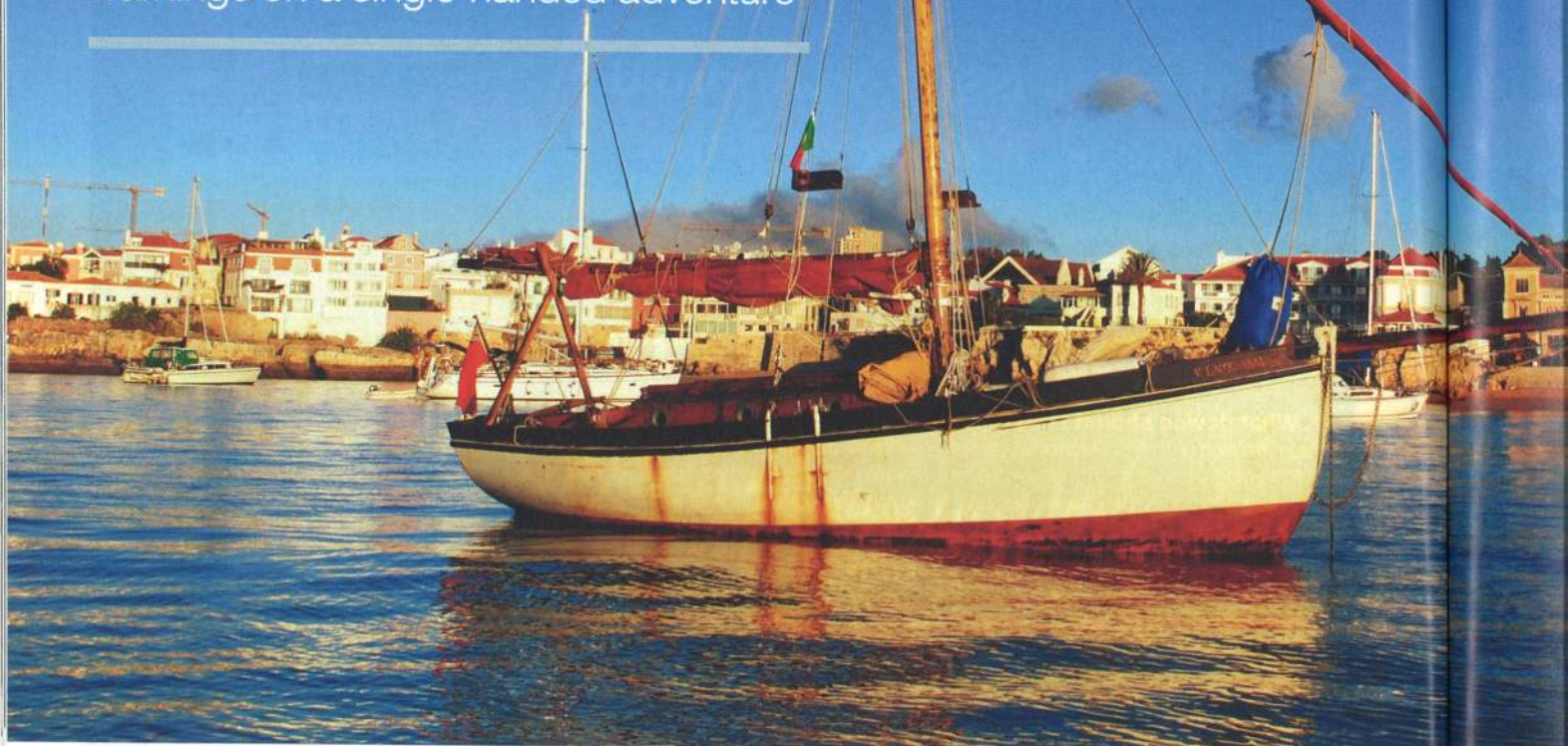


Old gaffer to Portugal

Max Liberson encounters stormy weather, Biscay fatigue and orca warnings on a single-handed adventure

PART
2



Sailing from Wales to Portugal in *Wendy May*, my 84-year-old gaff cutter, had not been as straightforward as I'd hoped. After losing my crewmember in Ushant and getting a bump to the head (see last month's PBO) I was now under way once more. It was just myself and *Wendy* and we had a long crossing of Biscay ahead of us.

