church.



Combarro – “a gem”

One of the local delicacies we had not yet tried was sardines and we found just the right place. On the waterfront (conveniently accessible by dinghy) is a small square with old wooden tables and a wood burning grill. This, we were told by the locals, was where we would get the best sardines in the area. The old man who was turning the fishes on the grill had been doing the job for thirty years and had developed asbestos fingers with which he deftly flicked the sardines over and over until they were cooked to perfection. A real treat.

Having returned to the boat after dinner, Richard announced that he had a cunning plan: to ensure that the non-sailing members of the crew climbed the learning curve as rapidly as possible, he was proposing that for the whole of the following day, Maria would be Upstairs Skipper and Essex and Anthony would be her crew. My role, as Admiral, was to be strictly non-executive, and Richard and Venetia would busy themselves by giving the boat a thorough spring-clean and would deal with all the domestic arrangements. “What do you think of it Tim?” Well, I quite liked the idea of the spring-clean but beyond that I thought the idea sucked. As I said to Richard later during a quiet chat, it was akin to me suggesting that his two small children were entrusted to the care of a couple of the more demented inmates of the lunatic asylum by way of an interesting experiment. Nevertheless, not wanting to come across as a power-crazed control freak, I felt obliged to pretend that I thought the idea was absolutely terrific; that I had full confidence in the skipper and crew etc etc.

That night I didn't sleep too well. Nor, I suspect did Maria. Throughout the night I was bombarded with questions like “Remind me again which string we pull to get the sail out of the stick thing?” (a reference, I think, to the in-mast furling main). The following morning, whilst Venetia and Richard prepared the breakfast, Maria and her crew were familiarising themselves with the chartplotter by manically punching buttons at random. Two badges were found and whilst Maria proudly pinned the one marked “Captain” to her T-shirt, the other one, marked “Galley Slave”, was pinned to Richard's. We were ready to go.



The new “Galley Slave” and “Captain”. One of them was a great success.

I had been told that the off-lying islands of Isla Ons and the Islas Cies were highlights of this coast. The Isla Ons guards the entrance to the Ria de Pontevedra and lay 11 miles from our anchorage. This was to be our first stop. Feigning complete indifference, the Admiral took a book to one of the quarter seats at the stern and pretended to read. (In truth, the book stayed open at the same page the entire day.) The course was accurately plotted; the engine turned on; the anchor raised; sails were set (eventually) and trimmed to perfection and, after a rather serpentine start, an accurate course steered to the island. The sound of water washing past the hull was drowned by the sound down below of furious scrubbing and hoovering as Richard and Venetia fulfilled their side of the bargain. I'm proud to say that I managed to stay shtum the entire trip except for two occasions when I leapt to my feet screaming “Stop!” just before some expensive bit of kit was ripped from the deck by an electric winch.

We anchored off a beautiful gleaming white beach fringed with scented eucalyptus and pine trees. The beach was uncrowded and included some of the best examples of nudants (as they are known in our family) we had seen. The shore party spent the afternoon variously lounging around on the beach or scaling the heights of the island, according to taste, whilst I remained on the boat sorting a few things out. After tea I resumed my Admiral's position on the poop deck, Maria gave the order to weigh anchor and with Essex at the helm we made our way ten miles south to the Islas Cíes. These consist of three wonderful, mountainous and wooded islands, the northern most two of which are joined by a sandy spit. The islands are a bird sanctuary, mainly herring gulls and lesser black-backed gulls as far as I could see. There is a campsite fed by regular ferries from Bayona which also brings day trippers to the islands but, apart from that, the islands are quite deserted and very beautiful with long sandy beaches on the eastern side.

After a couple of attempts to get the anchor to hold, the engine was turned off and I (very quietly) heaved a sigh of relief. The experiment was over. Maria, having thanked and congratulated her crew, retired below to find it gleaming like a new pin.

The experiment had, of course, been a terrific success. In fact the only person who ended up with egg on his face was Richard who as Galley Slave had to confess at lunchtime that he had no idea how to turn the cooker on. This was a man who had been on board for a full ten days!

The following morning (Friday 21 July) we awoke to another gloriously sunny day and decided to explore the islands before the sun got too high. We walked across the sandy spit to the Isla del Faro, and across the mountain to the lighthouse on the southern tip which afforded panoramic views for miles in all directions. At lunchtime we relocated to anchor off the beach of the southernmost island (Isla de San Martin). As a bird sanctuary one is not supposed to go tramping all over the island, but the beach lovers did go and spend the afternoon ashore and swimming in the crystal clear waters. At 1700 in a light northwesterly wind, we sailed off the anchor and made our way to Bayona, funking out of the rock strewn inner passage and making our way instead around the outside of the Islotes las Serralleiras.



Isla de San Martin in the Islas Cíes

Bayona seems to be everyone's favourite, and I can understand why. We had been told that on approaching the breakwater we would be greeted by a mariner in a dory from the big marina who would try to lead us to our berth, but we were to resist and turn sharp right into the marina of the Monte-Real Club de Yates. Bang on cue, there was the mariner, but we made our excuses and made our way to the pontoons of the yacht club marina. The MRCY is efficient and friendly and has a most welcoming club house and restaurant (comparatively formal) and all the facilities you could ask for. It also lies in the shadow of the parador, once the residence of the Governor of the province, with its fortified walls which wind round the peninsula and offer spectacular views of the Islas Cies, particularly as the sun goes down.

Here one is also entering the area from which all the great Spanish and Portuguese explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries left and/or returned. It was to Bayona that the Pinta, one of Columbus's three ships, returned with news of the discovery of the New World. There is a replica of the Pinta in the harbour and it is only when you

see how incredibly small it is that you appreciate the bravery of those men who knowingly sailed over the horizon into the unknown.

We hadn't originally intended going the 10 miles up the ria to Vigo itself as I had got the impression that it was very industrial and didn't have much to recommend it. But Richard and Essex had an early train to catch from there the following morning, so we sailed across the ria to an anchorage on the north side in the Ensenada de Barra where we spent a pleasant afternoon before sailing up to Vigo. And whilst perhaps not quite as quaint as Bayona, we were all very pleasantly surprised at this elegant and wealthy town.

So after two weeks of the Biscay crossing and the exploration of the Spanish rias, the time had come for the Close-Smiths and the Kenney-Herberts to leave. As always they are delightful people to have on board and, as always, they left the boat in much better condition than when they arrived. Exemplary guests.

On Sunday 23 July, Maria and I, now alone, sailed back down to Bayona where we stayed for the next couple of days, generally chilling out and dealing with domestic arrangements such as two weeks worth of accumulated laundry.

On Tuesday 25 July Maria and I left the Galician rias to head into Portugal. I had always known that the rias were to be a highlight of our passage down the Iberian peninsula and so they were. Superb cruising grounds cut into the magnificent wooded hills on either side with the variety of islands, sandy beaches, secluded anchorages and captivating villages and towns. After the last couple of years in Norway and the Baltic, not renowned for their high cuisine, the seafood for which Galicia is renowned is addictive. You could spend months cruising this area and still have only scratched the surface. Indeed John Minton, the original owner of *Mina*² (then *Stealer*) brought her here year after year, so *Mina*² pretty much knew her way around. But for us it was all new and all delightful.



