

Undertaking an offshore passage

Steve Hodges experiences high highs and low lows, and not just on the barometer, during an RYA Yachtmaster Ocean passage attempt

A plan was set out for my fiancée Sam and I – both Yachtmaster Offshore qualified and Royal Yachting Association (RYA) Cruising instructors – to achieve our Yachtmaster Ocean certification.

We passed the Navathome online theory course and then as the world opened up after lockdown, we turned our sights on the qualifying passage.

This would need to be 600 miles, a third of which should be 50-plus miles from land or charted objects capable of being used for navigation. The minimum duration of the passage was 96 hours.

Importantly, we needed to take a full role in the planning and preparation of the passage.

Having met on an RYA sailing course, it seemed only right that we achieve this prestigious certificate together.

With an overall goal to head for northern Spain in late spring or early summer, we broke our planning down into crew selection; passage planning; boat preparation, maintenance and equipment; victualling; medical and safety; watches, roles and responsibilities; weather.

Armed with Tom Cunliffe's *The*

Complete Ocean Skipper, the C18 Chart, *The Shell Channel Pilot* and all the internet had to offer on global weather patterns and seasonal tidal streams, plus much-needed vino and Pringles, we tried to make every possible contingency plan.

Crew selection

We were not short of volunteer crew, as sailing across the Bay is pretty epic, and our Beneteau Cyclades 39.3 *Ruby May* is a nice yacht to spend time on.

Having undertaken Leg 8 of the Clipper Round the World Race in 2018, two former crewmates – Nigel and Dave



Active teamwork on board *Ruby May*



ABOVE The route
RIGHT Beneteau Cyclades 39.3 Ruby May

(Smithy) – stood out to Sam. While both are excellent sailors, their experience comes with age so we agreed that our remaining two crewmates required physical fortitude as well as an adventurous spirit.

Sam's half-brother Charlie, a pilot with meteorology and navigation experience, was an ideal candidate, along with my friend Malcolm, a former Royal Marine

who had undertaken the Fastnet and mile-builder trips with me. Invitations went out and, without hesitation, an incredible crew was formed.

Passage planning

When we first discussed the route, my cocky and naive response was: "Turn right out of Eastbourne, left at the end of France and head for Spain."

All I knew is that I needed 200 miles, 50 miles from anything. The rest was mile-fodder to get to the 600-mile mark.

Sam explained the three options: drop down and along the coast of France, mosey along the south coast of the UK to Falmouth and hit a line of 180° or look for the shortest route, from the end of the channel TSS to the edge of the TSS off Brest and then out towards 7° where crossing the continental shelf is reported to be less agitated and more enjoyable.

We planned for all options, with the weather to be the deciding factor. First choice would be the direct route, followed by the south coast of the UK and lastly we'd hug France for as long as required.

We printed out a big chart of the Bay and marked rough distances to every safe haven along the way, with notes about restrictions of entry and facilities. What a stroke of genius that would turn out to be.

Victualling

During the Clipper Race, Sam had a boat where food was as important for motivation as it was fuel but took out two crew, every day, to manage. Having attended the London Nautical School in the 1990s, we had treated food just as calories and sustenance but, on our family sailing, lunch and dinner are often as much an event as they are a function.

