

# Across Biscay on a Songbird

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The plan was simple, indeed flawless. Stuart and Sharanne had sailed their lovely new Dufour 40 “Songbird” from the South coast of England to Brittany the previous year, and wintered it out of the water at Arzal on La Vilaine River. In May Stu had flown back out from Fremantle to recommission it and I was to join him a week later. We would sail down the French coast to La Rochelle for a few days. The boat was built there so the builders would spend a day doing some warranty work, then our third crew Mike from Southampton would fly out and we would cross straight across Biscay in 3 days to the Spanish port of La Coruna, drop Mike off at the airport and carry on round windy Cape Finisterre to the Southern rias - around 500 miles all up. There I would leave the boat and fly back to Fremantle from Santiago de Compostella at around the time Sharanne and Mike’s son Jack would arrive for the gentle sail down the Portuguese coast and into the Med. And the plan almost worked - almost.



*Songbird and skipper Stuart*

My flight from Perth to Paris with Qatar Airways was pleasantly uneventful, with a gentle twist of nostalgia - it stopped over in Qatar’s capital Doha, an international transport hub with a new airport that rival’s Dubai in its size and glitz. The last time I landed there was in 1980 when the plane stopped there on my first ever journey to Australia. Back then it was just a dusty fuel stop in the hazy desert, whereas now some 34 years later it is ... a dusty fuel stop in the hazy desert, but with nice coffee shops and duty free bargains. Plus ca change?

I was met at Nantes airport by Stu in the hire car and we drove the one hour to Arzal where the boat had been relaunched the previous day. Stayed the first night in a lovely gite near where the boat was, run by the local mayor. Or at least I think that’s what he said, my

Franglais and Stu's Auslais might have left something out in the translation. On reflection he might have said that the mayor ran along the river, or he ran the mayor over in his car, or both.

Next day was cold but bright and we spent the time doing all the inevitable jobs required to get a boat ready for sea after a winter out of the water. I should point out that Stu had already spent the entire previous week doing said jobs, it's just that a jobs list never shrinks, and also takes a quantum jump in length every time a new crew member arrives (why doesn't this switch work Stu? What about if we put that block over there to reduce chafe? This valve's a bit stuff, have you checked it recently?" etc.). On leaving Arzal and going through the dock we discovered there was no reading on the depth sounder. Given that we were to tie up to the downstream pontoon overnight and didn't want to go aground at low tide, this was of some concern. So once tied up at said pontoon, Stu returned the hire car whilst I made a temporary leadline (a bit of rope with some spare heavy shackles tied at one end, and a knot every two metres). This I proceeded to dangle over the side at bow, midships and stern on each side to find out how deep and uneven the bottom of the seabed was. To any French onlooker I must have appeared to be a very impatient and unsuccessful fisherman, dangling the line in the water for 20 seconds before moving to a better spot. As for the bait I was using... ("ah!, zees crazee oztralienne, zey are worze zan zee eengleesh!"). Having established that we weren't going to go aground overnight I then set myself to finding out what was wrong with the depth sounder. Now I acknowledge that electronics and I get on like a five-star general and a Woodstock hippie sharing a tent, but I couldn't even find the darn thing. Stu had left with the parting wisdom that it was "under the floorboard up forward near the log (speedo) transducer." I knew what all these nautical terms meant and I found the log but, try as I might, I could not find the depth sounder. OK it was an unfamiliar boat, but I have spent a disproportionate part of my life crawling around in the bilges of boats; surely the jet lag can't have affected me that much? I remembered that all boats built in the EU are now required by law to have an owner's manual, and that manual has to have a plan showing all the through-hull fittings in case of emergency. I found the manual and the plan, but no mention of depth sounder location, or even the log, Note to self: bureaucratic safety regulations are useless unless properly implemented. Then it dawned on me, complete with light bulbs popping, rising star in the east and heavenly choir of angels whispering in my ear "the log transducer is also the depth sounder, you dummy!". And of course the log transducer had been withdrawn from its exit hole for the winter and not put back in place after launching. If I'd taken the trouble to look at the speed reading as well as depth, the penny, er, Euro, might have dropped a little earlier. I'll blame that on jet lag.

Next morning the voyage proper started, at 6.30 am with mist rising off a calm but cold river. I was wearing everything I had, including my fleece beanie I bought specially for a trip to Antarctica 3 years ago (name-dropper!), it was that cold. The sun warmed things up a tiny bit, a gentle breeze came to cool things back down again, and 10 hours later we were in Port Joinville on Isle d'Yeu at beer o'clock. A nice French meal and a long sleep saw the exercise repeated next day, this time to Les Sables d'Olonne, home of the famous Vendee Globe single handed round the world race. Our visit to the tourist office to get directions to

the Vendée Globe Museum/Centre revealed that no such thing existed, but there was a souvenir shop down the road that sold gifts. Maybe it was the Franglais again; perhaps we had asked where we could buy one handed-shirts. Or it could have been the jet lag. By this time it was beer o'clock, followed by dinner in a small French restaurant.