Pole-dredging for shell fish

didn't mean we weren't looking forward to Portugal, and so it was not with a heavy heart that Maria and I set sail for Viana do Castelo at the mouth of the Rio Lima some 30 miles down the coast. To break the journey we tucked in behind the island fort,

Insua Nova, in the entrance to the Rio Minho which forms the border between Spain and Portugal and anchored for lunch.

The Portuguese trades had now established their pattern of little to no wind in the morning then during lunch the trade wind kicks in and builds up during the afternoon to a lively northwesterly F5 or 6 and occasionally stronger. But as the wind is always astern it simply speeds you on your way whilst providing you with a cooling breeze. As a result of these trade winds we had a fast passage for the remainder of the leg to Viana do Castelo and arrived at 1730 at the marina which is almost underneath an impressive road and rail bridge spanning the river, which was built by Monsieur Eiffel. He was clearly a busy man. Apart from his famous tower, he also designed and built the internal structure of the Statue of Liberty and the locks of the Panama Canal. But his great love was bridges which he built all over the world from Canada to Indochina. As we made our way down the coast there hardly seemed to be a river of any consequence which didn't have an impressive Eiffel bridge spanning it.

Viana do Castelo became very wealthy in the sixteenth century from trade with Brazil and the Newfoundland cod fishing fleet and this wealth is still evident from the magnificent medieval town square, the Praça da Republica, with its renaissance fountain surrounded by opulent public buildings. The pretty streets fanning away from the square are lined with the impressive houses of the wealthy merchants. But not all the residents of Viana do Castelo sat at home creating their fortunes. At least four of its sons became famous navigator explorers, including João Velho who charted the Congo.

Atop a mountain overlooking the town is the domed neo-byzantine Basilica do Santa Luzia. Certainly worth a visit, but first you have to get there. The funicular railway was out of action so we set off in the comparative cool of the early morning for the long haul up the mountain. The flight of stone steps to the summit went on and on. And on. It certainly did for my knee on which I had recently had an operation. But it was well worth the pain and suffering. The Basilica looks as if it had been built hundreds of years ago but was in fact constructed in the early part of the twentieth century. Modelled on the Sacré Coeur in Paris, it is surprisingly small and intimate inside with the most superb carvings, paintings and stained glass. Outside, the view over the town and river would have been worth the climb in itself.



Basilica do Santa Luzia

Next stop was Leixoes, another 30 miles down the coast and the commercial harbour for Oporto. We left after lunch in a stiff F6 northwesterly wind. Not the most relaxing passage as there was a minefield of lobster pots almost the whole way, some of which were barely marked with an empty oil can and no flag. My original intention was to try and stay in Oporto itself, but everyone told me that this was really impractical (which turned out to be the case). My reluctance to stay in Leixoes was that it probably has the worst press of any marina anywhere. The unanimous view is that it is incredibly dirty with one pilot book saying “...there is often a film of crude oil and carcasses of cats, dogs and birds floating around!” Anyway needs must, but to my surprise I found the marina as clean and pleasant as any I had come across.

Leixoes, with its nearby airport (so nearby that you can hear the reverse thrust of the landing planes from the marina), is an ideal spot for crew changes. Maria was to return to London for a week and I was to have a boys’ week to get down to Lisbon, with three friends joining me.

Lawrence Wells likes to keep people on their toes so he turned up a day earlier than expected which was a lovely surprise. I don’t suppose he will be doing that again – rather than arriving to find an immaculately clean boat, he was press-ganged into cleaning it himself ready for the arrival of the other two, Tom Mallaburn and Derek Scott, the following day.

Maria and I had taken the bus into Oporto the previous day. On the Rio Douro, it was all it was cracked up to be with the twisting streets of the Old Town rising above the north bank of the river. Crossing to the south bank over the impressive Maria Pia bridge, another of Eiffel’s creations, one arrives at all the English and Scottish-owned port lodges – Warr, Taylor, Croft, Dow, Graham, Sandeman, and Cockburn to name the more famous. Most of them have conducted tours of the lodges followed by a wine tasting and Maria and I enjoyed a pleasant afternoon, escaping from the heat, going round the Graham’s lodge and, after sampling some excellent vintages, being painlessly relieved of the contents of my wallet in exchange for a variety of their products.



Eiffel’s bridge in Oporto and the view of the city from Graham’s port lodge

On the morning of Saturday 29 July, having said goodbye to Maria the evening before and now with all the “lads” on board, our departure for Aveiro was delayed by fog but once it seemed to be lifting we set off. As Derek had missed out on Oporto due to the

late arrival of his plane, I had planned to take *Mina*² up the Rio Douro so at least he could see the town. As we were approaching the river entrance the fog closed right in again and, alarmed by the sound of some seriously noisy dredging or pile driving in what I thought to be the entrance to the river, we aborted the venture and continued to our destination.

As we sailed down the coast, Tom set the mackerel line and much to his surprise (and our delight) managed to catch a modest but delicious lunch. In the afternoon, the wind picked up as usual to give us a good beam reach in F3-4. On checking the charts and pilot I discovered that an 18m electricity cable had been erected about 5m in front of the pontoon in Alveiro. This was not sufficient to clear my expensive new, fixed, highly conductible burgee staff at the top of an already tall mast, so we adapted our plans to stop at the entrance to the river in São Jacinto. (Martin Walker and Anne Hammick's excellent revised RCC Pilotage Foundation edition of Atlantic Spain and Portugal had arrived, hot off the press, only a couple of days before my departure, so I hadn't had the latest information when I was planning the cruise).

São Jacinto is not somewhere you would go out of your way to visit for a good meal (or for much else, come to that). All the restaurants were uninspiring and empty. But that was when we saw what we thought was a building on fire. It was the grill of the "A Peixara" restaurant that had a queue snaking round the building. After a short wait, we sat down to an excellent meal of sardines, *feijoada do marisco* (white bean stew with every imaginable kind of seafood chucked in) and *chocos* – cuttlefish - which looks very odd but was strangely tasty, particularly the tentacles .

The following morning we went ashore and caught the ferry which linked with a bus service which took us past enormous piles of salt from the salt pans to Aveiro at the top of the lagoon. Known as the Little Venice of Portugal, it is criss-crossed with canals, the islands linked by picturesque bridges.



Salt piles in the lagoons of Aveiro

Monday and we headed off early in a moderate northeasterly wind for Figueira do Foz. My cruising chute is terrific with the wind on the quarter, but it isn't a great

running sail so, with the wind directly astern we were goose-winged with a poled-out yankee – an excellent and very stable arrangement.

