

A Cruise in northern Europe (Part one)

In July 2007, my wife and I tried to get our 27ft Albin Vega, "Ocean Sunrise" (OS) from the Isle of White (IOW) on the central English Channel to La Coruna in NW Spain and back, all in a short 3 week cruise.

We had been planning this trip for over a year, it was the perfect opportunity to find out if we had what it was needed to tackle an infamous bit of water in order to make it to the Caribbean later in life.

The total trip was going to be 1200 Nm, which would start on the eastern side of the IOW down the coast on the UK Side, once past the Scilly islands on the far west tip of the UK down to Spain.

I had done this trip countless of times in my mind, what we needed were the correct winds.

On the day of departure we had a forecast for SW 3-4 dropping to SW 2-3 backing SE 3-4, latter veering W 5-6 (this is in a 48 hr period). Far from required, but at least it was not a gale warning.

We left Ryde (on the eastern end in the IOW) at 3:00 on Saturday the 6th of July, after packing and arranging everything in order so that we had as much space as possible and stocked with enough food and water for 6 days at sea.

The wind was about F3 from the SW the day was clear and we had a really nice sun rise, at once we lifted the number 1 Jib (having no roller furler) and started looking to raise the main sail, but for some reason we could not find the main halyard, due to the lack of light we could do very little but speculate why was it not there.

Once the sun came up, we saw that it was stuck at the top of the mast (some one must have taken it off from where we keep it and I had pulled the line to tighten it the night before), here is where things started to not go according to plan, we had planned to go all the way to Plymouth (120Nm away), so to solve the problem we decided to stop in Yarmouth at the western end of the IOW (16 NM away) and find a way to bring the halyard down, this took 3 hrs by which time we had missed the rest of the favourable west going ebb tide.

So we stopped there and waited for the next one, had some beers a meal, it was a good opportunity to get more ice for the cool box and some extra meat.

We finally left Yarmouth at about 16:00 the wind was about F4-5 still from the SW so we left, we were looking forward to pass through the needles channel (east end of the Isle of Wight); about 1 nm WSW of Yarmouth the waves started getting steep (about 5'-6') and the wind started freshening up, so I went to the bow to change the jib for a smaller one, at which time some rescue people came near us and looked at us for about 20 sec to see if we needed help (I presume), I can tell you, I was very tempted to ask them for a Ride out of the over falls, but we changed the sail and started getting serious, at this point Jasmeet (my wife) started panicking and said "this is not fun any more lets go back to Yarmouth" this annoyed me a bit, I explained that it was because they were over falls the reason for the wave action. We compromised to make it too Poole (24Nm to the west) and re-asses the situation.

I had read in some Solent pilot that the needles channel can be very rough on strong SW winds and to use the Northern channel in that case (a small channel 2

NM north of the needles channel, very close to shore, so close in fact that is very difficult to believe that there is a channel there), so I decided to change course from SW to W to go through that channel, however the waves became steeper and bigger (6-8') at one point the boat twice dogged in to the oncoming waves, with the result that the bow was 1' below the wave, something I had not seen before, Ocean Sunrise was just jumping up and down. Since I still had steerage and we were moving where we wanted to go, I tried to ignore them, there were also at least 10 other boats going through the same passage and having the same experience, only that they were under engine and we were under sail, tacking.

Finally after 1 hr things calmed down, the wind gradually dropped to about F1-2, from then on we motored the rest of the way to Poole (Poole bay is the biggest natural harbour in the UK, and with a green island with a castle right in the middle, it makes it a magical looking place in the right conditions) and arrived with one of the most amazing sun sets I have seen.

The next day we slept in (having arrived at 23:00 and the next ebb being at 5:00) until 10:00 and missed the SE wind which blew for about 8 hrs, this proved later to be a mistake; we left at 15:00 just as the wind had veered back to WSW F4, we still had in mind going to Plymouth.