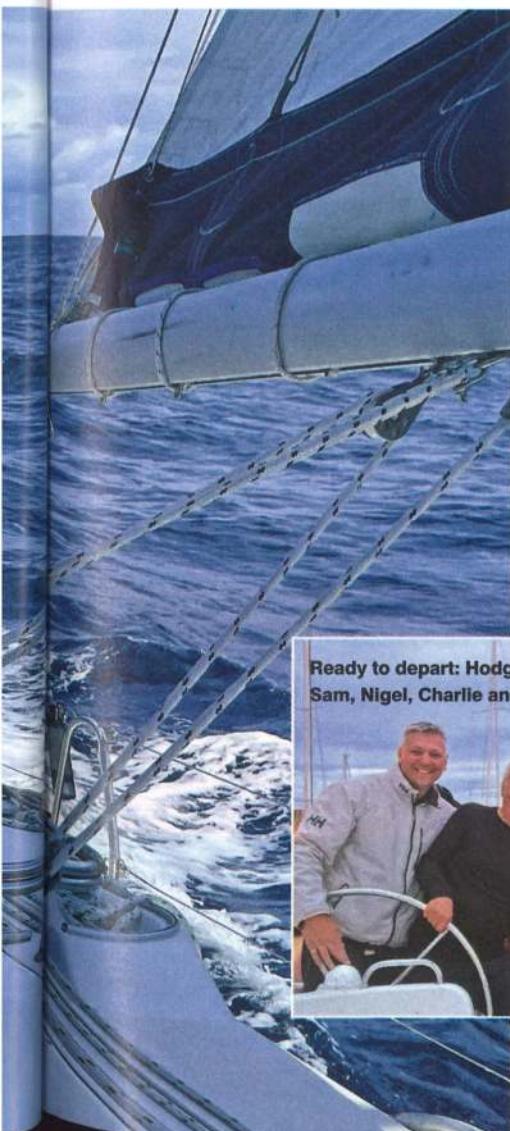
We put together an eight-day menu and agreed to cook the whole lot the week before, vacuum seal it and freeze it, allowing it to defrost over the week. Then we'd just need to add veg and rice or pasta for good food, done quickly if it was lumpy out there. Lasagne, chilli con carne, chicken curry, chorizo and bean casserole all made it onto the shortlist.

Lunch would be sandwiches, wraps and pittas (some kept fresh, some frozen) and breakfast was fruit (fresh and tinned) along with porridge pots, bacon and sausages. We also froze 8 x two-pint cartons of milk both to give it longevity without the fridge on, and to act as ice packs for the other food as we planned to only turn the fridge on for a few hours a day. Plus lots of snacks: crisps, biscuits, chocolate and sweets, nuts and preserved meats.

We agreed it would be a 'dry' boat. So, with just water and some squash along with tea and coffee to drink, we set about calculating our water requirements.

Ruby May carries 430lt of fresh water in one tank, under the bed in the forepeak. But it is marina water and while we clean it and add cleaning additives, we are never that comfortable using it for anything more than hot drinks, cooking and washing up. Equally, should the tank get damaged, we'd be in trouble.

So we decided to take drinking water in separate containers. Brilliantly, Highland Spring sells boxes (plastic bags inside) of 10lt mineral water. Six crew for seven days at 2lt a day would mean 84lt water. So we added 10x10lt to the



Ready to depart: Hodge, Smithy, Sam, Nigel, Charlie and Malcs

Sainsbury's order as well as the 2x5lt we keep under one berth for emergencies and we were heading off with over 500lt of water on board. Heavy it is, but crossing the Bay would be thirsty work.

Medical and safety

It dawned on me that our Category C first aid kit, plus seasickness tablets, those clever ice packs that you break and then freeze for a cold compress, and household painkillers, might not meet the needs of a medical emergency 'offshore'.

After many hours of research, the answer came from the lovely people at the World Cruising Club: the local pharmacy can provide a ship's owner or master with the medicines appropriate for the journey so long as you produce the relevant ship documents, personal certification and a covering letter.

After some more research, allowing for the crew age and health and the maximum distance from help on the passage, I requested:

- Amoxicillin 250mg capsules – 4x 15 capsules to treat infections
- Aspirin 300mg tab – 2x packs of 32 for mild pain management.
- Codeine phosphate 30mg tablet – 1 pack of 28 for mild to moderate pain.
- Morphine sulfate 10mg/5ml oral solution – 1x 300ml bottle for pain.
- Adrenaline/epinephrine injection BP 0.5mg injector pen – x6 for use in adults with severe allergic reactions.
- GTN spray for angina treatment.

We bought a lockable medicine box.

Organising watches

We really enjoyed thinking about our crew's personalities, physical fitness and their reactions to leadership styles. Only two of our crew had previously known one another. We settled on a Red Watch of Sam, Smithy and Charlie, and a Black Watch of me (Hodge), Nigel and Malcs.