As we approached the marina pontoon we saw a couple of other British boats, one of them being a Centurion 40. Lawrence pointed to it and said “Look, that’s just like the boat I used to own in the early 90’s”. After a pause he said with incredulity “Hold on a moment, it’s *Full Flight*. That *is* my old boat”. The present owners refused to believe that Lawrence once owned the boat (not many people trust Lawrence – he used to be a car dealer before becoming a racehorse trainer). Lawrence eventually convinced them by telling them that the boat was originally called Gucci before he changed the name to Full Flight after one of his racehorses. Only then did they let him on board for a nostalgic nose around. An incredible coincidence.

I had been told that a “must” when passing by Figuera do Foz is to take a day out and travel 30 miles inland inland to Coimbra. We thought of hiring a car but in the end found it easier to take the train (it takes just under an hour), the station being about 20 minutes walk from the marina. The capital of Portugal in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Coimbra (pronounced “Quimbrer”) is a thriving university town - after Oxford and Cambridge the university is the oldest in Europe having transferred there from Lisbon in 1290. With such a history it is hardly surprising that the city is full of opulent monuments and buildings. Horribly touristy, but we found the best way of learning as much about the town in the short time available was to take an opened top tourist bus complete with cardboard sunhats and a running commentary. But the highlight was the university itself. Set on a hill overlooking the town, the grandeur of the council chamber and examination room with their richly tiled walls and intricately painted ceilings are impressive, but pale into insignificance compared to the eighteenth-century baroque Joanina Library. Its intricately carved and gilded pillars and arches, and superb ceiling paintings are completely over the top and magnificent.



The lads touring Coimbra in style



Coimbra university

It had been my intention, on Wednesday 2 August, to sail to Peniche. I had somehow got it into my head that it was a 36 mile passage, so intended to start after lunch when the northerly trade wind kicked in. It wasn't until midday when I was planning the detail of the passage that I realised it was much further than I had thought – 58 miles and too far to get to that day. So we headed for Nazaré instead – a more manageable 33 miles. We had an excellent sail in the F6-7 northerly – again goose-winging with a poled-out yankee. When we arrived, we headed for one of the many long and vacant pontoons but a man with a gun instead directed us to raft up alongside a couple of other boats. He then made it clear that I had to go with him immediately to the office for the form-filling marathon. My back had gone earlier in the day and clambering over three boats to get to the pontoon was extremely painful, as was the walk up to the port offices.

A note on Iberian bureaucracy: My cruising thus far has required a bit of form filling when moving across national boundaries, particularly when moving out of the EU – and fair enough. In Spain you have to fill in a form at every marina you visit, including details of all the crew and passengers on board (and with 2 x Close-Smiths and 2 x Kenney-Herberts it took hours). But in Portugal it gets even worse. Everyone one wants a form: the harbour master, the Guardia Civil and the Brigada Fiscal (their customs and excise). There is no uniformity to the information they require. It not only varied from port to port but from office to office within the same building. Requirements include details of the skipper and owner (including home address and contact telephone number), and passport details of crew (with photocopies carefully taken of passports, registration documents and insurance certificates); they needed to know your port of entry into the country; your last port and your next port. And then there were the exhaustive details of the yacht: name, make, port of registration, home port, insurance underwriter and policy number, length, width, depth, construction material, colour, number of masts, whether you have VHF and radar and, for some reason I couldn't work out, the make of the engine and its horsepower. About the only measurement they didn't have was my inside leg. All the forms differed slightly – sometimes they wanted details only of skipper and sometimes the whole crew. Sometimes they needed to know the horsepower of my engine but didn't require insurance details. So it was clear that there was no central database but that all these bits of paper were carefully filed never to see the light of day again, i.e. as far as I could see, the whole exercise was a complete waste of time and simply provided employment to a bunch of civil servants. Some ports had got their act together and either put the details on to a computer to be shared by the different agencies, or had duplicated forms so you only had to fill in the top copy. In other ports however, you had to do the rounds of all the offices filling in forms containing almost, but not quite,

the same information. There were some small ports with an army of personnel representing the marina and the various government departments - and all this for a small handful of yachts which might arrive each day. Whilst I was wearing my right arm out form-filling, the crew were wearing their right arms out sitting in my cockpit drinking my gin! Oh well, a small price to pay, I guess for the pleasure of cruising.

When at last I had completed all the documentation, I asked for a pass to get me back through the locked gate to the pontoons. No, they didn't have passes. I had to go to the gatehouse at the port entrance for that. The gatehouse was about a quarter of a mile away. I couldn't hail my fellow crew-members, so off I lurched, wincing every step of the long way. At the gatehouse, I was told that to get a pass I would have to fill in yet another long form, almost the same as the three I had just completed, and then hand over €25 as a deposit. Quite why they needed to know that my boat draws 2.2m and has a Perkins diesel engine before they would grant me entrance back on to the pontoon I don't know. But I did as I was told and, after more than an hour, I returned to the boat, pain stabbing my back and steam coming out of my ears. The town is quite a long walk from the port so, after sacrificing one of my delicious bottles of white port as an aperitif, we dined on board on the mussels and sardines which we had bought in Figueira da Foz.

The following morning dawned grey and misty with a slight drizzle – the first precipitation we had had in four weeks. Nazaré had not been our most successful stopover, and the moment the weather cleared, we were off. Destination: Berlenga island about 20 miles south and lying 7 miles NW of Peniche. Berlenga is a spectacular island: a barren, rocky bird sanctuary and rather reminiscent of Helgoland in the German Bight. Except it was a lot warmer and surrounded by crystal clear blue water.

In the anchorage were a few boats (including a couple of largish tripper boats) attached to moorings. And as luck would have it there was one mooring buoy which remained unoccupied. We picked the buoy up and, as a precaution, gunned the engine astern a little just to ensure the security of the mooring. As we and the buoy shot backwards out of the anchorage at a rate of knots, it became apparent that rather than being attached to the sea bed by several tons of ground tackle we were, in fact, attached to no more than a rather small lobster pot. So we resorted to the anchor, lying in the shadow of the rather impressive Forte de São João Baptisto. Rebuilt at the end of the seventeenth century (the medieval original having been destroyed by a 15-strong fleet of Spanish ships which bombarded it to rubble) this fortified monastery is now a hostel. We lowered the dinghy to explore the tunnels eaten into the granite, one of which goes right through into a small bay on the south side of the island, with granite walls soaring spectacularly upwards on all sides. We then tide up to a small quay alongside the fort and went for a walk along the set paths over the island to the lighthouse. The island is covered by nesting gulls, the whole thing a little bit spooky and reminding one of Hitchcock's "The Birds".



The fort on Isla Berlenga and one of the spectacular grottoes

The evening was beautiful and we contemplated a night passage for the 55 miles to Lisbon, but given the enormous number of lobster pots which are difficult enough to avoid in daylight we decided against it and retired to our bunks. In the early hours the wind picked up from the northeast and the swell built. Talk about rock'n'roll! By 0630 we had all had enough so we weighed anchor just as the sun was rising. We drifted slowly to our destination with a light following wind for a couple of hours before “peeling to the Perkins”, a shame as this was the last passage for Tom, Derek and Lawrence who were disembarking at Lisbon. But there was time enough for one last excitement as a flying fish leapt out of the water and shot past us. It was my first sighting of a flying fish (and the only one I saw in the entire cruise). I was amazed how far it glided.