(Island in the middle of Poole harbour)

When leaving Poole there is a very conspicuous rock called Old Harry rock, it guards the entrance to Poole harbour channel, is about 50 meters high and on its own rising from the sea bed about 2 cables from the chalky shore, you see it as you are leaving and is about 4Nm south from the harbour.

After about 4 hrs in one single tack, trying to clear Saint Albans head (near to where the rock stands), with the boat tilting at uncomfortable angles I realised how lost our cause was and that it would take over 30 hrs to do the remaining 90 nm to Plymouth, so we had a chat and saw that on the same tack in 12 hrs we could be in Alderney one of the Channel Islands, on the other side of the English channel and technically in an other country, so off we went.



(saint albans headland and old harry rock the furthest one out)

We were still in the same tack as the night fell, with it so did the temperature, the wind increase, still strong from the WSW (F5), the waves became bigger and they started coming on board regularly (at least the spray, quite a lot of spray!) it was cold, windy, lonely, dark and to top it off every 10 min someone would throw a whole bucket full of cold salt water on top of me (or who ever was outside), it was the second day of our 3 week holiday, nothing was going according to plan and it did not look as if we were ever going to get to the end of the English Channel, little alone to Spain, at one point I started weeping.....

Slowly morale improved and finally at 3:00 we were 10 nm from Alderney, faster than I had expected, too fast for that matter, since I did not want to go into Braye harbour during dark hrs, so we hove to, until the horizon was at least grey and we started going in, the wind backed to SSW so we could only tack there.

The best description of Alderney I have ever heard is of "7000 drunks hanging to a rock" well it is definitely a rock, and one which sits in the middle of one of the most powerful tidal races in the world, on one side (east) the Alderney race on the other (west) the Swinge race; so you need to come in with amazing precision so that the boat does not get swept into either one of the races.

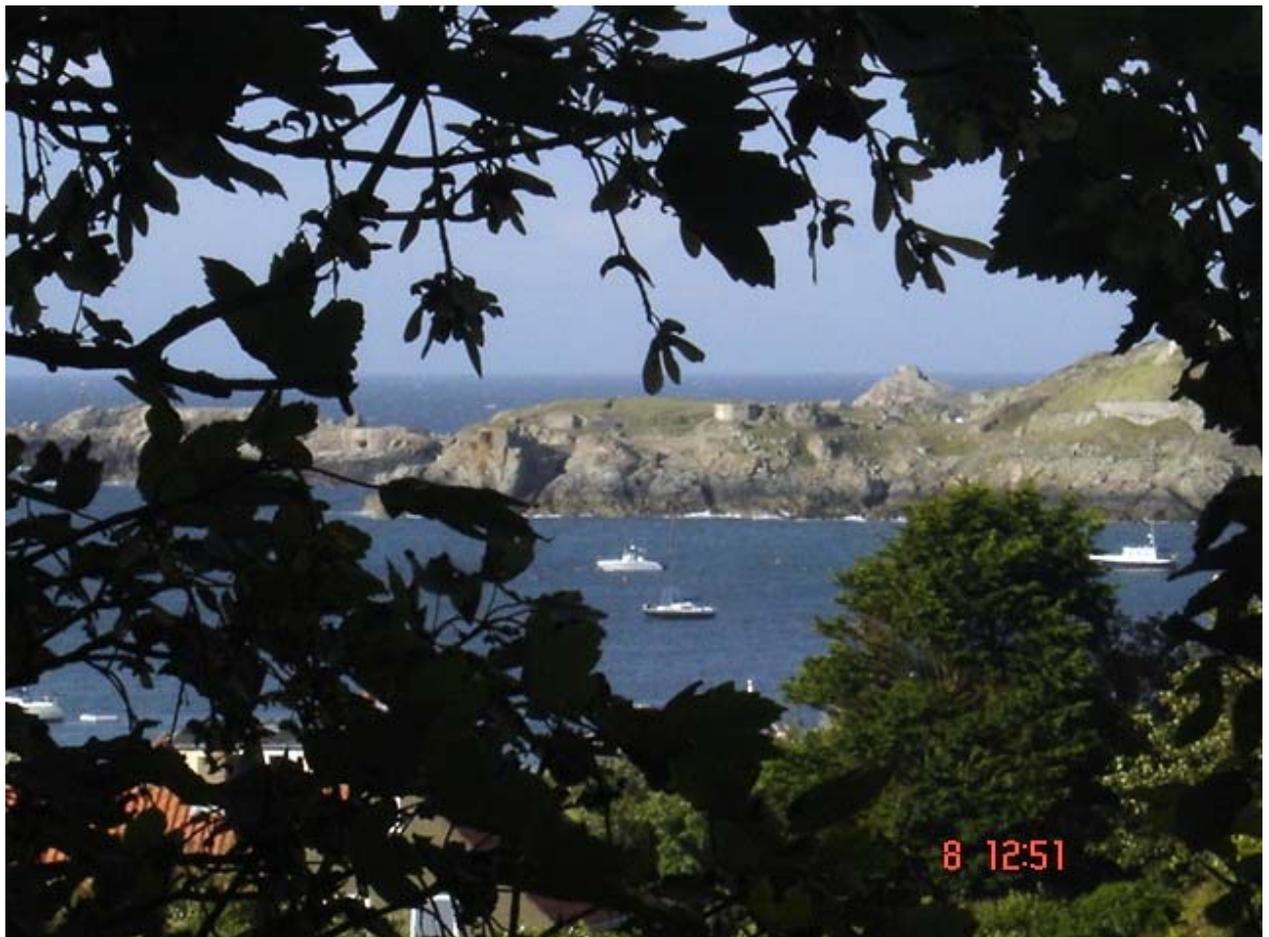
We dropped the sails and started motoring (we have a 6HP two stroke outboard engine), about 4 nm from the entrance we realise that we were coming in at a wrong angle; to top it all off the outboard engine mounting bracket broke only staying on by some lines that we had attached, just in case.

