

# Across the Bay

Solo sailor ALASTAIR BUCHAN and his Hurley 20 finally cast off from British shores and head across the Bay of Biscay to La Coruña – the first step of their Atlantic circuit

As the seagull flies, it is 420 miles from Lizard Point to La Coruña in the north-west corner of Spain. Make some allowance for starting from Falmouth Yacht Marina and call it 430 miles to simplify the arithmetic. At an average speed of 3 knots it would take almost 150 hours, or a shade over six days at sea. This was far longer than my usual singlehanded passages. Once round Ushant, whatever happened, I would be committed to taking it on the chin, even if I did try to hide it behind a sagging bottom lip.

Fine, settled weather would be an advantage, but a week is a long time in weather forecasting. I had gathered a

fine collection of synoptic charts culled from newspapers, listened to every shipping forecast and compared what was promised with what arrived. I was little wiser. For me, forecasting more than 48 hours ahead appears to demand the same skills as picking the winning lottery numbers. As the time for departure approached, a high pressure area with northerly winds built up. I watched it anxiously. If it persisted, I could run south under spinnaker. Perhaps I should consider making for Bayona. It was not much further.

Such are the flimsy ambitions of shore-based dreams, tinsel that tarnishes in the sea air, but as I pointed *Mintaka's* bow towards a sparkling sea,

under blue skies that brought gentle winds, I really thought my luck was in. The only snag was that the winds were from the south-west. This was no time to play purist. I could not afford the fuel, but I needed to see some of those 430 miles from astern. Spending the day tacking back and forward between Falmouth and the Lizard might be good for the soul, but not for my morale.

I motored, telling myself that I would find the forecast winds out at sea. It was fuel well spent. Just after eleven, the promised northwesterlies arrived and *Mintaka* was bowling along under full main and genoa. We were on our way.

In the great days of sail, the square-riggers crossing the Bay sailed west

until La Coruña bore south and then altered course to keep the Pole Star on their backstay. Not only did this simplify their navigation; it also reduced the chances of being embayed and allowed them to pick up a favourable current worth around 10 miles a day. Wise guys on those square-riggers, but I knew better.

Encouraged by the northwesterlies, convinced that it would take a couple of days for the high pressure to break up, and confident, thanks to modern technology, of my navigation, I was eager to cut corners, but not that eager. I compromised by aiming west of the rhumb line course. I was steering nothing like due west but, even so, I was in a win-win situation. I would increase my cushion for rounding Ushant and, after a couple of days, I would be able to lay La Coruña in almost any wind. It was brilliant logic and utterly wrong.

This was not immediately apparent. Such mistakes rarely are. Noon to noon we ran a little under 100 miles for the first 24 hours and all of it had been under sail. I had not touched the

**Noon to noon *Mintaka* ran a touch under 100 miles for the first 24 hours and all of it had been under sail. I had not touched the helm or a sheet and could claim no credit**

helm or a sheet and could claim no credit for a splendid performance by *Mintaka* and her windvane self-steering, Alfred the Navik. We were almost up to Ushant and nicely west of the rhumb line course. Everything was coming together.

Those in charge of the weather were clearly upset. With little change in strength they swung the wind round to the south-west. This meant hardening the sheets and altering course to due south. I was giving up some of my westing, but I had plenty to spare. The wind rose and I reefed down to avoid driving *Mintaka* into the seas that were beginning to build up. The reduction in sail area made little difference to our speed. Noon to noon *Mintaka* made almost 90 miles. As I put the position on the chart, I noticed that we were off soundings. This had to mean something.

It did. This was the big boys' league where the wind played hardball. It increased until it was blowing a steady Force 6-7. I put the third reef in the main and rolled away most of the





genoa. I wondered about heaving-to or even lying a-hull but there seemed to be no reason for such drastic measures. *Mintaka* was sailing up the waves at 10-15 degrees to the general wave front and swooping down their backs before rising to meet the next wave. This was only possible because of the long wave length and she loved it.

It was more than I did. Sitting in the hatchway, admiring the seascape and thinking of the pork chops I would fry with onions and tomatoes for tea, I was suddenly overtaken by a desire to inspect the latticework of foam being blown from the waves. I forgot about eating and concentrated on feeling miserable.

But not too miserable. There was a lot of traffic hereabouts and I needed to keep some of my wits active. Some vessels passed quite close, looking like an illustration for a Masfield poem, and they rolled in the sea and the wind snatched at their funnel exhaust. Lord knows what they thought of me and I did not stop to ask. I was cold, wet from spray and still not giving the chops a second thought.