Sailing up the Rio Tejo into historic Lisbon is a great experience. We had chosen to stay in the Doca de Alcântara – the closest marina to the old city centre - and having gone under the spectacular Tejo bridge we then had to wait about 20 minutes for the lifting pedestrian bridge to open and allow us through into the dock. Noticing another RCC burgee I went round and introduced myself to Peter and Katharine Ingram, feted members and serial winners of RCC pots for their adventurous cruises with their 18-month old son, Robert. I had been intending to recce the harbours of the south coast of Portugal and Spain for the best place to over-winter *Mina*² and they said that they had left *Kokiri* in Chipiona at the bottom of the Rio Guadalquivir and found it excellent.

Lawrence, Tom, Derek and I walked into central Lisbon for dinner – a mistake: although late in the evening it was still boiling hot and much further than we had anticipated. But the long and hot walk certainly whetted our appetite for an excellent dinner.

Saturday 5 August and crew change-over day. The week with the “lads” (average age about 60) had been terrific. We’d slipped easily into bad habits: lots of whisky and wine (perhaps a little too much on occasions), non-stop pathetically juvenile jokes (mainly with a perverted sexual theme), and not a can of lager drunk without an appreciative and expertly delivered burp. Enormous fun, none of which would be appreciated by the Downstairs Skipper who was due to arrive shortly so I had to sharpen my act up. We shaved and showered, mucked out the boat with a pitch fork, fumigated the cabins, hired a skip for the empty bottles and cans and by the time the DS was piped on board it was like I had spent the week with a bunch of house-proud nuns.

The DS arrived with Selina (our daughter) and two of Selina's friends, Sarah and Neil. Since their last trip on the boat from Copenhagen to Kiel last year, Neil (the Geordie Lifeboatman) had completed his Day Skipper course with flying colours and had acquired an even more impressive collection of gadgets. His pride and joy was a pneumatically powered spear gun, the enormous cost of which, he had told Sarah, was to be justified by catching most of our meals of exotic and delicious fish.

But first we had to "do" Lisbon. We arrived in the centre of town in the late afternoon. After the success of the conducted tour bus in Coimbra we were disappointed to see the last tourist bus of the day leaving as we arrived in the central square. But fortuitously, having visited the wonderful cathedral, we found ourselves by the stop of the No. 28 tram which pretty much covered the same circuit but for about 2% of the price. On we hopped and enjoyed a tour of the city before getting off at a café very near the top of hill on which the city is built. We enjoyed a drink on the terrace with a spectacular view over the city and the Rio Tejo before walking down towards the centre to grab some dinner. Down and down through the twisting cobbled streets, passing numerous touristy restaurants and suddenly we stumbled across a restaurant which seemed far from touristy.



The No 28 tram – winds its way through Lisbon

There was a wisp of smoke coming from a barbecue stuck on a couple of bricks on the pavement. It was so small I would have baulked at cooking a meal for the family on it, but a wizened old man was valiantly cooking dinner for about 20 tables ranged out along the pavement between two graffiti'ed corrugated iron sheets. Service was provided by one man who was absolutely panic stricken and who spent most of the evening rushing around from table to table apologising for the delay in bringing their food. But we were in no hurry on this balmy evening. As we (eventually) tucked into delicious plates of sardines and calamaris, a couple of men sat outside the building in

front of an open window and started playing hauntingly sad music, one on a classical guitar and the other on a 12-stringed Portuguese guitar shaped like a lute. Someone got up from a table and started singing a mournful song about lost loves and opportunities. This was Fado, the folk music of Portugal. Other singers took their turn including a fat lady who was sitting in the open window. On one occasion when a man was giving his best, a drunk in the street thought he could do better and insisted on joining in – until a small woman in an apron rushed out of the building and clocked him one, whipped out a mobile phone and called the police. For a while the Fado concert was put on hold as the street was filled with blue flashing lights and police sirens. But once the drunk had been dragged off, flicking V-signs, the impromptu concert resumed with the small lady in the apron belting out a couple of numbers whilst, at the same time, catching the eye of diners and writing out their bills on a pad of paper as she sang.

When we finished our meal we were offered a CD (for a not immodest €20) of Fado music sung by the legendary Fátima Fernandez whom we recognised as the fat lady in the window. The feisty woman in the apron was her daughter who arranged not only for her mum to sign the cover of the CD but also for us to be photographed with the legend herself! An absolutely unforgettable evening.



The Fado restaurant...

... and the legendary Fátima Fernandez

On Sunday morning, 6 August, we sailed out of Lisbon fittingly accompanied by the music of our new friend Fátima on the ship's stereo. Coming out of the river, we were greeted by a F5 west-southwesterly wind which gave us an exhilarating fetch for the 15 miles to Cabo Espichel before turning east-northeast and motoring 13 miles along the dramatic coastline to the anchorage at Arrábida near the entrance to the Rio Sado. On the approach Neil thought he saw a tuna flashing past the boat, so he started pumping up his new spear gun in eager anticipation. The moment the anchor had dug in, in 4m of water, the dinghy was dropped and the shore party set off for the beach, with Neil decked out like a member of the SBS. I was told not to bother preparing dinner – Neil would provide all. Being sceptical I stayed on board and prepared the chicken for the barbecue anyway. And just as well. Neil returned to the boat triumphant with a foot long grey mullet. Apparently it had put up quite a struggle and Neil had to have three goes at it before it hurled itself onto the end of his spear. You would have to be very hungry before you ate a grey mullet. When they are not eating the highly toxic slime off the bottom of your boat (all the marinas were thick with mullet) they are congregating in large numbers by sewage outfalls. Not wanting to waste one of God's creatures, we popped it into the lobster pot as bait and slung it overboard.

We awoke the following morning to another cloudless sky and after pulling up the lobster pot (even the lobsters and the crabs had spurned Neil's grey mullet) we were in the process of raising the anchor when there was a strong smell of burning electrics and the windlass packed up. So in went the winch handle and Neil had the anchor up in a flash. The sea was glassy smooth as we motored the 32 miles across the wide, sweeping Baía de Setúbal. Half way across, Maria saw some dolphins in the water a cable or so off our port beam. We went to investigate and as we approached we saw two large pods of them quietly moving through the water. We motored between them and turned the engine off.

All of a sudden we were surrounded by between 50 to 100 20-foot cetaceans – far larger than any dolphin I had ever seen. Even the babies who swam close to their mothers were bigger than dolphins. I whipped down below to get out the reference book and quickly identified them as long-finned pilot whales. Quick as a flash “Gadget Man” Neil had his camera in the waterproof case and was heading down the bathing ladder for a bit of underwater photography. He reported that, apart from all the whales around us, there were dozens more swimming around under the boat in the shadow of the hull. They took it in turns to approach us in groups, swimming around and under the boat before making way for the next group. They obligingly put on displays for us, turning onto their backs and flapping their fins and coming up vertically, sticking their heads out of the water and looking at us through their beady, intelligent eyes. Sometimes a few of them would dive down together and then, as one, exhale so that bubbles rushed to the surface and it seemed as if the boat was surrounded by boiling water. You could hear all the squeaks and clicks as they talked to one another and at regular intervals they would blow sprays of fine mist through their blow-holes, creating beautiful rainbows of colour.