Finally we managed to make it in under engine, with it half hanging off the stern at about 25% power, we picked up a buoy, I had some beers whilst Jasmeet (my wife) slept.

Things were looking up, we had made it under our own steam after what I believed to be the last time I was going to be on OS (if some one would have offered to buy her at any time during the previous night I would have said, yes!), it was a sunny warm day.

When Jasmeet got up we decided to anchor off the beach (it was cheaper and better looking), so we moved OS, dropped the anchor (a CQR 25 pounder and 75 ft of chain), I went overboard to check that the anchor was properly set and then we went to town and check the place out.

Alderney is very hilly about 6 nm long and 3 nm wide, some trees, a lot of bottle shops (tax free grog) and some farm animals, but it was windy with sunny spells, what a cliché!.



(Brayer Harbour with OS in the middle of picture)

Its tidal range at neaps is about 4 meters, so when we got back I noticed that there was a black patch under the boat, again went down to check the anchor

and found out that a rock was precisely 1ft below the hull, we let more chain out and that put us about 6 meters away from it (huge harbour and we picked the spot with the rocks!) we made some plans in case things went wrong and went to sleep.

The next thing I remember is waking up and the wind howling out side (F7 maybe 8) with no more than 2 cables of visibility and a 70' yacht coming into the harbour and dropping anchor near us, needless to say we did not sleep that well, the only thing I could think of was getting out of that rock and looking for a nicer place.

In the morning the wind had moderated a bit, we went to ask people around what was the best time to go out through the Swinge (the race on the west side of Alderney), since in the chart it reads "danger refer to note" the note says "broken water to be found, dangerous for small craft" I had calculated that about 16:30 was the best time since it would be slack tide, but had heard some people say that the best time was 14:30 and other people at 16:00; the problem with Alderney is that you can not say that if the tide is coming up (or going down) is going in one directions, we made a decision and left at 15:30 under sail.

Who ever made the note was not joking, the wind was from the WSW about F3-4 but the waves were like pyramids, as if some one was grabbing a giant bucket and throwing water up, the waves were not moving forward or backward, just up and down, thankfully within 1/2 hr we had cleared the race plus, the more we saw them the more we got used to them, finally there were no more ugly looking waves, now just the regular kind, the ones that lift you up and gently drop you down.