Crossing Biscay

We left at lunchtime on Saturday 26 September and, once clear of Ushant's reefs, gybed over to a broad reach on the starboard tack. I was able to set the sheet to tiller steering. Once I had the balance right, *Wendy May* stayed well enough on track that I could leave her romping along at nearly 5 knots. Dolphins came to visit, and I wondered if they'd been waiting for us.

We ran in good style all day while I rested and ate. Our beautiful wind started to fail at 0400 the following morning, though we were still making about 4

knots. A ship was overhauling us. I could see its port and starboard lights and was going to get very close. So, after finding its name on the AIS, I called it up to check he had seen me. Receiving no reply, I started the engine and turned to starboard and out of his way. At 0850 I altered course for a fishing boat. The wind backed to north-west as we crept over the continental shelf.

At 1325 on Sunday our 24-hour run was 101 miles. I was kept busy taking out reefs and trying to get *Wendy* to steer better. At 1755 I had the engine on. Then the wind came back, but from the west. By the start of the new day we were making slow speed but in the right direction. Our 24-hour run on Monday at 1330 was 81 miles.

Wendy May at anchor in Cascais after an eventful voyage from Wales

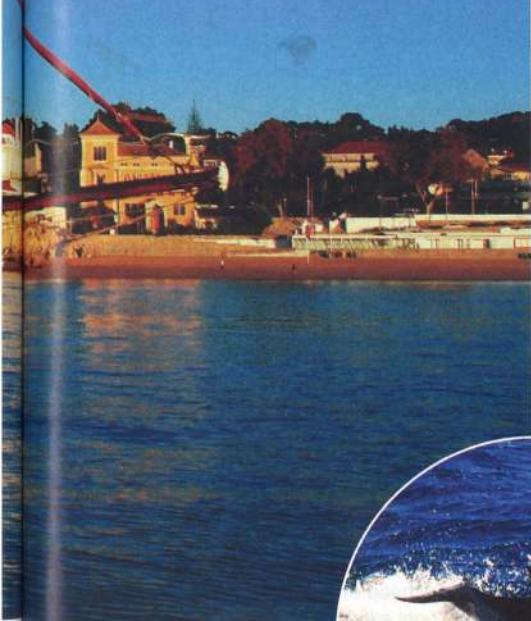
The moon came out and we had some wonderful sailing across a flat sea, but later the wind failed and we had to motor. Tuesday was spent motoring at 3.5 knots, and finally land came into sight at 0755. We still had 58 miles to go so I decided to stop at Cedeira in Galicia, Spain. By then we were low on fuel and, after a couple of days without sleep, I was starting to hallucinate.

My hallucinations take the form of inventing a presence. I start to think there is someone else on the boat. It gets so bad I've been known to make two cups of tea, one for myself and the other for an

'Things got more exciting when the paraffin cooker caught fire...'



BELOW Sunset near Finisterre
INSET BELOW Friendly dolphins accompanied Max throughout the voyage



imaginary crew!

I needed to get to a place where I could rest. The weather too was a factor. The quiet spell we were enjoying was due to be interrupted by storm Alex. I'd hoped to be past Finisterre before it hit, but without more fuel that was unlikely.

I worked out that at 3.5 knots it would take us 16 more hours to arrive at Cedeira. I refilled the tank with the last of my spare fuel, which gave us about 4 gallons – approximately 20 hours at slow speed. It was set to be a long and boring night, alleviated by my friends the dolphins, and getting a phone signal which meant I could call Eva.

Fire on board!

However, things got more exciting at 1930 when the Taylors paraffin cooker caught fire. It was down to human error. After cooking breakfast, I tried to turn the flame

off. The knob rotated but didn't do anything, so I shut off the supply valve. I then forgot about it. When I came to heat up my dinner, I remembered there

was a problem with the right-hand burner, and preheated the left hand one. Once it was hot I turned on the fuel supply and it lit nicely. I put the pressure cooker on and went off to check the course.


Meanwhile neat fuel was squirting all over the cooker from the right hand burner that was still full on and squirting unlit fuel over the cooker. Eventually this started to burn.