Using Sam's experience from Clipper, we settled on a 6-6-4-4-4 hourly watch pattern: 0800 to 1400, 1400 to 2000 and then 2000-0000, 0000-0400, 0400-0800, for a good balance of rest and effort. It wasn't rigid, if people wanted to be up on their off-watch, great, but the framework proved to be invaluable for ensuring people knew when they could rest and



what was expected of them on watch.

It was agreed that the 'on watch' would make the meals and the 'off watch' would join them half an hour before so we could eat together and catch up.

These turned out to be some of the most enjoyable times, laughing, chatting, playing games with a healthy dose of inter-watch competitive banter!

Sam produced a rota of tasks.

During the watch handover we'd share responsibility for checking water levels, fresh water stock, fuel levels and battery charge. But there also were tasks that needed to be done at least once a day, like engine and rigging checks, sanitising high touch surfaces, cleaning the heads and emptying the bins, plus we had our celestial nav sightings to do. With a checklist on the wall at the chart table, nothing would get missed.

Weather

Of course, the weather was largely unpredictable until the last minute, and fickle as hell. So why plan? Well, when it comes to Biscay, there are challenging times to cross and then suicidal times to cross. Atlantic fronts, Azores highs and swells colliding with the continental shelf are all very real considerations, if not of route, then of timing.

We settled on a departure date of the best available weather window at the end of June, avoiding all the main nasty stuff that hits the bay. Equally, ready for last minute changes, we had subscriptions to Windy, Wind.Hub and PredictWind, to check surface pressure charts and forecasts daily leading up to the trip.

A few months out from departure time, we met up in a pub in London to introduce the crew. The experienced sailors were keen to see how their own planning matched up with ours. The less experienced guys added fun and enthusiasm while taking in the talk about route, weather systems, destinations,

safe havens, and boat equipment.

An overnight dash to Dieppe helped the team to gel, and the boat lived up to expectations. In Dieppe, we visited the fantastic church on the hill dedicated to mariners, and enjoyed the local cuisine. We left early the next morning, bound for Sovereign Marina, and with the required Border Force paperwork completed and a call to the National Yachtline, we went our separate ways.

Pre-trip banter

We created a Biscay 2022 WhatsApp group and let the banter commence. The lead up to the trip was a lot of fun, outside of the admin of C1331s, booking return flights, organising a marina visitor slot and a delivery skipper to bring the boat back, plus childcare, dog care, and cover at work. As departure day grew closer, the WhatsApp group pinged regularly. Weather was a major topic of conversation along with Sam's orca updates and Smithy's shots across the bow of bunkmate Nigel.

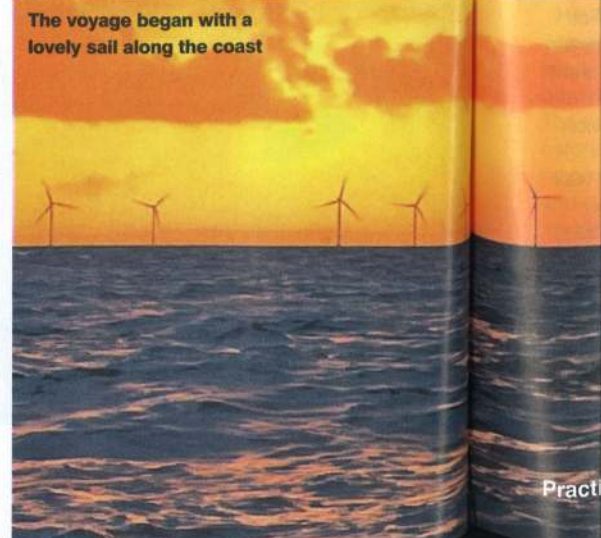
In the week before meeting the team at Eastbourne, an RMT train strike caused a last-minute shuffling of travel plans. Four of us were flying home together, Nigel and Smithy in their retirement years were

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Steve Hodges attended the London Nautical School from age 11. He is the CEO of a small global IT (Astro Technology Group) company and Sam

McClements is head of performance marketing for a hearing aid company (Hidden Hearing). They're both RYA sailing instructors, teaching for Elite Sailing in Chatham part-time.