(the swinge race, did I mentioned it was rocky?)
So we passed the Swinge and now Guernsey (another of the Channel Islands and the one with the most tree cover) was our next stop, we planned to pass through

the little Russell channel, a channel between Guernsey and Herm (another of the islands).

This little Russell channel is only 2 miles long, what I forgot was to see how wide it was, I looked at the chart and it looked 1 mile wide at least, as it turns out at low water is only 2 cables (plus the tide was taking us at about 3-4kts), so by the time we realized that between does rocks sticking out of the water lay the little Russell we had passed it and ended up in the big Russell which lies between Herm on the western side and Sark on the eastern side.

At this point already tired of the stress of navigating through hard edged rocks, we forgot about tradition and started using the GPS. At one point I went down to see if I could find a channel to go through and Jasmeet came up to steer, I am looking at the GPS and see that we are coming up to some shoals so I told her so, at that time the water was calm like a meandering river, suddenly jasmeet screams "Roger there are rocks here" and veers hard to starboard (which puts us closer to the real rocks in Herm!), I go out and took the tiller, correct the course and she escapes down bellow.....

These waves were completely different, they were breaking with a perfect tubular motion and on top of the deck I could not see much as it was pitch dark, from no noise to suddenly having all of dose breaking waves.

It was loud and even I started doubting that they were shoals and started believing we were doomed; they lasted about 10 min, but they were tense moments, I could not move away from them since the channel to get to St peter port (The main port and capital of Guernsey) was just passed those shoals and did not wish to be swept further down to another set of shoals.

We managed to make it to Saint Peters port at 23:00, it was very rewarding to arrive and see that the town is very developed and a huge improvement over Alderney, but I can not stress how rocky it was (even inside the harbour there are tons of rocks that dry at low water).



(Saint Peters port in Guernsey).

We spent the days a total of 4 days in Saint Peter port, an incredible place to hike very wooded in did, further blessed with a set of concerts of 1930 style music (think Frank Sinatra), which for the first two nights were quite entertaining and charming, however the same singers and repertoire started making it tedious, furthermore, when you start learning some songs which until two days ago you have never heard then you know that is time to start moving on.

We thought initially about spending 2 days in Guernsey, but the wind was hard from the west and I did not fancy the proposition of tacking all the way, nor did I wanted to see any more rocks.



(Guernsey the sandy side)

We had been reading about the Brittany coast, which we could hop along, but they were just as rocky as the Channel Islands, finally salvation came on the form of a longish term weather forecast (4 days).

A low was coming strait up the English Channel and that at some point the wind will have to become easterly (or have an easterly element) and since it was not a deep low we could wait for it and use it to our advantage.

We left on the ebb that I thought was closest for the wind to go easterly; for hrs we moved only as far as the tide was taking us, thankfully it moves hard and fast around Guernsey, other wise we would have bobbed around the south western end of the island, instead we moved very slowly westwards and in 10 hrs we had gone about 20 nm.

Finally the long awaited easterly arrived and everything again started looking great, we were far out to sea so no rocks to worry about, over falls, shoals or any other land effect or risk, the wind was going in our direction; first did about 5 nm in an hr, then 14 in 2 hrs.

The night was amazingly clear but incredible dark, we were about 30nm from the shore of France and every now and again we could see red explosions going on along the coast, we thought they maybe flairs, until we managed to see they were also green ones, latter we found out that it was Bastille day.

I went to sleep and woke up thinking that the water was making a funny noise bellow the hull, looked at the chart and had done 10 nm in 1 hr, when I went outside and looked at the wind vane; it was controlling the boat with violent movements of the tiller, I knew that it was time to reef dramatically or the boat

might broach or some part may break, at this point Jasmeet panicked! "I am scared" came out of her and she looked almost in shock. It took us about 30 minutes to get everything back under control again, by which time the sun started coming out, the wind dropping.....what a tornado of emotions in just 30 min.