At one point there was a frenzied thrashing around close to the boat and it was very clear for all to see that one of the males was very keen to make baby whales. Neil was out of the water like a shot. He had no intention of becoming an unwilling participant in a whale orgy!

As if our lives were not already complete, in the distance we saw some cetaceans spectacularly throwing themselves out of the water and rocketing towards us – a pod of bottle-nosed dolphins had decided to join the party. The dolphins zig-zagged through the whales with their usual exuberance and after a short while shot away.

There was no way we could leave even if we had wanted to – there was no question of our motoring away for fear of injuring one of these beautiful creatures with our propeller, and there was no wind. But after about an hour and a half a slight breeze picked up so we hoisted the sails and slowly and reluctantly headed south again. It took a while for the whales to realize that their new best friend was moving off, but when we were about half a mile away, a number of them began to take chase and they escorted us on our way until the wind picked up and we slowly pulled away from them. Our excitement had been enormous, not least because it was all so unexpected, and I think everyone realised that this was one of those once-in-a-lifetime never-to-be-forgotten experiences which we would be talking about for years.

When we got to Sines (pronounced Seensh), we were brought down to earth by the need to sort out the windlass. Neil and I (well, Neil actually) started to dismantle the windlass but without total success so we decided we would need help and phoned Sopromar in Lagos who said they would be able to help us when we arrived there in three days time.

The old town in Sines is a short ten minute walk from the harbour with quaint cobbled streets, all overlooked by the imposing castle. On the front is a statue of Vasco de Gama (a son of Sines) looking out to sea. The town was full of tacky-looking empty restaurants which didn't augur well, but there was one which was packed with locals. The obvious choice you would have thought but it was a big disappointment. Our food took hours to arrive and my fish was so old it smelt rank.

Our next stop was a bit of a gamble. There is an anchorage tucked behind a headland at Praia da Arrifana which is exposed to westerly and southerly winds. It was 36 miles from Sines and if it was untenable then we would have a further 30 miles plus to get to a safe harbour round Cape St Vincent (Cabo de São Vicente). In the event, although the wind was (unusually) southerly it was extremely light and we had to motor the entire way. Although there was only a slight swell at anchor, this is a famous surfing beach and even the slightest swell results in long breaking waves onto the shallow shelving beach. Getting the crew to the beach in the dinghy proved interesting but, guided by Neil the Lifeboatman who does this sort of thing all of the time, our technique was basically to head the boat into the surf, away from the beach and back in slowly until in sufficiently shallow water for everyone to leap out and wade to the shore. Still some way out, Maria surprised us all by deciding that the time was right and she launched herself into the water with her plastic bag containing mobile phones, cameras, towels and other not-to-be-got-wet things. Like the Lady of the Lake, she disappeared entirely except for her arms with the plastic bag held aloft. Slowly the arms moved towards the beach until, eventually, her laughing, spluttering head appeared. In more manageable depths everyone else stepped overboard into the shallows and I shot away just as the next roller was threatening to break.

At the end of the day the operation had to be repeated in reverse. By this time the tide had come in and the beach was much steeper and the breakers much more violent. I backed in getting as close as I dared and once again Maria showed her leadership qualities by being the first to the dinghy. With great agility she leapt into the bow of the dinghy, stood up and saw a 4 ft high vertical wall of breaking water hurtling towards us. I thought the only thing to do was to give us a bit of momentum so I opened the throttle and the dinghy leapt towards the breaking wave. Maria, like a rabbit caught in the headlights, froze. She reminded me very much of Gregory Peck as Captain Ahab in the closing sequences of *Moby Dick* when he is standing in the bow of the whaler hurtling through the waves: the same stance, the same crazed look in her steely eyes. "GET DOWN" screamed Neil from the beach. The trance was broken and Maria threw herself forward onto the bow tube. The foaming water hit us like a brick wall. The bow reared to near vertical but our momentum carried us through and we were left, bobbing but very water logged the other side in the swell. I took Maria back to *Mina*², bailed the dinghy out and somehow managed to recover the rest of the crew with a little less drama, doubtless to the great disappointment of the onlookers.

Wednesday 9 August and we were to round Cape St Vincent and enter the Algarve – a turning point in the cruise literally and metaphorically. After two days of very light winds we had a brilliant sail with an unexpected southeasterly wind which steadily increased during the day to F7 but as we were in the lee of the land the water was flat and we were belting along at more than 8 knots. Great. As we rounded the famous cape we dipped our ensign, as is customary, in honour of the saint. I'm not quite sure why this tradition exists but the great martyr is the patron saint of vintners amongst other honours, which was good enough for me.



Dipping the ensign rounding Cape St Vincent

Immediately after rounding the cape we tucked into the Ensenada de Sagres to anchor for the night, but at 0130, like someone suddenly turning on a light switch, a very lumpy swell came into the bay from the southeast after which not much sleep was had. So at 0700 we were keen - very keen - to get going. It was pretty tough getting the anchor up manually, but we eventually succeeded. We could have beaten into the easterly wind, but I was anxious to get to Lagos as early as possible so that Sopromar could get to work on the windlass, so we motor-sailed the 17 miles, arriving at 1040. To cut a long story short, one of the windlass switches had shorted which resulted in the motor burning out and it was beyond repair. A call to Oyster After Sales and a replacement was on order and it would be freighted to us further round the coast.



Unloading the catch in Lagos...



...and where it is an hour later

In many respects, the Sopromar pontoon in the fish dock is a much nicer place to stay than the marina further up the channel. There is a lot of activity as the fishing boats come and go, and it is immediately opposite the palm-lined riverfront of the town, but having already spent one night there we couldn't hang around any longer so we went upstream into the marina. The marina dockmaster was waiting on our allotted pontoon to take our lines. Neil, who had been practising various docking techniques, had tied a large bight into a mooring line with a view to lassoing a pontoon cleat. Seeing the dockmaster, Neil tossed the line to him and the noose went straight over his head, nearly garrotting him! Everyone, including the dockmaster, was laughing so much we nearly had to abort the docking and start all over again.

I had expected Lagos to be a modern tourist town, lacking in character, but I was very wrong. It is indeed very touristy but at the same time has maintained its charm and I can understand why it is so popular. With its promenade palm trees and the exotic storks sitting in their enormous nests atop chimneys one also felt, for the first time, well travelled. Behind the market in the fish harbour are a row of fishmongers, one of which had a seafood restaurant above and this was where we decided to go for Sarah and Neil's Last Supper. Great choice. It was hectically busy, but all the waiters were incredibly friendly (something of a novelty) and were very helpful in showing the seafood novices how to extract the morsels of meat from each type of crustacean. We tucked into a selection of prawns, oysters, crab, cockles and, the speciality of the area, gooseneck barnacles (*percebes*) which are absolutely delicious. After dinner our son, Peter, arrived on the train from Faro to join us for a short five days.