The voyage began with a lovely sail along the coast

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LEFT Crew briefing
RIGHT The office
BELOW The chart said 4,400m – a figure not quite matched by the depth sounder



being joined by their girlfriends to enjoy the Spanish sun for a few extra days.

There were mountains of cooking, vacuum packing and freezing to be done, supported by the national electricity provider who turned our power off for half a day! If nothing else, sailing educates you in the need to be adaptable.

We'd agreed to meet at the boat early Saturday afternoon for a safety briefing, engine check, to stow gear, chat through the plan and look at the weather routing before enjoying dinner out, with a Sunday departure of 0800.

This would give us a restful night and a favourable tide and still get us to A Coruña in time for a couple of days of post-trip decompression, or at worst some contingency before our flights home the following Sunday. As the week progressed, we could see the weather build out in the Atlantic; it was forecast to head up the Irish coast but, being extra cautious, we told the group to prepare for a midnight Saturday lock out.

Dinner was a combination of sailing stories, friendly inter-watch rivalry, drawing straws for the first midnight to 0400 watch and sweepstakes for arrival times! It was relaxed, fun and exciting.

Setting sail

We locked out of Sovereign Marina an hour early, prepared to fight the tide for a bit. There was tapas waiting for us at the end of our journey.

After punching out past Beachy Head Lighthouse, we moseyed along the south coast, tacked to avoid the Isle of Wight, made another long passage down towards Portland Bill, tacked out to avoid the heavy tide, then after another long tack it was down across Lyme Bay, and a tack out from Start Point towards northern France.

Spirits were high despite the heavy weather. Swapping from one reef to two and trimming the foresail, we kept an eye on the inbound low pressure out in the Atlantic. We planned to take the outside route at the TSS at Brest, hoping to meet the tide as it headed south around 0800 on Tuesday, about eight hours after the bad weather that was headed north as predicted, meaning a westward wind would hit us for a rapid, relaxed transition down the Bay.

The weather didn't abate, it continued to build, and build. Three reefs in, a slither of foresail and at this time while the IridiumGo! would connect, an error message from PredictWind about account permissions was not helping the situation.

Getting hammered

As we rounded the corner of the TSS we were getting hammered. Our track was directly into the Force 7 wind and we were making short tacks, not wanting to

Offshore upgrades

Chartplotter *Ruby May* has the latest Axiom Pro chart plotter with supporting i70 repeater and an iPad for RayControl at the chart table. She has a Raymarine 600 AIS Transponder, and ICOM IC-M423GE VHF with DSC and a Command Mic by the helm.

Safety equipment We carry an EPIRB, handy billy, recovery sling, ocean danbuoy, and a recently serviced six-man liferaft, plus engine spares and tool kits. We increased our coast kit flare pack to include the Seago ISAF Flare Pack.

Weather receiver We installed the NASA Navtex BT-3 with an H Vector antenna device and the associated app on the iPad and on our phones for offshore weather updates knowing that the VHF might just not cover it.

Tri light We upgraded our Tri Light to the NASA Dual Tri/anchor light just to give us better visibility from further away.

Battery Monitor We upgraded to a Merlin SmartGauge battery monitor knowing that power management would be a key consideration.

Comms We hired an IridiumGO! from g-comm.co.uk so that if anyone left ashore needed to contact us in an emergency, they could send us a message. And we upgraded to PredictWind Pro to get the offshore GRIB files. I borrowed a