Next day was much the same, finally arriving at La Rochelle at beer o'clock (French dinner etc.) Sometime during the previous few days, I forget exactly when, we had tried out the new asymmetric spinnaker for a couple hours in light winds in order to avoid having to motor. It was a lovely sail, went up smoothly and set beautifully. Pulling it down again seemed a bit like hard work, perhaps the jet lag had made me weak? When it was nearly all the way down we discovered that the sheath of the halyard had chafed through to the core, and I was trying to pull the resulting mess through the block (a bit like trying to stuff a marshmallow into a letterbox, only backwards.) Something else to add to the jobs list. Another job was to fix the nasty scratch we put in the topsides coming into the berth at La Rochelle. It was the first ever scratch on Stuart's lovely new boat (now officially not so new), but he took it with good grace after a few beers.



**Old La Rochelle port**

The stopover in La Rochelle was supposed to run like this: arrive Thursday (tick), warranty jobs done Friday (no tick), collect Mike from airport Saturday ( tick), leave for Spain on Sunday (no tick). The French have an approach to timekeeping similar to the Mexican “mañana”, but without the same degree of urgency. Consequently the warranty jobs didn't get done until Monday lunchtime, and even then only a few of them were completed. In fairness, they did a nice job of filling and polishing out the scratch on the hull, for free. Not to worry, La Rochelle is a beautiful walled city with a fortified old port surrounded by bars and restaurants, which made every hour beer o'clock. The marina itself is a good walk out of town; it has to be, because it is a whopper – it has just been expanded to five *thousand* berths, second largest in the world only to Marine del Rey ( LA). Even England's Hamble River only has 3,000 berths for all its marinas combined. I never did get to walk round the marina perimeter, that would have taken nearly an hour.

We left La Rochelle with at least some of the jobs completed. We had one compass light working (not the one they “fixed” though), the chart plotter no longer spat its dummy every hour or so, and the wedge holding the stern ramp in place was theoretically now redundant (though we kept it in place just in case). We still had a wrong-coloured floorboard, but the consensus was that it wouldn’t overly impinge on safety or performance. The speedo and depth were still over-reading, but by applying a bit of science and caution we could live with that. Cruising might well be defined as the art of repairing yachts in exotic places with inadequate tools, but there comes a point when you say ”that’ll do, let’s go”.

The first afternoon and night out from La Rochelle was mainly motoring in calm winds, quite cold though. The next day (Tuesday) we managed to do a bit of sailing and were often surrounded by small, white-bellied dolphins for hours on end. We should have heeded sailing folklore (“when the sea-hog jumps, man the pumps”); as evening moved toward sunset we had enough wind to warrant reefing. It was from SSW i.e., on the nose, but we were all experienced and cynical enough to know that would happen. Now, a word about weather and weather forecasts. The two are supposed to be related, if only as distant cousins. Not in the northern hemisphere in 2014 they weren’t. The world’s weather systems travel from west to east i.e. all our weather comes from the west. This is a consequence of the direction the earth rotates, so this is a fairly definitive general rule. Except in the northern hemisphere in 2014. Whilst on our way down to La Rochelle we had been keeping careful track of the weather, eating grib files for breakfast, lunch and dinner (look it up if you don’t know what a grib file is). It showed low pressure systems over the Baltic gently meandering west, not east; weird. We can genuinely blame this on Putin, as he had decided not to grant an exit visa to a high pressure system sitting over Russia.



**Wet and cold weather**

The forecasts when we left La Rochelle had more variety than Heinz – we looked at Predictwind, PocketGrib, NOAA, France Meteo and the UK Met Office. They differed in every respect except to advise that there was a very large though not especially deep low moving from Brittany slowly *westward* into the Atlantic. This would bring strong SW winds across most of Biscay sometime on Tuesday night. How strong, and what happened next, was anybody's guess. We bashed into it all Tuesday night into Wednesday, it probably reached about 30-35knots, with gusts in the high 30s (force 7 gusting 8 in UK terms). This was later confirmed by a yacht that had sailed down from Plymouth at about the same time. After reducing to fully reefed main and no headsail to keep speed down (reduce slamming into the waves), the wind swung to the west before dawn but was still strong and rather cold, with rain showers. Stu and Mike seemed to prefer to stay in the cockpit all night for some reason, so I had two lovely long off-watch sleeps in the aft cabin under the duvet. I didn't dare tell them that, for fear they would mutiny. (Hang on a sec, a skipper can't mutiny can he? Maybe if he's beside himself...). One of the things that wasn't working properly was the Navtex weather receiver, so we were in 30kn wind with no forecasts and still 100 miles to go. Sanity prevailed (in the form of Stu saying "Stuff this, let's go to Gijon instead") and we bore off for the city port of Gijon (pronounced hee-hon, hence referred to thereafter as the donkey town), arriving in mid-afternoon. It turned out to be a good decision because the SW winds continued to blow strongly off and on for the next week, complete with rain squalls.