The following morning the Downstairs Skipper and I visited the retail fish market in the town and bought the ingredients for a bouillabaisse which the DS was keen to make that evening. We then took *Mina*² to the extraordinary red rocks and little beaches just half a mile south of the river entrance where we anchored off. The day was hot and the water at 26°C much warmer than the <20°C temperatures experienced thus far. The beach lovers took the dinghy ashore and even the skipper managed a dip from the back of the boat. Rambo Neil took all his diving gear and harpoon gun for one last attempt before he left but sadly yielded nothing, which meant that his sole success was one inedible grey mullet.



“Rambo” Neil with his one and only catch

Before we hoisted the dinghy back onto the davits, we went for a tour round and through all the spectacular rock formations sticking out of the sea before making our way back to the marina to greet our next two guests who were due to arrive late evening. The bouillabaisse was a triumph.

Tessa and Kaz, more friends of Selina, duly arrived at 2300 and the welcome party continued until shortly before 0530 when Sarah and Neil had to leave for the train to Faro and their flight home. As a parting gesture, Neil very kindly bequeathed to me one (one of several in his Tardis like bag) of his Petzl LED head torches which has seen much use since. The final crew movements were put into place at 1000 on the arrival of Alice and Jess, two friends of Peter. We now had a total complement of eight of whom Peter and I were the only males. I made sure the water tanks were full. Last time Kaz was on board, she washed her hair and used, by my estimation, about 300 litres of water. With six ladies on board.....

Sunday 13 August and we headed east with our new crew for the long 46 mile hop to the tidal lagoons behind the Cabo de Santa Maria, specifically the anchorage to the north of Culatra Island. With a F5 westerly and with the cruising chute up most of the way, I realised that I now had what I had always had in mind when I bought the boat: clear blue skies and hot sunshine; perfect sailing conditions and acres of sun-drenched deck draped with attractive scantily clad young ladies. Couldn't be better!



Peter with his harem

From the holiday brochure type descriptions of the pilot books I had rather expected the anchorage behind Culatra to be a deserted paradise. Paradise it might have been. Deserted it wasn't. It was more like Newtown Creek on a Bank Holiday weekend, and you had to find a spot into which you could just dip your anchor such that, at the turn of tide, everybody swung together missing each other by inches. That was the theory. But in the middle of the night the tide turned east and was in opposition to a stiffish breeze which was now heading west. The light displacement shallow draft motor boat was definitely wind-set and *Mina*², heavy displacement and deep-keeled was definitely tide-set. We were very close and slewing around all over the place. Time to move. Peter was roused from his deep slumber and given the winch handle on his way

to the still manual windlass. As we raised the anchor it was clear that the sailing boat now ahead of us had put out more scope than we and our anchor was firmly placed directly under his hull. We got within a couple of feet of his stern and, now with well shortened scope, I went full astern and luckily managed to pull the anchor out of the sand without taking his rudder away with me. We re-anchored in much deeper water with plenty of room and went back to sleep.

The following morning everyone went ashore to the long sandy beach before setting off at lunch time for the 30 mile haul to Ayamonte at the mouth of the Rio Guadiana which marks the border between Portugal and Spain. Again a wonderful F6-7 southwesterly swept us to our destination at 8+ knots under main and poled out yankee. It had originally been part of my cruise plan to spend a couple of days making our way 20 miles upriver to the twin towns of Alcoutim on the Portuguese side and Sanlúcar de Guadiana on the Spanish side, but sadly time didn't allow.

Tuesday 15 August and (fanfare of trumpets) the Downstairs Skipper's birthday. A suitable fuss was made of her until I worked out that our next scheduled stop, El Rompido, wouldn't be safely accessible to us with our draft until near high water at 2200, so we had to stretch our legs a little further to Mazagón, a route of 35 miles to the east-southeast. So, quickly stowing the birthday presents, we cast off at midday to enjoy another sensational day's 8+ knots sailing on a broad reach in the F6 southwesterly. We arrived in good time for tea complete with birthday cake and candle.

I went ashore to recce a suitable place for the birthday dinner and was disappointed to find Mazagón was a distinctly downmarket resort with eating places to match. By far the most salubrious place appeared to be Las Dunas which also happened to be conveniently close to the marina so I booked a table for eight for later that evening. We arrived after dark and as I was expecting to be greeted by a warm candle-lit ambience, I was surprised to find the whole place brilliantly illuminated with hundreds of cold blue-white fluorescent strip lights. It was like eating in an army barracks canteen. Never mind, the menu looked great and we spent some time deciding what to have. The waiter duly arrived and almost everything we ordered was greeted with "No hay mas" – "We haven't any more", so back to the drawing board. But at the end of the day, the food they did have available was delicious and a splendid time was had by all.

The following morning we set sail for the Rio Guadalquivir 32 miles to the southwest. For the third day in succession we had perfect sailing conditions, today a F6 beam reach and ideal for helming lessons. All seven crew took the helm in turn for 20 minutes, allowing five minutes to get used to it and settle down before being marked for speed and steadiness of course. All reached 8 knots at some stage, but it was extraordinary how such genteel, nicely brought-up young ladies can turn from Jekyll to Hyde the moment you put them into a competitive position. Clenched fists punching the air and triumphant yells of "In yer face, loser" as a previous record was pipped, normally followed by screams of outrage from the others claiming cheating-by-bearing-away-for-a-bit-of-extra-speed. It was all quite scary. Selina was the penultimate challenger and set a new record of 8.2 knots. After her 20-minute trick at the helm, she was relieved by her mum, the Downstairs Skipper, who was the last to go, and Selina went below satisfied that her record was now unassailable.

It was clear that everyone thought Selina's air of smug complacency was a little much so Peter, her loving brother who can be quite Machiavellian at times, whispered his plans to everyone else on deck. After a quiet count of three, everyone screamed in triumph "8.3" "8.3 knots – well done Maria". Selina shot on deck, her face a contorted mask of shock and hatred. It shames me now, thinking of the foul-mouthed words she spat at her grinning mother who was helming the boat at a steady 7.9 knots!

At the entrance to the Guadalquivir we bore away, our intention being to anchor off Sanlucar de Barrameda about three miles upriver, but with the stiff southwesterly forcing a large swell up the river it soon became obvious that anchoring at Sanlucar was going to be extremely uncomfortable at best so we turned the engine on, furled the sails, and crashed back into the waves with green water sweeping the decks. The harbour of Chipiona lay a couple of miles away at the entrance to the river and we were relieved when we crept into the lee of the breakwater. And just as well as the wind continued to build overnight to a full gale.