Fortunately, I noticed the flames before anything vital caught and the fire extinguisher dealt with the problem quickly. Once it had cooled down, I found the split pin that had fallen out of the on/off valve and fixed the original problem in a few minutes. Luckily, because dinner was in the pressure cooker, it wasn't

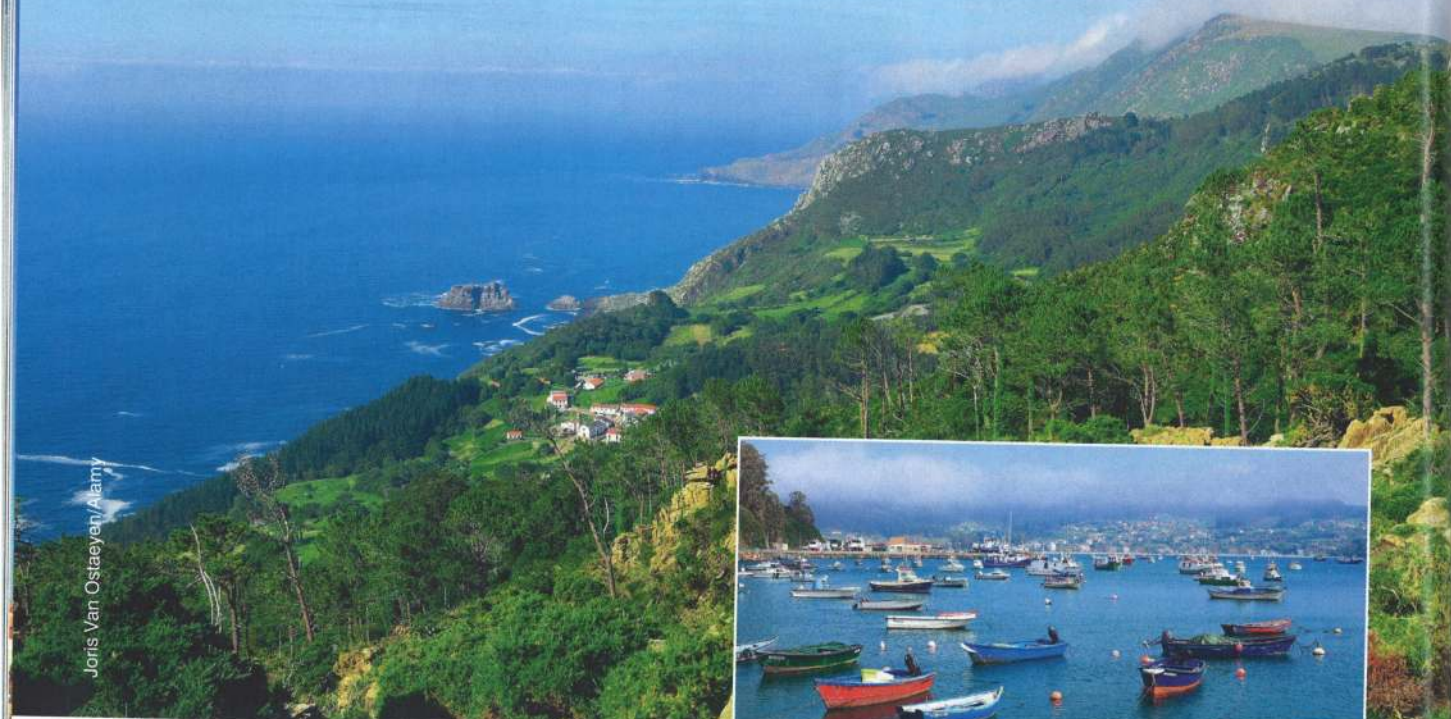
ruined, and a wiser man sat down to his meal not long after.

The moon was so bright I could almost read by it, and the entourage of dolphins showed off for hours. I wondered where they got their energy. Finally at 0545 on Wednesday – after almost 4 days' straight sailing – I came into port. I had a hard time trying to get my tired brain to understand the lights, but we made the anchorage safely and I chose a place to drop the hook in 6m. I spent some time sorting out the anchor light and hoisting it, which was silly, as daylight was almost upon us by the time I crawled into my bunk.

