

SFCC South Brittany Cruise 2008

The South Brittany Cruise got off to a promising start with “Ashanta” meeting up in mid-Channel with “Seabird” and “Maid of Honour” who had left from Dartmouth. A firm westerly, which conveniently veered north-westerly after dark, meant a fast passage and the 140nm leg to Camaret was completed in 26hrs, with recourse to engines only in order to charge batteries. Peter on Ashanta put in an outstanding performance sailing solo from the Exe and it was a magnificent first 24hr passage for Dave and Angie. The rest day in Camaret was hot and sunny - just what was needed after the long and challenging passage - and also gave Gera a chance to catch up with Ashanta, courtesy of Brittany Ferries and a bus to Brest.

Next day continued the blue skies, but almost windless conditions meant motoring past the Tas de Pois and round the Pte du Raz meeting little more than a hint of Atlantic swell. We picked up buoys in Ste Evette (cue for a swim for some), while awaiting sufficient tidal depth to enter Audierne. After successfully rafting out on the pontoon hammerheads we relaxed over an excellent meal of local seafood in a harbour-side restaurant, in this thriving and substantial fishing port, and recounted the fun of battling the flood which had been particularly intent in trying to carry Maid of Honour under the low bridge which blocks the river just above the marina! The following day we continued south, completing the haul round the rather featureless Penmarc'h with its octagonal 60m high Eckmühl Lighthouse before entering the Odet River to stop at Ste Marine. The weather continued hot with light winds and after the long passages a further port day allowed each to relax as they chose – browsing the nauticalia in an open air market, sunbathing and swimming off the magnificent beach which borders the Anse de Bénodet to the west, exploring the coastline to L'Île Tudy, or pottering on board and watching life go by in this bustling yachting centre.



Ashanta decided to return to Audierne, while Seabird and Maid of Honour pressed on to Belle Île, the largest island off the Brittany coast, picking up moorings outside the outer north mole at Sauzon. This dramatic island with its fascinating history warrants a longer stay but we allowed ourselves just one day of exploration. Dave and Angie hired a moped to visit Le Palais with its “impregnable” citadel which was stormed and captured by British marines in 1761 – a feat for which they were awarded the laurels which surround their cap badge to this day.



‘Motorised’, they roamed the 11 by 6 miles of the island, marvelling at the wild and spectacular cliffs, lashed by centuries of Atlantic gales. Tony walked across to L’Apothicairerie and then via the Sentier Cotier to the unique anchorages of



Ster Wenn and Ster Vraz and Pte des Poulains with its pretty lighthouse. In 1892 the actress Sarah Bernhardt made a day visit to Belle Île only to fall in love with this dramatic, exposed corner. A small military fort stood there which she bought and used as a summer retreat for the next 30 years. Unfortunately the fort was destroyed by the Germans at the end of the war but it has recently been restored to house a museum to celebrate the life and achievements of Sarah Bernhardt. At last, in Sauzon, we found the local summer nightlife for which the Brittany coast is famed: eating *en plein air* while crowds strolled the harbourside listening to musicians; langoustines and sardines at Chez Carole serenaded by Count Basie and the pure tones of a guitar-playing folk singer.

The next leg took us to the magnificent “Caribbean” island of Houat – another (and the last!) warm, sunny day, motoring over a flat sea. Houat is justly called “a paradise of peacefulness.” Here we anchored off Tréac’h-er-Goured – a phenomenal beach - and dinghied ashore for a pleasant meal in the Hôtel de la Sirène before enjoying a delightfully tranquil night undisturbed by the infamous vent solaire.

Time (and it transpired fair weather) was running out and it was with reluctance that we weighed anchor next morning, returned through the Passage de Béniguet and set course for Île de Grois. For a full 25 minutes a large pod of dolphins played around the two boats as a warm sun sparkled on the surface and we snapped dozens of photos (of largely empty seas - the joys of digital photography!)



They also distracted us from noticing an ominous cloud mass which swept in from Biscay bringing a sudden deterioration in the weather. Seemingly without warning the wind rose and the heavens opened and we found ourselves hurtling along at 8kts under just a reefed main and unable to see more than a boat's length forward of the pulpit through the torrential downpour. Fortunately we had already crossed the likely track of vedettes plying between Belle Île and Quiberon, but it was with considerable relief that the worst of the storm passed after 20 minutes and the restoration of visibility revealed other yachts looking equally as startled and bedraggled as ourselves! Following the rain the temperature dropped markedly and we were glad to tie up in a very crowded Port Tudy.



The deterioration in the weather continued but we enjoyed an excellent sail to Loctudy. The wind moderated to a F3/4 although a significant swell remained and to each boat the other appeared to climb the Atlantic swell until the keel was visible before sinking until only the mast above the spreaders remained. Loctudy is a spacious, modern, well-equipped marina, a short walk from the thriving fish market and town, which we got to know well as strong winds and rain kept us port-bound for three days. Sadly the mood of the cruise sank with the rain, wind and temperature, and we felt an increasing anxiety at the delay. On the Friday we left at 0900 for a painfully slow slog under power into head

winds and seas till round Pte Penmarc'h, when at last we were able to set sail and make good speed despite the 3-4 metre swell. We passed through the Raz with perfect timing, but even so experienced noticeably more turbulence than on the passage south and viewed the awesome sight of the seas surging up around the rocks at the base of La Vieille. As we approached and then navigated through the Chenal du Toulinguet the wind rose, the temperature dropped and the rain returned. Arrival in Camaret marina after a very challenging 12 hr passage was most welcome.

Saturday was cold and very wet and only saved by a truly outstanding seafood meal in one of the hotels.

A forecast improvement on Sunday saw us continue north through the Chenal du Four leaving just before midday in patchy thick fog to cross the Rade de Brest. Southbound traffic and navigation buoys announced themselves on the radar but were often not sighted until we had closed within 50 – 200 metres, but fortunately as we approached Pte de St Mathieu visibility improved somewhat. While collision was no longer a risk, accurate navigation remained essential to bring us within sight of the next buoy. Approaching the Port Sail mark the wind backed and strengthened and persistent heavy rain made the rock-strewn passage from the Libenter to a mooring buoy off L'Aber Wrac'h a rather testing thrash! Weary of the cold and the wet, and with further gales forecast, a decision was made to leave the boats here and catch a ferry back from Roscoff.

Postscript:

The following Friday at 2pm we were sitting in a Flybe Dash 8 on the tarmac at Exeter Airport. At 4pm we were again on board in L'Aber Wrac'h having glimpsed the shipping lanes, Guernsey and the North Brittany coast through gaps in the clouds before landing at Brest and taking a taxi. The sail back was double-reefed in 20-27kt winds, gusting higher, and rough breaking seas - the forecast improvement failed to materialise! Maid of Honour left an hour before Seabird at 07.00, and we did not sight each other again until 03.00 next morning when Seabird, entering Dartmouth, crossed ahead of Dave and Paddy on Maid of Honour who carried on to the Exe.

Despite the disappointing weather the cruise left us with splendid memories of sometimes glorious, but frequently challenging sails, fascinating places visited, and superb seafood and wine in good company. South Brittany is a captivating cruising ground.

“Ashanta” – Peter and Gera Boyle

“Maid of Honour” – Dave and Angie Gill (Paddy Smith return crossing)

“Seabird” – Dermot Nolan and Tony Leigh

Tony Leigh (normally “ZigZag”).