It all went quite, that's when I started thinking that the westerly will start soon, and we started motoring as hard as we could (I had heard the forecast saying WNW F6 and did not fancy facing it on a rising sea, getting close to land and with our final destination, La Aber Wrack exposed to the WNW, we had done about 70 nm of the 110 nm needed to get there), it became a race, would the wind get before we got to La 'aber wrack on the south western edge of English channel on the French side?

As the early morning wore on, lots of yachts started appearing out of what I can presume to be cracks on the coast, at one point a flotilla of 8 of them past us, still flat calmed, the sky grey if it was not for the weather forecast it would have been difficult to predict that the wind will soon pick up.



(entrance to La Aver'wark)

Finally 2 hrs before arriving the wind picked up considerably; since we were running out of petrol we had to sail the last 6 nm, on a F5 and rising, visibility dropping, it was a very dramatic entry, the good news is that the seas had not had enough time to build up, by the time we entered the river (again full of rocks!) we where hungry, stressed, but after some wine, a crêpe, checking the town out (there was not much there) and looking at the chart that we were only

20 NM from the bay of Biscay, we decided to go the next day on the first tide available.

The following day the weather had a very different idea, it started with a F4 from the SW, I looked at the weather forecast and it said F5-7 we still got ready to go, just as we were about to go, this guy next to us, looks at me and asked with a French accent "are you going now?" I said "that is the plan", "the forecast says that there will be strong winds, tomorrow will be better", he went below his boat, then there was a very strong gust, so we stayed one more day.....



(a BBQ at the end of the day, would you believe that same morning was very gusty?)

One thing about the French country side is that it has more of a rural feel than the Channel Islands do, there are more restaurants and the wine is cheap so it is not as much of a chore to stay for one more day in a French rural town.

We made preparations to go through the channel du four, the last bit between us and the bay of Biscay, on the east side of the channel lays the furthest western land of continental France, on the western side is the Isle de Ouessant an island which is also a national park, it can only be accessed on the best of weathers. The channel is aprox 10 nm long and the tides run strong, southerly for half the time and again strong, northerly for the other half.



(channel du four light house at the entrance of the channel)

The following day it was an amazingly nice day, probably the best we had, the wind still from the SSW but F2-3 and since in the town there was no petrol station we did not have a lot of fuel, so we sailed (leaving at 10:00), it took us so long on that breath of wind that 3 nm from the end of the channel du four, the tide changed and we could not make any progress (we motored for 30 min doing .5 knots over the ground at full throttle) so I thought, what would Joshua Slocum do?

He would find a head land, anchor out of the tidal stream and wait for a favourable tide, I looked at the chart and there was a headland with a beach, when we got to it (we had just passed it on the way down, but could not see inside the bay) it was big and sandy, full of people and next to a town, so we anchored calculated when would the best time to leave be and went to town.

Le Conquet, was the name of the town, significantly larger than La'aber Wark, very picturesque and full of French tourists, which it even had a petrol station 2 miles from the beach, we inflated the dingy, rowed to shore, walked to the petrol station, found it, then a nice stroll back to Ocean Sunrise with 25ltrs of petrol, when we got there the tide had gone out so much that we had to carry the dingy 200 meters to get to the water and start rowing again to get the petrol to OS, at least this time OS was closer so less rowing.

We left at 17:30 from this beach, at which time the tide would still be against us but not too strong and once we turned the corner (into the Gulf of Brest) the tide would be with us but not for long, as we finished the channel du four an entered

the gulf, to our west lay Biscay so close we could see her, but yet so far that it will still remain uncrossed by us for yet a few more years.

We were happy to have made it this far, we knew inside that time beat us, not our lack of skills.

I would never forget when we finally arrived at Camaret sur mer at 23:00, with the sun setting towards Biscay, it was the furthest south and west we managed to get this time around, it had taken 11 days of our 23 day cruise.....we still had to make it back to our office work.



(Camaret sur mer, as far west and south we got to).