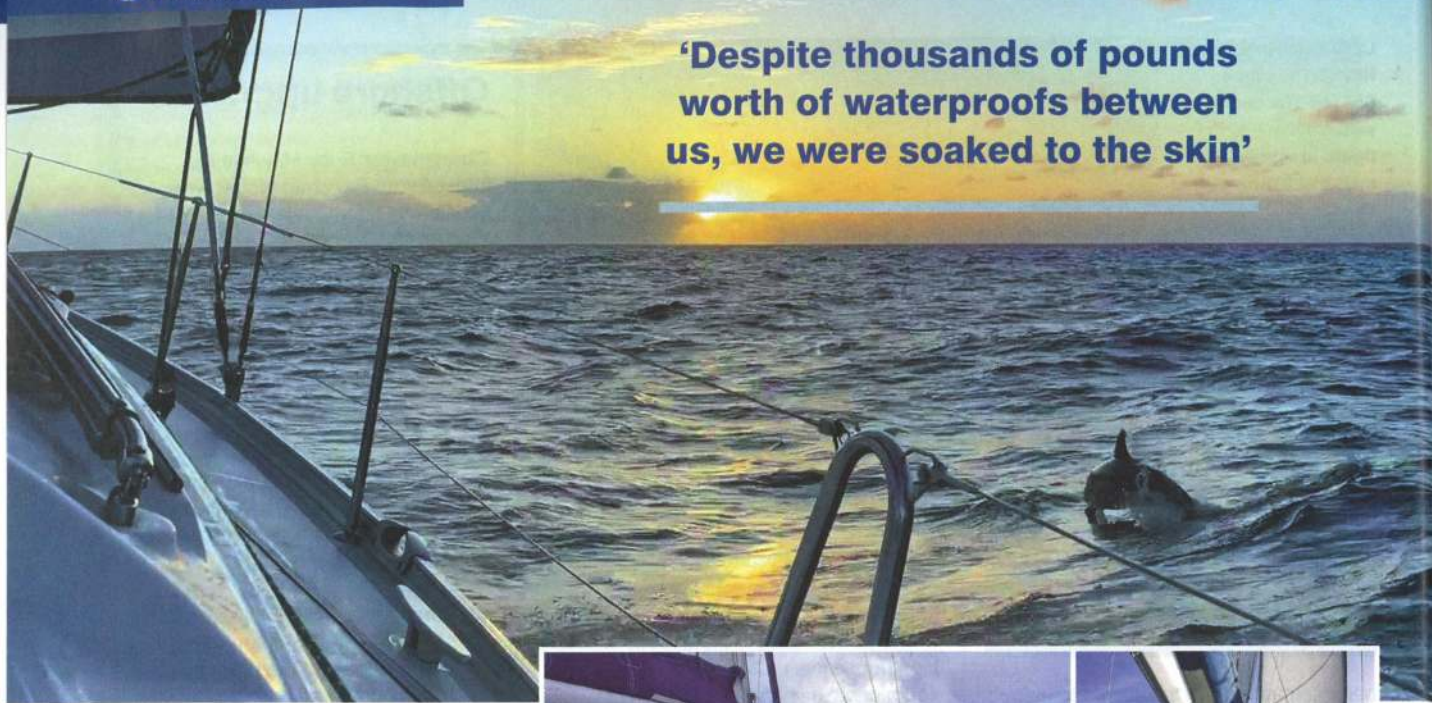


StarLink sat comms dish from work, more for fun than anything else.

Fuel *Ruby May* carries 210lt of diesel. We calculated that at around 2,250 revs, she will burn around 2lt per hour at an average of 5 knots. The trip was expected to be around 640/680 miles, so in the worst-case scenario we should carry more.

New flag And of course, the Spanish courtesy flag.

'Despite thousands of pounds worth of waterproofs between us, we were soaked to the skin'



bear too far west where the weather was worse, or too far east towards the TSS.

It was soon all hands on deck, the sailing felt precarious, but not dangerous. As evening drew in, we looked at the latest NavTex upload and it wasn't pretty: wind a solid 7 in north-west Biscay and a 'very rough' sea state. The WINDEX was reporting 40-plus knot gusts and we were all soaking from the rain, hail, waves and sweat that comes with sailing in this environment.

Sam was resolute, it was time to call it a day. I was devastated. I felt that the boat could cope, we had a good, strong crew and this wind had to shift, it had to.

Visibility was down to 500m when we hit the TSS, we were glued to the AIS, the binoculars and watching what was going on as the light faded. Then, the death knell of our trip: a massive wave slammed into us and I heard something break below. I felt sick. Going to investigate, I found the forward heads door smashed off its hinges. Despite the crazy environment, everyone was calm. It was a very controlled chaos.

We had employed a policy of tethering on any time it was dark or when anyone went out of the cockpit. Now it was time for double tethers.