Pitstop in Cedeira

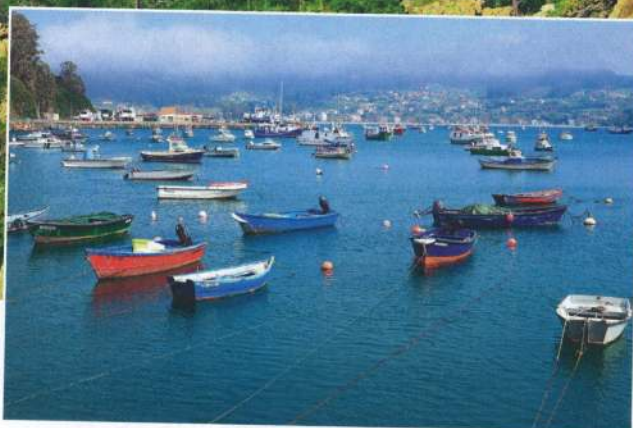
Waking up in the same place as you went to sleep is, of course, normal ashore but I always get a thrill from it while anchored. I was also pleased when daylight revealed that I was positioned quite well – away from the other moored craft; mostly fishing boats, some as big as 60ft. 

Joris Van Ostaeyen/Alamy



ABOVE The unspoiled, natural landscape near Cedeira was a relief after a long Biscay crossing

RIGHT Max was exhausted by the time he made landfall in Cedeira, north-western Spain



regiert/istock/Alamy

Konrad Zelazowski/Alamy

After some breakfast and coffee I launched the dinghy and rowed to the beach with the empty fuel can. There was the gentlest of surfs, which was just as well because I messed up my arrival and got my shoes wet in the next wave.

Hauling the dinghy high above the water mark I walked towards the town. A man stopped me and pointed to my face, drawing attention to my mask-less state. He said something about the police.

Fortunately, I had an old disposable mask in my rear pocket, so I put it on and thanked him in Spanish. I pointed to my can and shrugged my shoulders as he rattled off some mostly incomprehensible directions. I did, however, understand enough to work out the petrol station was on the main drag. In town I found a cash point. I'd forgotten my PIN number and the first two attempts produced no money. I walked away and when I remembered the number, went back, and was soon in possession of some euros.

The petrol station was at the top of the town. Filling up the can here only cost €20 – far more reasonable than the €38 I'd paid in Ushant. I walked back, stopping at

two different coffee bars. The tide was a long way from my dinghy so I dragged it down the beach, threw the can in and rowed back to *Wendy*.

Stormy anchorage

The long-foretold blow was upon us. I made ready for it by refilling the fuel tank. There was only about a gallon left, and it was murky. I poured it into an old paraffin can and refilled the engine with clean diesel. I then bled the system again. In an emergency I needed to know the engine would start.

Next, I hauled the dinghy aboard and lashed it down. I let out more chain so we had 36m down in 6m depth. All good so far but then I made a mistake and left the jib furled-up on the end of the bowsprit.

The wind started to blow hard. Torrential rain poured down and I anxiously lined up transits to reassure myself we were not dragging. The harbour wall and the fish sorting building was between us and the wind but about a quarter of a mile away. Even so, I was surprised to see white caps and proper waves building up.

At 2230 the jib outhaul parted and the jib

shot back to the stem head and partly unrolled. I knew something was up by what sounded like thunder and *Wendy* heeling far over. I dashed out into the darkness, crawled under the madly flapping canvas and let the jib halyard go. I managed to get the sail off and lashed it down in a heap on the foredeck.

I didn't get a lot of sleep that night, but fortunately we had no more dramas. At first light, with the wind dropping down, I ventured out to assess the damage. I noticed that the port navigation light was gone from its home on the port shrouds. Fortunately, it was still attached to the boat by its electric cable and was floating happily alongside so I rescued it. The sheets of the jib had been tightly knotted to the shrouds and took some time to untangle. The rigging was also slack. It took me all morning to sort out the rigging. The navigation light had a broken bulb and there was some other damage so I took the opportunity to replace both plastic lights with a pair of copper ones I'd found on ebay. By the end of the day *Wendy* was fit for sea once more.

