

Rhu to Las Palmas

It was a damp, early September afternoon and the train journey from Queens Street to Helensburgh passed through the dark back streets of Glasgow before running along the muddy shores of the Clyde. The taxi fare from Helensburgh station to Rhu marina was far too much for such a short journey but I was taken to the top of the ramp to the pontoons so I did not have to carry my jumbo kit bag too far. The yacht was called Sunrise, a very sleek looking Sigma 400, but the skipper was not aboard.

Forcing my kit bag through the hatch, I went below to find a fairly normal layout, twin berths forward, saloon, galley to port, nav station to starboard, two heads, one each side and two small double cabins aft. We were taking the boat to Las Palmas so the owner could compete in the 2006 ARC and so it was stuffed to the gunnels with everything he thought they would need plus provisions for another boat. He obviously did not realise that they had good, cheap supermarkets in the Canaries.

After nosing around for five minutes, I went back up on deck to find the skipper, Adrian, and mate, Tex, arriving with our provisions which, after introductions, we then proceeded to take aboard and stow below. The two double cabins had already been taken so I was stuck on the berth in the saloon because the forward cabin was full of sails.

That evening we went to the local hotel and over a few beers and a meal, discussed the plan for the journey. The skipper had been on the weather sites and knew there was a gale due within twenty four hours but wanted to get as far as possible before it came through.

So it was at 0400 hours the next morning, we caught the favourable tide on a dark, wet Clyde morning, motoring against a light breeze from the south. Steering from buoy to buoy we made our way down the channel until we could turn onto the course of 205 degrees, which was to be our heading for the entire cruise. I learnt that this course was one of the longest that could be steered on a single heading, without, hopefully, hitting anything in between. Passing Ailsa Craig seemed to take hours upon hours as it was difficult to tell which side you were looking at.

It was getting dark by the time we neared Bangor, NI where it had been decided to wait out the gale. The entrance to the marina is at the western end of the concrete breakwater, very close to the shore, so you just have to keep heading in until you think you are going to run aground, then turn hard to port. It didn't help that the starboard light at the harbour entrance was not working but we got in and, after looking around, found the berth the Harbour Master had directed us to occupy. After putting the boat to bed, we went for a meal and drink in one of the local hotels and very pleasant it was too.

Next morning, whilst doing the routine engine checks, I discovered the fresh water cooling system filler cap had come apart and also there was some oil or grease in the engine fresh water system. So it was off into town to find that the chandlers did not have one but luckily located a motor factor who was able to order one for that afternoon. The skipper phoned the owner who knew nothing about the oil in the water but as the oil level had remained constant and not emulsified, he decided nothing could be done but to keep a close watch on it. We picked up the filler cap in the afternoon then went for a fish supper followed by a pint whilst watching Manchester United versus Celtic on the pub television. The sign outside the pub said no colours and each time a side scored there was a muted cheer from one side of the bar or the other.

After refuelling, we set off at 1000 hours the next morning motoring into a light south easterly, taking the narrow passage between Crossland Island and the mainland, then as we turned back onto our course, we were able to hoist sails. We went onto the proper watch system of 3 hours each on the helm, everybody got their own breakfast when they got up, the person on the 0600 to 0900 watch washed the breakfast dishes and cleaned the heads, 0900 to 1200 made the lunch and washed up and 1200 to 1500 made the supper and washed up. I found the 0300 to 0600

most difficult to start with until my body got used to taking naps during the day to catch up on missed sleep.

Two days later I saw the light of the Tusker Rock lighthouse rising at the end of my 0300 watch and I got up a couple of hours later to see us approaching it. The plan called for us to go into Kilmore Quay for weather reports, fuel and water. Getting into Kilmore Quay from the east called for negotiating a very narrow passage through shallow water between the mainland and the north Saltee Island otherwise it would add another four hours to the passage. The buoys marking the passage are removed in winter, according to the almanac, so we called the Harbour Master who confirmed they were still there. The approach to the harbour is by two leading marks which are situated quite low down on a beach to the east of the harbour. Although there is no fuel dock, the Harbour Master had, very kindly, brought cans of diesel down to the pontoon for us to refuel. This was done by having two pieces of tube, one long and one short, putting the long piece to the bottom of the can and into the fuel inlet, the short being used to blow into the top of the can with the spout of the can covered. In this way, diesel can be transferred with the minimum of effort and mess and no taste of the stuff in your mouth afterwards. There were some very nasty looking weather systems in the west Atlantic but it seemed we had enough of a window to carry on so we set off early afternoon, motoring on a calm sea.

For four days we mostly sailed making the best course possible, when the wind was not favourable, but with the wind mostly in the south-west we headed further south than intended. . Once into the routine, each day merges seamlessly into the next unless there is something to remember it by. Two days out I found the back stay had three strands broken within 12 inches, a maximum of two broken usually being considered safe. The rig on this yacht though did not depend on the normal backstay, having swept back spreaders and two running backstays for downwind sailing with the spinnaker.

We saw dolphins every day and as we neared the Spanish coast, I will never forget the sight of more than fifty of these beautiful creatures coming out of every wave towards the boat. They can give you a fright though when they surface and blow air right beside the boat in the middle of the night.

As we travelled further into Biscay, the skipper pointed out on the chart the area where giant freak waves were reported to occur, the area we were just entering. He ventured the opinion that these waves were becoming more frequent, possibly due to the sea having less oil on its surface as conservation measures became more effective.

In any case, this did not help my peace of mind when we ran into a squall in the middle of the night. I was on watch, in the pitch dark, beating under full sail into a force 3 when, without warning, the wind increased to force 6. The wind across the deck was a 7/8 and so I bore away to shed the apparent wind before trimming the sails for these conditions. The squall lasted for 20 minutes before settling down again.