Game over

Another loud noise and in a heartbeat, I saw my dreams of completing our Ocean Yachtmaster on this trip disappear. The foresail tore. It could have been the noise of my heart being ripped out of my chest.

Of course, Sam had already worked out that it was game over but I had a tiny flicker of hope inside me. I wanted it so badly. In hindsight, we should have put the sail away long before but the conditions never really allowed for work on deck. The number of times we tell students 'reef early...' But it is all too



TOP Dolphins were a joy to see LEFT Steve still smiling RIGHT Sam doing a sun sight

easy to get caught up in the moment. Never again!

Sam was updating the log with our damage and consulting her notes on safe havens, looking at the charts and making plans. I stuck my head down the companionway, reluctantly whispering: "It's game over, isn't it baby?"

She was miles ahead of me. "If we head east-north-east, we can run with the weather and head to L'Aber Wrac'h - it has everything we need and more, especially lots of shelter a few miles out."

That will be a yes then, I thought as I headed back to the cockpit.

We completed a rapid pilotage plan, consulted the channel guide and briefed the crew, the look of relief on their faces was palpable.

Despite thousands of pounds worth of waterproofs between us, we were soaked to the skin, my hands had shrivelled up to prunes with a combination of the buckets of water pouring over us and the grip on the helm.

We tentatively picked our way across the TSS, then headed towards the lighthouse showing the way to L'Aber Wrac'h. As we got behind the wind shadow of Ouessant, things started to abate. It would have been easy to think we had made the wrong choice, the sailing was totally different. But a quick

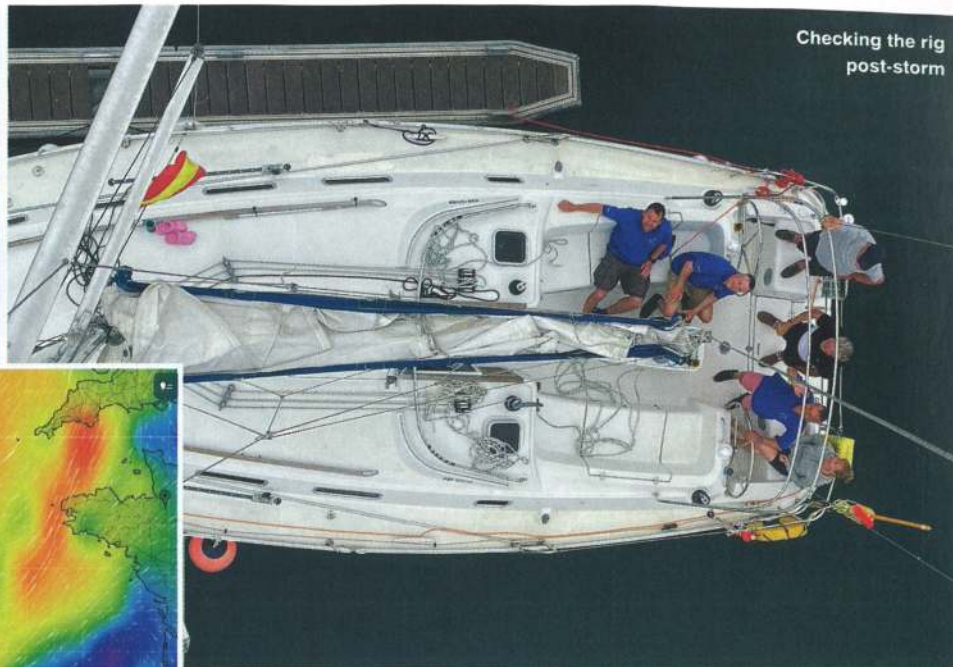
look astern was a rapid reminder of what it would be like heading towards our goal. Arriving at the marina entrance we found boats rafted two or three deep. Clearly, we were not the only ones to seek shelter.

Battered pride

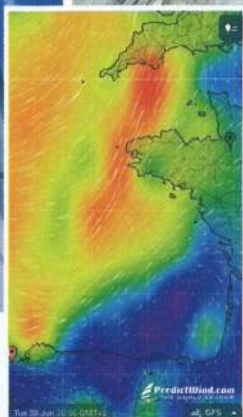
The log reads 'Tied up alongside 0300', battered, a little bruised, certainly disappointed and very tired. We hit the hay for five hours of much-needed sleep.