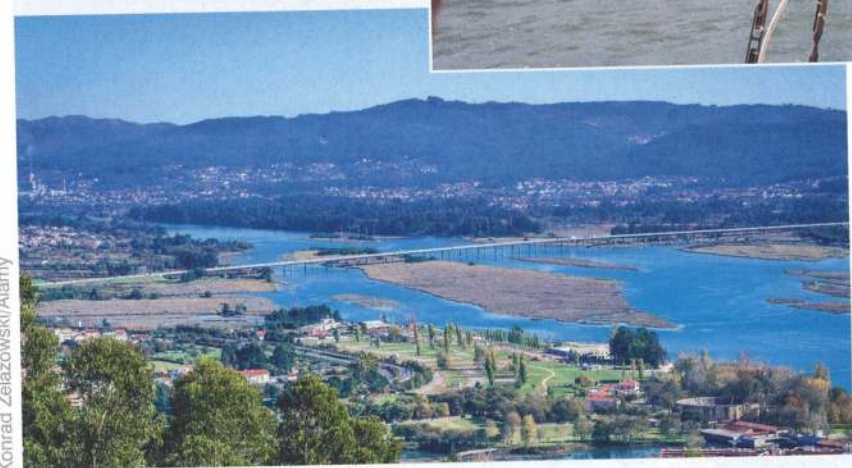
The next day was Saturday; the wind had eased but was still about a Force 7. I stayed aboard and did various jobs in order to amuse myself. That's another good thing about having an old wooden boat – you never run out of little jobs to do!

By Monday the wind was down and the blow over. I launched the dinghy and

'The supermarket manager threatened to call the Policia because I wasn't wearing a mask'



LEFT The mechanic in Cedeira was really helpful. **BELOW** Wendy May at anchor in Cedeira.
BELOW LEFT Viana do Castelo is at the mouth of the Lima river



Konrad Zelazowski/Alamy

arrived on the beach still quite dry. I walked into town and bought a rucksack, which I then took to the supermarket and filled with food. Afterwards I treated myself to a tortilla in a café before making my way back to Wendy.

On Tuesday it rained hard until the afternoon, at which point I went ashore and bought another 20lt of fuel.

Friendly mechanic

Wednesday brought the barometer up to a better place: 'Fair', and the forecast was for a period of calm for the rest of the week. I went ashore for more food and I also wanted to find a diesel filter because I'd used up all my spares. I noticed an old garage in the main road so that was my first stop.

The owner was a small, stocky fellow of advanced age with a cigar in his mouth and a flat cap. By the reek of tobacco I guessed he got through quite a few of them in a day.

In one corner of the garage was a fleet of refurbished bikes and the wall opposite was given over to all the special tools that it takes a mechanic a lifetime to accumulate. All were hanging from their screws with an outline drawn round them, so as to be returned to the proper place.

There was one startling omission from what was obviously a well organised garage: no customers – presumably because of the downturn in the economy.

As a result I was given immediate attention. I showed the owner the picture of the filter I needed and he found it straight away in a box. Wishing I could say more than, 'muchas gracias,' we bumped fists and I went off to the supermarket for more food.

Sadly, I had forgotten my mask, so I put my bandana around my face, something acceptable in the UK. However, apparently that was not the case in Spain. I was accosted by a small woman, who I presume was the manager, she screamed at me and threatened to call the 'Policia' because I was not wearing a mask. I checked and she really was serious, so I left the shop.

I had enough food by then anyway, so I found a little café with wifi and caught up with my emails while drinking coffee and eating a ham and cheese roll.

Orca warnings

I returned to the boat and hauled the dinghy aboard, ready for going to sea. The evening was quiet and the air was rich with the scent of cedar trees from the surrounding hills. I heard reports of orcas attacking small boats in the area I was headed to next, but on an evening so calm it seemed unlikely that anything bad could happen. I slept deeply that night with no worries.

By now it was early October – three weeks since I'd left the UK. I set the


mainsail and we motored out of Cedeira. A couple of times slight winds came, but not enough to move us. Regular warnings came over the radio telling us not to approach the orcas.