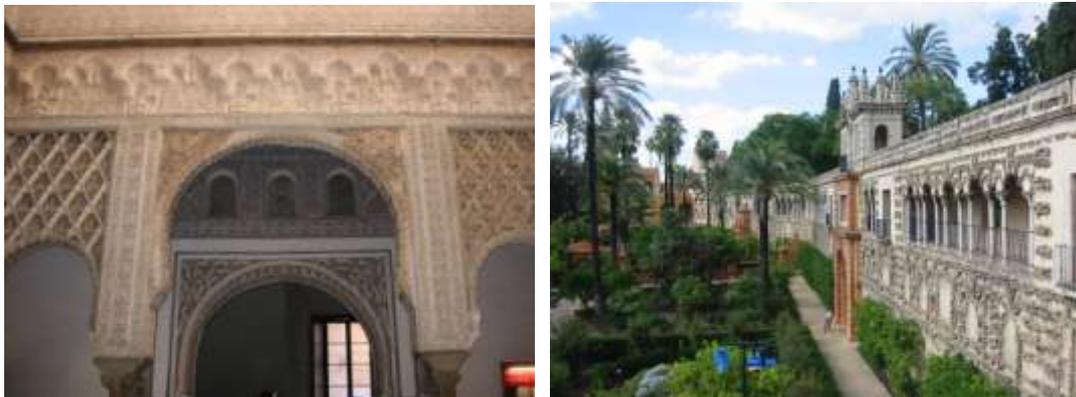
Chipiona was the harbour that had been suggested to us by the Ingrams as a good spot to overwinter, so I was interested to check out the facilities available in the marina and the town. We went into town that evening. It is clearly a holiday resort for the slightly less well-heeled of Seville, and I guessed it would be empty throughout the winter, but it had a cosy atmosphere and we found it delightful. It was also very central for trips to Cadiz, Jerez, Seville and Sanlucar if we were to pop out for the odd week. Ryanair fly into Jerez for next to nothing, and the airport is only a short distance from the marina. The following morning I went to the harbour master's office to talk about leaving the boat there for six months. The price was good (very good by UK standards) and there was availability for a boat of my size. I said that I would think about it and would let them know soon. No problem.

We made an early start to catch the tide, leaving the marina at 0615. Although I had been expecting stifling heat (the average temperature in Seville in August is 40°C) as we entered the temperature was a positively cold 17°C; the grey clouds scudded low and fast, it was still blowing a gale, and I was wrapped up in a sweater which I hadn't seen for over a month. As we passed the flat landscape it looked like an autumn day in the swathways of Suffolk. The sky got darker and darker. A squall was heading our way so I went down below to dig out my heavy weather gear which I hadn't needed since the Biscay crossing five weeks earlier. Toggled up in the nick of time, the rain arrived. Sensibly the Downstairs Skipper decided the time was right for a comfort breakfast of egg and bacon rolls and retired to her domain below. Meanwhile I stood in the cockpit being power hosed in the most torrential rain I had seen, which was coming in horizontally assisted by 48 knot winds. For a while visibility was reduced to no more than about 50m. But the squall passed as quickly as it had arrived and we continued on our way.

We were getting a tremendous shove from the tide and arrived at the lock just south of Seville at 1215 just as the skies were clearing and the sun was starting to peak through the clouds. We were hanging around just outside the lock gate in full view of the control room in which we could clearly see people, and whilst we could hear the lock-keeper communicating with ships on his VHF channel he was apparently unable to hear us at all. We tried low power and high power; we tried the handheld VHF and the masthead antenna of the main VHF. Absolutely nothing. Eventually the pilot on a ship coming up river said to the lock-keeper, "Can't you hear the yacht Mina that has been calling you for half an hour?" Apparently not, so the pilot kindly relayed

messages between us and when he arrived at the lock gates we were allowed to slip past him into the canal. But between us and the yacht club was a lifting bridge which only opens on three days a week and we had to tie up overnight at the Marina Yachting Sevilla just by the lock. The pontoons were so old they were almost sinking and the facilities ashore were basic to put it mildly (and had no lights working). The marina was in the middle of nowhere and the only way of getting into town was by taking a 20 minute taxi ride. But because of all this it would be cheap, you would have thought. And we would have been quite wrong. Knowing that you had no choice but to stay there until the bridge lifted, they had you over a barrel and they stung me for €37 – by far the steepest price I had paid the entire trip. By the time we had taken two taxis into town and two back to the marina, it was getting seriously expensive. But the delights of Seville beckoned.

As the cathedral was closed by the time we arrived at 1700, we went round the remarkable palace of Alcázar, just opposite. Most of it was built by King Pedro the Cruel of Castile in the fourteenth century and, whilst he was not a moor himself, the Moorish influence is considerable. Whilst there have been numerous add-ons over the centuries, Pedro's work forms the nucleus of the palace (which is still used by the Spanish royal family) and it offers some of the best surviving examples of Mudejar architecture.



The palace of Alcázar

Seville is reputedly from where tapas originated and a tour of the city is not complete unless it includes several pit-stops for a glass of chilled Manzanilla sherry and a small plate of something delicious. You don't exactly have to scour the place for a tapas bar – they are everywhere.

We eventually caught our taxis back to the marina (none of the taxi drivers seemed to have heard of it), and the following morning we left the marina with some relief and made our way the two miles up river to the lifting bridge in time for its scheduled opening. The Club Nautico de Sevilla has its premises immediately past the bridge and a mariner was waiting there to take our lines. Although the club houses a number of canoes and rowing boats which are used regularly, one rather gathered that few of its members had anything to do with yachting, either by motor or sail. It is more of a private country club for the wealthy residents of Seville with swimming pools, tennis courts, a restaurant etc, all of which are available for use by visiting yachtsmen. Extremely civilised. It is by no means cheap but, with the high security that a private club offers (and the mariner comes round several times a day to check that all the boats and lines are OK), the superb facilities and its location close to the

centre of the city it did, we felt, represent very good value for money. If one were to over-winter on board (rather than, like us, leaving the boat for most of the winter) it would be a very attractive option.



Mina² at the Club Nautico de Sevilla

Once settled in, we lowered the dinghy and went into the centre of the city and tied up to some steps (with a chain and padlock round the railings). The day's tourist events included a visit to the spectacular cathedral (housing the tomb of Christopher Columbus) and a fascinating guided tour round the bullring.

Another must when visiting Seville is to see some proper flamenco dancing. Rather than going to one of the many tourist spectacles with flashing lights and souvenir castanets, we went instead to the Arts Centre, housed in a beautiful old building and, in the surroundings of the intimate courtyard, watched a performance of traditional flamenco dance and song accompanied by a classical guitar. Dramatically beautiful, it was on the one hand sensitive and balletic and on the other a powerfully athletic demonstration of the complex rhythmic dance. We were exhausted just looking at them.

Over the course of two days, our crew left in dribs and drabs until Maria and I were alone. It had been a real joy having both our children, and all their delightful friends on board at the same time, and the boat seemed very quiet without them. But Maria and I were enjoying Seville so much that we extended our stay by a couple of days before heading back through the lifting bridge on the evening of Monday 21 August to stay one last night at the ghastly Marina Yachting Sevilla before entering the lock early the following morning and returning to the sea. The weather had by now returned to normal with the temperature at a hardly bearable 38°C at 10pm.