Anyway, we had made it to Spain after some 250 miles of non-stop sailing, no broken boat and no broken crew. We were also still talking to each other and having fun, proof of a good skipper if ever it was needed. And I was almost over my jet lag. The evening in Gijon was a little hazy after two days at sea, but it followed the familiar pattern of beer o'clock (cerveza de punto? I'm guessing) then a little Spanish restaurant. There were however two differences to this pattern. Firstly, Spaniards consider you either childish or deranged if you eat before 10pm. Secondly, our combined Spanglais was even more pitiful than our Franglais, and absolutely nobody in Gijon restaurants spoke a word of English. We managed some conversations in broken French; or it could have been Italian, or maybe German, I'm not sure. Anyway, it was all Stu's fault – he chose the place to eat. It was a very local fishermen's bar, which turned out to be a cidery. We didn't recognise a single word on the menu and the usual miming act didn't get us anywhere this time, so we just conveyed the message "feed us and water us". To this day I don't know what we ate, but it was quite nice, as was the local house wine. However, all the tables around us were drinking cider, not wine. The way this was poured by the waiters I have never seen before in my life. The bottle would be opened, then it and a glass would be carried over to what is best described as a cross between a spittoon and an art deco ashtray. The glass would be held above the rim of the spittoon at about waist height, the bottle raised to well above head height i.e. arm fully stretched out vertically. Then with a look of intense concentration on the waiter's face, he would stare directly ahead as if in a trance and pour the cider straight into the glass from a height of about 1.5m, and not spill a drop despite (or because of) deliberately not looking at either the bottle, the glass or the spittoon. It was a stellar performance each time, I wish we had the gumption to take a video of it. The inevitable consequence of this display was that we simply had to try a bottle for ourselves. It was duly poured for us in said fashion and by God it was



rough stuff! Imagine west-country scrumpy cider without the, er, subtlety or sophistication. I did remember the rest of the night, but rather wished I hadn't. Then again, maybe it was the jet lag still fighting me.

The next few days followed the same pattern as the trip down the French coast - leave in the morning, sail all day to the next harbour in time for beer o'clock followed by (late) dinner. The scenery became increasingly beautiful as we travelled west – steep granite cliffs, wooded inlets with little fishing towns, distant mountains and ferocious cold squalls that could spring up out of nowhere. It reminded me of Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentina, but just a bit warmer. We made it to Coruna the day before Mike's flight and decided that was where we should stop, as the next three days were all crew change days.

Coruna is a big, friendly city which I last visited some 48 years ago (wow!). It is famous for the glassed-in upper balconies of its apartment blocks (an idea conceived by a local naval architect according to the tourist blurb – and who am I to argue?), which tells you that it is not really warm enough to bask outdoors in the sunshine. We explored the oldest working lighthouse – the base was built by the Romans - which had an intriguing Celtic rose at its foot.



**The eight-sided Celtic rose**

The NW of Spain (Galicia) is strongly Celtic, something which becomes increasingly evident as you wander the streets hearing bagpipes at every square and corner (and in one place a digeridoo, which confused me for a moment- surely I was over the jet lag by now?). Said Celtic rose pointed to 7 Celtic regions (Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany, Wales, Isle of Man and Galicia) but had eight parts. This was completely baffling (surely not *still* the jet

lag?!) until a subsequent Google search suggested they had added a local legendary figure to the rose just to confuse the smart-aleks who thought they knew their Celtic culture.



**The ubiquitous Celtic bagpipes, with oldest working lighthouse in background**

Then it was time for another hire car, a trip to Santiago for two nights in a lovely small hotel and a visit to the cathedral famous less for itself than for the pilgrimage walk to it along the north of Spain (the Camino – see the fairly good 3-out-of-5-star film “The Way” starring Michael Sheen). It has very tall ceilings 20m high, from which is hung a pulley and a rope. On one end of the rope is a very large golden incense burner and on the other end are attached a fairly large number of fairly large priests, presumably recruited from the God’s Gardeners Rugby XV. At the end of the mass they ignite the incense burner (I thought there was a no smoking rule in churches?), hoist it up several metres then give it a swing and raise and lower it at a particular timing in order to hit resonance. Anyone who has suffered my lectures on synchronous rolling in ships and yachts will instantly recognise this as the demonstration I give using a piece of string and a pocket knife, on how waves of a certain frequency can cause a vessel to capsize when travelling downwind in waves. Clearly the priests pinched my idea several centuries ago (am I really that old?) but fortunately they didn’t quite get it right because, though the burner swung wildly through an arc of more than 60 degrees across the knave, it didn’t actually capsize. Nevertheless those in the congregation

sitting directly under it had developed a nervous twitch by the end of the service. In order to witness this impressive piece of religious theatre I had to sit through the full one hour mass (in Spanish, or maybe Latin), for only the second time in my life. I guess it was worth the wait, but without the swinging burner bit I don't think they'd be attracting the crowds.



**The incense burner inside Santiago cathedral**

After all that excitement I was up at 4.50am the next day for the early flight out of Santiago, and a nice 30 hour journey back to Perth to help me finally get over my jet lag.