The hills and occasional monastery slipped by slowly and by nightfall we were almost at the corner. It was a long night. Although the autohelm was steering a steady course, there were a lot of fishing boats around meaning frequent changes of course.

The night was not without its rewards: no moon and a flat sea meant the phosphorescence was startlingly abundant. Wendy left her trail in glowing green across the sea. Dolphins showed up at the bow. I watched as they played with strings of phosphorescence, slowly rotating so it looked like they were wearing a string of green glowing pearls. I felt like I was witnessing a dolphin ballet – a memory I'll always treasure.

In the half-light of an early dawn I thought the game was up, the orcas had found me! A black-backed leviathan arched out of the sea off the port beam, but it was just a friendly minke whale. He dived under the keel, and afterwards we had another visit from a gang of dolphins.

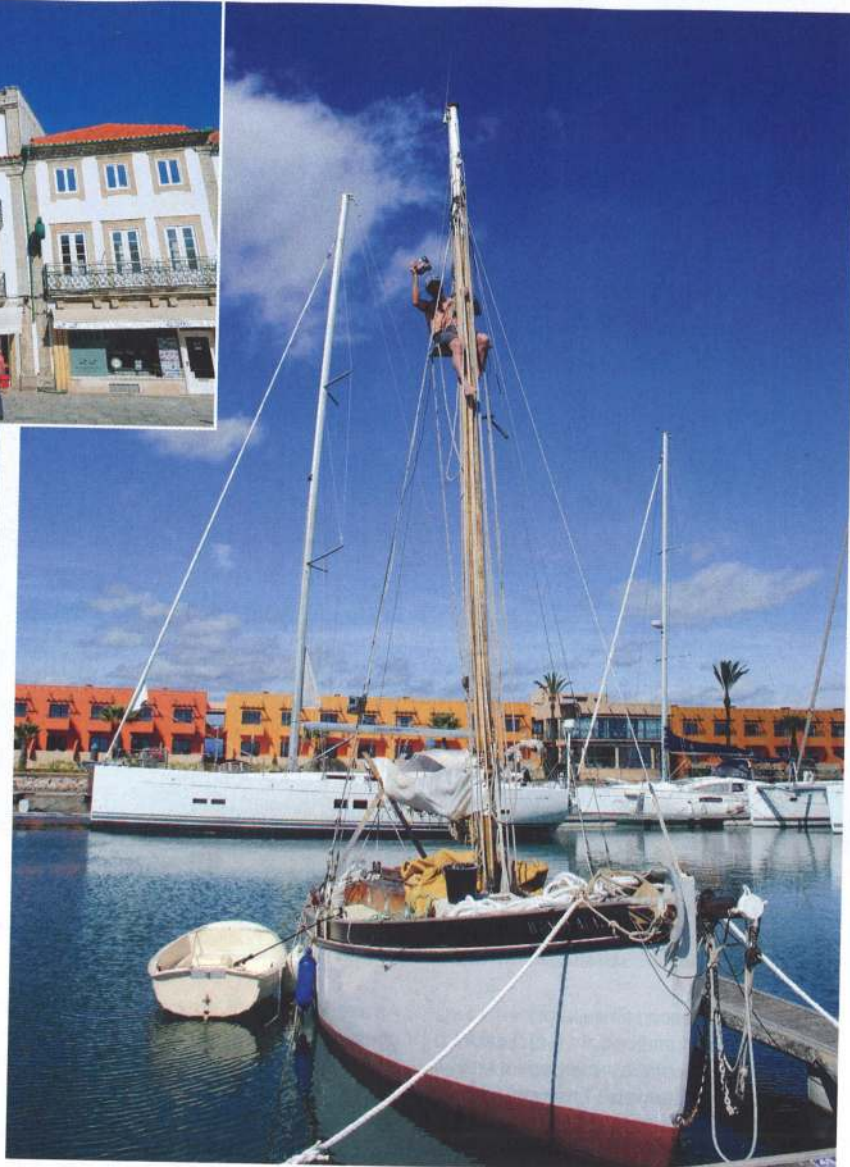
By then Fisterra was sliding slowly past our beam. A wind of sorts filled in and with great relief I turned off the diesel. We could make 3 knots but we were off course, steering more south-west than south. I hoped the wind would go north-west as forecasted, but after a while I gave up and restarted the engine. By the afternoon I reluctantly resigned myself to motoring to Viana do Castelo, a Portuguese port 45 miles away. I reckoned we had 16 hours of diesel in the tank and it would take us 12 hours to get there.