At 0800 we were back up on deck, Q flag and courtesy flag quickly raised, coffee in hand, service on the IridiumGo! restored and we started to plan our next move. The guys dropped the foresail and started a repair. I went to the office to check in. The staff provided tokens for the facilities. I showered and took a short time out to process my thoughts. Of course, we had made the right decision but I was absolutely gutted.

Sam maintains it was not defeat, it was good seamanship. In post-trip beer-based analysis, the team would agree. I, however, felt that our objective remained unachieved. Anyway, self-reflection lasted about as long as a shower, loading the washing machine and tumble dryer and returning to the crew who had started up with the banter again. It was just what was needed.



Checking the rig post-storm



FAR LEFT Torn foresail
LEFT Weather report

We sat down and saw that the bad weather had now headed north up the coast of Ireland

with a gale warning to go with it. The words I uttered cannot be printed in such a prestigious publication.

At this point, things started to look up again. We seized an opportunity to depart the marina at 1500, head into the tide under motor and south-south-east down the Chenal du Four before rounding the rocks at Chaussée de Sein, bound for A Coruña.

High highs

Before departure we inspected the standing and running rigging. The main halyard had chafed almost all the way through, as had the starboard jib sheet so we trimmed and sealed them. We'd popped a shackle and needed a few other running repairs but nothing major. We topped up on fuel, and set off.

Leaving the river we saw a Société Nationale de Sauvetage en Mer towing a badly battered yacht with the crew on the lifeboat. Our hearts went out to them as we reflected on where bad choices could have gotten us.

However, we were on our way to Spain, with the tide in our favour and the wind on the beam, we hurtled down the coast, at 7, 8 then 9 knots. The weather expected 24 hours before had finally shown up. Watches recommenced, dinner was served and spirits were riding high again. The next few days were the most amazing sailing imaginable. Sunshine, dolphins, pilot whales and much laughter. Crisp nights with shooting stars, meteors and bioluminescence, including the stunning light show of dolphins chasing fish.

We maintained a steady 5 to 7 knots, and saw very little traffic. Sun sights

were undertaken and our crossing of the continental shelf was uneventful. As we hit the shallower water off the coast of Spain, thoughts started to turn to what we would eat ashore, how many beers we had earned and meeting up with loved ones.

It was my watch as we spotted the Hercules Lighthouse and headed due south into the harbour at A Coruña. We hoisted the Q flag and the Spanish courtesy flag. We woke the off-watch so they could enjoy the long-awaited approach into Marina Náutico Club Real, slipped *Ruby May* into her pre-booked berth and popped open the fizz! Smithy's girlfriend was down in a flash to welcome us and I set about doing the admin.

At A Coruña, they photocopied our passports, the ship's papers and my details, and advised us about getting our passports stamped at the local police station. The next 24 hours were all about matching crew T-shirts, good food, beer and wine and war stories. The ladies who flew over to be with



Crew safe, well and still happy

Steve Hodges at the wheel in better weather



us were bags of fun, let us ramble on about 5m waves and washing-machine-like hours of sleep and refereed arguments about which watch helmed the straightest and who made the most miles. It was a glorious end to months of prep, weeks of excitement and a week of mixed emotions and experiences.

Reflecting on the trip, I keep drifting back to the belly laughing moments on board – like Nigel asking Smithy to level the boat out while heeled over at 40° in a Force 8 so he could flush his deposit out of the heads, Smithy announcing to Sam that there were “lazy dolphins not bothering to jump out of the water on the starboard side” which turned out to be pilot whales, and Malcolm optimistically applying sun cream under the rainy, cloud-covered apocalyptic sky. All fantastic although probably ‘had to be there’ moments.

As for our Ocean Yachtmaster, I hold on to the fact that “fair weather never a great sailor made”, we will have to go again taking with us our learnings and, I hope, the same fine crew.

■ Turn to page 68 for Steve's unusual proposal to his partner, Sam McClements