When we reached the northern Spanish coast, we were too far east so we motored west for 6 hours until making landfall in the pretty port of Camarinas.

As we approached Camarinas, it was quite clear to see why this coast is called the Costa de la Muerte (the coast of death). It was a calm day, with no wind or chop on the water, but the big Atlantic swell still rolled in and broke in great spumes of spray on the jagged, rocky coastline. We were lucky with the weather as the area is well known for being blessed with stronger winds than the surrounding areas, stuck as it is, normally, between the Azores high and the Spanish low.

We were motoring west along the northern Spanish coast at the end of our four day voyage from Southern Ireland and were glad to see the lighthouse at Cabo Vilan which marked the eastern end of the Rias Camarinas. The lighthouse sits on the highest of three jagged fingers of rock on a small peninsula jutting out to sea and can only be accessed by a small covered walkway from the mainland.

After passing the lighthouse the Rias opened up abeam to port but the sailing directions said to keep heading south west until leading marks could be seen on a bearing of 112 degrees at the northern end of a beach some two miles within the bay. We did see a local fishing boat cut inside the reef from the north west but it would have been foolish to attempt the same passage without local knowledge.

We followed the marks into the Rias until abeam of the harbour breakwater and then turned to port, northwards, past the large commercial quay and found the marina 300yards further in, again on our port side. There were four long pontoons with finger berths and we tied up on the north side of the most southerly one. After the marina is an inner harbour where the many small local boats tie up, everything from a 10 foot rowing boat to a 40 foot steel inshore trawler.

After putting the boat to bed, we made our way to the Club Nautico (showers after a beer) , luckily only at the top of the ramp from the pontoon and proceeded to put away large quantities of alcohol and a very fine paella indeed. At the end of the evening, I had the privilege of assisting the mate back to the boat (this brought back memories of Stromness where I performed the same task for someone who shall remain nameless), and fell into a wonderful unbroken sleep for 8 hours.

The next day we took our laundry to the laverteria on the hill at the back of the harbour and returned to the Club Nautico to make use of the internet facilities. The weather was looking grim for the next day with forecasts of an approaching hurricane and another further off on the US east coast. So during that afternoon we made the boat ready by removing the roller reefing jib, tying down the main sail with the end of the main sheet, removing anything from the deck likely to be blown away or damaged and put as many extra mooring lines to the pontoon as we could find. Thus prepared, we returned to the Club Nautico for further refreshments.

The following morning I awoke at 0730 hours to hear the wind already blowing strongly from the Southwest, luckily we had moored with our bows pointing in the this direction. After a cup of tea and some breakfast I went up on deck to find the skipper keeping watch on the wind speed indicator, which was already showing gusts of over 30 knots. We sat on deck, in the lee of the spray hood, just watching and waiting. The wind gradually increased in ferocity over the next 3 hours and when it reached sixty knots I went below to get my grab bag containing passport and valuables. The speed increased to a steady 70 knots and the fiercest gust registered 85 knots. With this force the boats on our pontoon were heeled over at 45 degrees, even under bare poles, and there was a danger of masts clashing together and causing serious damage. But then the wind started easing and in another hour or so things had returned to normal, apart from the damage to the roofs of some buildings in the town and a genoa on another boat which had not been taken down. The only damage we sustained was a missing tricolour from the masthead for which there was a replacement aboard anyway.

For the next three days the wind blew steadily from the south west force 5 or 6, the direction we wanted to go, so the skipper decided to stay put. He said crashing into the big swell would be extremely uncomfortable as well as being unable to make any real progress. So we waited in and around Camarinas, which is not a very big town, for favourable weather. One day taking a circular walk to Cabon Vilan, which was even more impressive from the shore side, passing an enormous fish factory on the way back. We explored the town thoroughly with its many quaint small side streets and lace shops for which the area is famous.

Eventually we had a weather window where the wind was forecast to decrease to a force 4 and the following day die away completely. So the skipper decided to load up with extra cans of diesel and head directly for Las Palmas.

We left Camarinas at midday and immediately ran into the big Atlantic but once back on our heading of 205 degrees, we were quartering the waves so it was not too uncomfortable. The wind

was F4 from the west and so the sails were raised and we made a good 7 knots. We were still in sight of the Spanish mainland as we passed Cap Finisterre and then headed out into open ocean.

The main shipping lanes had to be crossed again, as on the approach to Camarinas, and this time at night. As we crossed the shipping lanes at a shallow angle, it took nine hours to cross them, the first few hours watching for ships approaching on the bow in the northbound lane then a break until the southbound lane where you watch for them overtaking from astern. Luckily, on my watch, there were only two vessels on converging headings which necessitated me making a change of course to avoid them.

After that night, the wind died away to almost nothing and the engine was started. The next four days were spent motoring on calm, flat seas with the sun shining, plenty of time to catch up with the reading, crossword puzzles and suntan. The nice thing about motoring is that you can put on the autopilot and have an easy watch; this is not usually possible when sailing due to the drain on the batteries.

The only concern was whether there was enough diesel to last until Las Palmas or whether we would have to pull into Madeira to refuel. Luckily, we had just enough and arrived at Las Palmas at 21.00 hours, having spent what seemed to be the longest part of the journey watching the island grow larger for most of that day. It did however, give us time to have a shower with what remained of the fresh water so that valuable refreshment time was not wasted.

The entry into the harbour was slow and cautious and not helped by one end of the massive breakwater not being lit but eventually we tied up alongside the refuelling berth in the marina, put the boat to bed and went for a well earned beer or two.

The next day we moved the boat to a proper berth and spent time relaxing and exploring the town. The last day was earmarked for giving the boat a complete clean inside and out before heading for the airport the next morning.