It was a long night. My hallucinations caused by lack of sleep became more vivid, to the point that I was going to pass the watch over to my imaginary crew while I went below for some shut-eye. When finally I made out the lights of the port a voice in my head suggested taking the 

Joris Van Ostaeyen/Alamy



TOP Pretty Viana do Castelo
ABOVE Max's friend Mike Tattisfield joined him for the last leg
RIGHT Max stayed busy in Portugal: here he's sanding the mast prior to varnishing



Ivan Nesterov/Alamy

shortcut and ignoring the port hand marker. Not possible because of the large stone breakwater, and I wondered where he was trained. Eventually we safely made Viana do Castelo and motored upriver after I'd stowed the sails and put the fenders out. It was a lovely still night and at 0430 we were safely tied up in the small marina, and I could go to bed.

Ready to meet the world

On awakening at 0900 I tried to go back to sleep, but to no avail so I got dressed, had a coffee and went out to meet the world... well, the harbourmaster, really.

He happened to be on his way to see me, with a card key. He asked me to find him after lunch to finish the formalities. I went back to *Wendy*, rooted out the empty fuel can went off to fill it at a close by garage. After some food shopping I tried to eat lunch at a little café, but it was busy and the service so slow I started to fall asleep before I could even order.

I like Vivano Castello. The buildings are beautiful – you can see the wealth of the Portuguese trading empire of the 1600s;

nothing ruined by modernists.

I ate a beautiful lunch on board *Wendy* with fresh bread, good cheese and sausage. I washed it down with some sangria, which was not quite so good. Then I went off to find the harbourmaster. He asked for my boat registration.

Luckily, the email from the SSR had come through and attached was a photo of my new registration card. He gave me the key to the shower, and I went off and had a good soak. I did have plans for a very early night because I wanted to leave the next morning on account of the fair wind that was forecasted to fill in after about 1000.

My early night plans were scuppered when I met a chap called Binky who owned a stunning teak English yacht on the nearby pontoon. We started talking boats and soon his shipwright joined us, and bottles were opened.

It was a hilarious evening. I awoke at daylight and went for a walk, my attempts to buy fresh bread were dished because once more I'd forgotten the infernal mask.

I handed my key back to the friendly

harbourmaster and made ready for sea. Binky had promised to throw my lines off and help me get out, but there was no sign of him. I did knock on his coachroof but still had no reply. This was a pity because the wind was perfect for sailing out. I'd never left a marina under sail before.

So I hoisted the main, had the two headsails ready to go then pushed *Wendy* astern to the end of the pontoon. Jumping aboard, I pinned the tiller to port, walked up forward and hoisted the jib and staysail then walked back and sheeted all in. *Wendy* gracefully wafted out into the river.

Soon we were on a broad reach making 3 knots, the iron bells of the old churches began to ring. The few people out and about stopped and stared, many took photos, and a man called out some compliments as we cleared the last spit and made for the open sea.

We started with a full main, and I also hoisted the top sail. If it had been calm we would have got along nicely, but as it was there was a bit of a swell that kept rolling the wind out of the sails. By 1400 the wind was building so I struck the topsail.