The lock was scheduled to open at 0700. Rather than go through the farce of non-communication on the VHF we had got the lock-keepers telephone number and at 0645 we phoned and were told we could enter the lock in a few minutes. We cast off and hung around near the lock gate. At 0700 nothing much seemed to be happening, so we phoned again and were told that we would have to wait. Ships came and went through the lock and, to cut a long story short, we were eventually allowed through with a ship at 0815.

Many people consider the Guadalquivir to be long and boring. I beg to differ. Whilst the country is flat either side, it is also very unspoilt and the lower section is a world-famous wetlands reserve. In the field of bird-watching I am a rank amateur, but I do like to identify what birds I can and there was certainly no shortage here. There were many species I was unable to identify but, amongst the many I did recognise, some of the more exotic were: White Stork, Greater Flamingo, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Little Bittern, Avocet, Glossy Ibis, Marsh Harrier, Red Kite and Golden Eagle. I was spending so much time with one eye looking through the binoculars and the other eye on the bird book that there were a couple of occasions when I nearly missed a turn in the river and ploughed up the bank!

We arrived in Chipiona at 1445, our final destination, and the end of another wonderful cruise – or so I thought. I spent some time decommissioning the boat and then went along to tell the marina office that we had indeed decided to over-winter with them with effect from the beginning of October, and to make all the necessary arrangements (our plan was to leave the boat for a month then come back for a further two or three weeks, before putting the boat to bed for the winter). However I was told that I could not enter into the over-wintering contract whilst the boat was actually in Chipiona! It was all extremely complicated and had to do with their commitment to have a proportion of berths always available for boats in transit. The rules were designed to stop boats from rolling over their stay in a transit berth whilst never leaving the marina. To cut a long and horribly complicated story short, it was arranged that we would take the boat 15 miles down the coast to their sister marina in Rota and leave her there for a month. On that basis, we would be able to enter into the over-wintering contract in Chipiona!

So the following day we duly left the marina and arrived early in Rota to finish the tidying up for our flight home the following morning.

To be honest, I had not had many great expectations for this cruise compared with my adventures of the previous two years. In my mind, this was more of a delivery trip to the Med, but I was wrong. The Biscay crossing was arguably the best passage I had ever had. The cruise right the way round the Iberian Peninsula had everything to offer from the beautiful rias in the north west; the fascinating cities of La Coruña, Baiona, Oporto, Lisbon and, finally, Sevilla; the great days of sailing in the consistent winds of the Portuguese trades; the subtly different cultures of Galicia, Portugal and Andalucia and the fabulous seafood for which the whole peninsula is renowned. And all this was enjoyment was enhanced in the great company of my many guests, without whom I wouldn't have half as much fun.

APPENDICES

A. Log Details

| Date | From | To | Lat (N) | Long (W) | Log distance | Av speed |
|----------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|----------|
| | | Helford | 50.05.84 | 005.07.62 | | |
| 09/07/06 | Helford | La Coruna | 43.36.35 | 008.22.66 | 480.4 | 5.9 |
| 15/07/06 | La Coruna | Camarinhas | 43.08.00 | 009.10.94 | 48.1 | 6.2 |
| 16/07/06 | Camarinhas | Muros | 42.46.91 | 009.03.41 | 37.8 | 5.9 |
| 17/07/06 | Muros | Bornalle anch | 42.47.822 | 009.01.592 | 1.6 | 2.7 |
| 18/07/06 | Bornalle anch | Carril | 42.36.754 | 008.46.837 | 35.4 | 6.2 |
| 19/07/06 | Carril | Isla de Arosa bay | 42.34.131 | 008.53.308 | 6.4 | 6.4 |
| 19/07/06 | Isla de Arosa bay | Combarro | 42.25.927 | 008.41.990 | 23.1 | 4.6 |
| 20/07/06 | Combarro | Isla Ons | 42.23.318 | 008.55.490 | 11.0 | 5.7 |
| 20/07/06 | Isla Ons | Islas Cies | 42.13.906 | 008.54.011 | 10.0 | 5.5 |
| 21/07/06 | Islas Cies | Bayona | 42.07.35 | 008.50.75 | 8.3 | 5.5 |
| 25/07/06 | Baiona | Foz do Minho | 41.51.271 | 008.52.388 | 19.1 | 6.4 |
| 25/07/06 | Foz do Minho | Viano do Castelo | 41.41.634 | 008.49.306 | 11.7 | 3.9 |
| 26/07/06 | Viano do Castelo | Leixoes | 41.11.264 | 008.42.548 | 30.7 | 6.4 |
| 29/07/06 | Leixoes | Sao Jacinto | 40.39.52 | 008.43.81 | 27.8 | 3.7 |
| 31/07/06 | Sao Jacinto | Figueira da Foz | 40.08.744 | 008.51.545 | 30.0 | 5.5 |
| 02/08/06 | Figueira da Foz | Nazare | 39.35.008 | 009.04.490 | 33.0 | 5.3 |
| 03/08/06 | Nazare | Berlinga Island | 39.24.651 | 009.30.184 | 20.5 | 5.0 |
| 04/08/06 | Berlinga Island | Lisbon | 38.41.996 | 009.09.508 | 55.1 | 5.2 |
| | | Arrabida | | | | |
| 06/08/06 | Lisbon | Anchorage | 38.28.6 | 008.58.7 | 35.1 | 5.1 |
| | Arrabida | | | | | |
| 07/08/06 | Anchorage | Sines | 37.57.044 | 008.51.936 | 31.9 | 5.3 |
| 08/08/06 | Sines | Praia da Arrifana | 37.17.520 | 008.52.180 | 36.8 | 6.1 |
| | | Ensenada de | | | | |
| 09/08/06 | Praia da Arrifana | Sagres | 37.00.146 | 008.56.478 | 26.8 | 5.5 |
| | Ensenada de | | | | | |
| 10/08/06 | Sagres | Lagos | 37.06.37 | 008.40.241 | 17.3 | 5.5 |
| | | Culatra | | | | |
| 13/08/06 | Lagos beach | anchorage | 37.00.338 | 007.49.162 | 46.4 | 6.0 |
| | Culatra | | | | | |
| 14/08/06 | anchorage | Ayamonte | 37.12.492 | 007.24.728 | 30.4 | 5.8 |
| 15/08/06 | Ayamonte | Mazagon | 37.07.817 | 006.49.831 | 31.0 | 7.8 |
| 16/08/06 | Mazagon | Chipiona | 36.44.976 | 006.25.655 | 32.2 | 7.2 |
| 17/08/06 | Chipiona | Sevilla | 37.19.982 | 005.59.537 | 39.9 | 6.6 |
| | | Sevilla (Yacht | | | | |
| 18/01/00 | Sevilla | Club) | 37.22.2 | 005.59.6 | 2.3 | 6.8 |
| | Sevilla (Yacht | | | | | |
| 22/08/06 | Club) | Chipiona | 36.44.976 | 006.25.655 | 44.3 | 6.8 |

1313.2