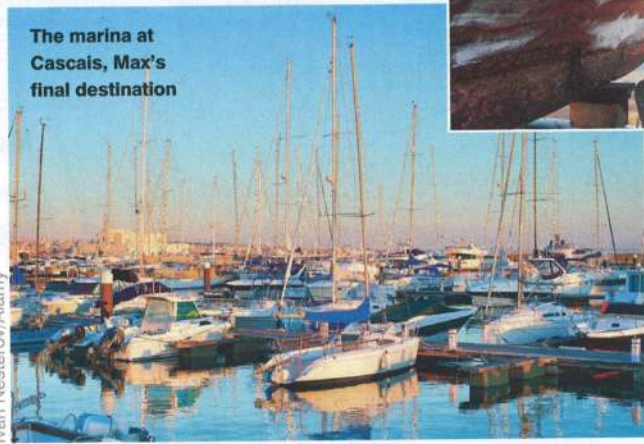
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ABOVE In Portugal *Wendy May* was lifted for some work in a local boatyard: here the shipwright is cutting out and fixing a bit of rot **TOP** Looking smart with a new coat of paint

The marina at Cascais, Max's final destination



Ivan Nesterov/Alamy

'We slowly sailed up the Algarve coast on a flat blue sea. It was like a dream'

Time to reef

At 1535 the wind was fresh and we started to exceed 6 knots. Time to reef again! With the third reef in we were still making 5.5 knots. The sea was building, but we were making so much progress I was loth to reduce sail again. The wind was forecast to drop at 2200. We dashed off downwind, only just in control.

I first became aware of the container ship at about 1730. Fifteen minutes later I realised it was going to cross our bows from seaward towards the land, which was about 10 miles away. I checked the AIS. It gave its speed as 11 knots and the closest it would get was 0.47 of a mile. Seemed OK.

I was distracted by something and the next time I looked – at about 1755 – I was shocked to see the ship a lot closer. I looked at the AIS and the ship had slowed down to 6 knots. I then went to the cockpit as I wanted to steer, which meant I could not use the radio. I thought he might be waiting for me to get past. I decided that I was the stand on vessel according to Rule 18 of the Colregs, as I was a vessel under

sail and he was under power. If he had not seen me, I still had the option of a gybe to port if it came down to a real chance of a collision. The vessel then went hard to starboard, speeded up and chopped across our bows before heading towards a distant port.

That night's sailing was a desperate affair. The wind would gust up and we would be wildly over-pressed, then it would drop back down to a more sensible range. The seas were building and I expected several of the larger waves to come on board which, without a



Peter Moulton/Alamy

ABOVE LEFT The colourful streets of Cascais, near Lisbon
ABOVE RIGHT Lighthouse at Cascais

self-draining cockpit, would be dangerous and involve a lot of pumping.

Fortunately, just as the walls of water threatened to swamp us, *Wendy* would give a tantalising twist of her stern and the wave would slide harmlessly underneath. Old Maurice Griffiths had certainly got *Wendy May*'s lines right when he designed her.

In the early hours we had to gybe and at 1045 our 24-hour run was an astonishing 118 miles! The wind had dropped down by then and I was taking the reefs out.

By 1400 I was putting the third reef back in, but I was exhausted, so I took in the main completely and tried to sail with just the staysail and jib. Later we were making 3.5 knots without the engine, and had 55 miles to go to Cascais, just west of Lisbon.


Arrival in Cascais

At 0730, after our usual escort of friendly dolphins had seen us to the edge of the harbour, we dropped anchor in 4m. I gratefully turned in and slept like a log for several hours. Then I moved closer in to get better shelter from a fresh wind that was promised the next day.

The following evening I cooked a big stew for friends Mike and John, who would be joining me on the final leg. John is a member of the Old Gaffer's Association who keeps his boat near Lisbon, while Mike lives on his yacht in Portimão. We consumed a bit too much wine and Mike and I had bad heads when we woke, but this didn't stop us heading out to sea.

With the third reef in our progress was slow and I resisted the temptation to take it out. Then, about lunch time, I snapped and gave her full sail. Predictably the wind then filled in. I took it down and we were back to rolling about at 3.5 knots. At least we could sail our course.

By the morning St Vincent was in sight. The wind was from the north but it had a touch of west in it. It slowly dropped off as we approached the cape so I hauled up the full main and we slowly sailed up the Algarve coast on a flat blue sea. It was like a dream. The warm sun and a steady deck signalled we'd arrived at our destination with the hard northern winter behind us and good times to look forward too.

As we came past Portimão some good friends of mine, Chris and Ana, were waiting on the breakwater to welcome us. We waved, they took photos and then we took in the sails and motored for the marina. At last, we had arrived. 



Caroline Vancouille/Alamy