Winds always seem stronger at night and that third night at sea was no

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exception. I am pretty sure that the wind never reached more than a Force 7 unless it was in a brief, occasional gust, but this did not prevent the seas from growing bigger and bolder.

With the Tinker Tramp lashed across the main hatch, I had not bothered to fit the washboards. The Tramp did a good job of keeping the spray out and it was quicker and easier to pull the hatch closed than fiddle around with the washboards when I went below to take my ease.

Rest was relative. Stowage arrangements ruled out my favourite ploy of curling up in the forepeak. I tried the quarterberth, but settled for sitting on a cushion on the cabin sole. I was there with the sleeping bag over my head

when there was a roar and a thump on the starboard quarter. *Mintaka* slithered sideways and some joker began throwing buckets of freshly chilled seawater through the space normally occupied by the washboards. Cursing my earlier idleness, I snatched the sleeping bag away from the deluge.

The flood diminished and finally stopped. I stuck my head out of the hatch and checked for damage. There was none. *Mintaka* had picked herself up, given a shake and sailed on as though nothing had happened. We were alone on a dark, wild, foam-flecked sea. I slowly worked out that *Mintaka* had been climbing a larger than average wave which had decided to break as she reached its crest. Statistically, this was a one-off fluke, unlikely ever to happen again.

I had just crept back under my damp sleeping bag when there was a repeat performance and a second deluge dashed aboard to join the fun. This time, I put the washboards in before I crawled under my sodden sleeping bag. I was seasick, cold, wet and totally miserable. Life can be cruel at sea.

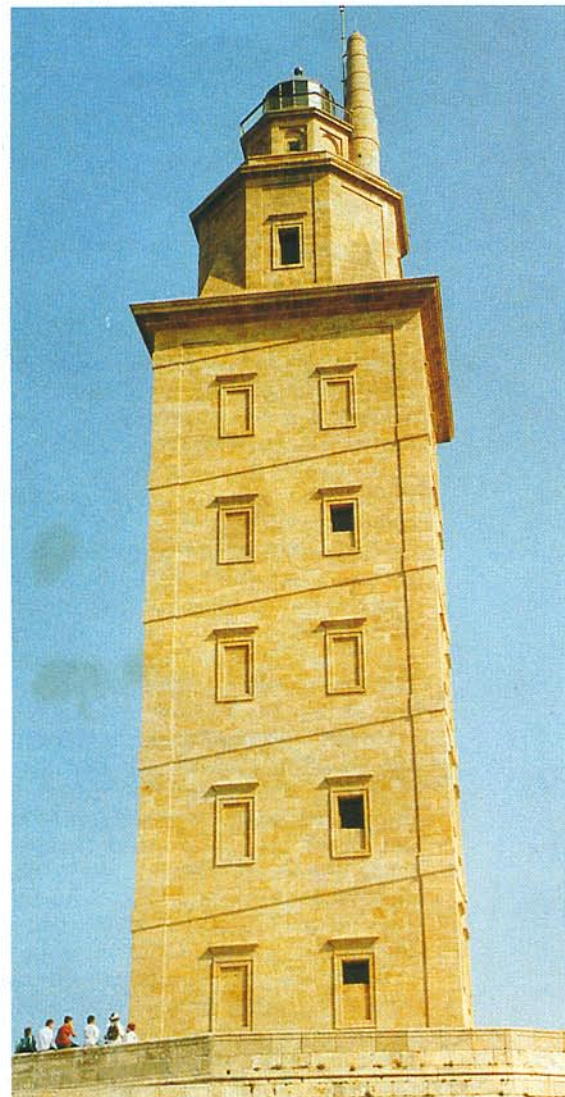
Nothing lasts for ever. By mid-morning the wind had moderated. By

lunchtime the mouth-watering smell of last night's chops wiped away the memories of the instant soup and coffee of the last 20 hours. I would have them with rice, mixed vegetables and sweet and sour sauce, followed by a can of peaches with evaporated milk and rounded off by cheese and biscuits. Delicious.

The heavy weather had been a useful experience. I had discovered that in strong winds *Mintaka* could sail upwind over the long ocean rollers and, with the correct sailplan, Alfred the Navik was happy to play his

part. It was worth knowing. In a true gale I would probably have to change tactics, but I would do so with a newfound confidence. As a bonus, I discovered that noon-to-noon we had made good just over 80 miles, but it had cost all and more of the westing I had built up. We were well into the bay.

There were nearly 180 miles remaining and every one of them was spent discussing with a fitful and petulant wind how best to travel south-west. Sometimes there was progress. There were seven glorious hours under spinnaker, but at times discussions would end in stalemate and I would be forced to point in any direction but La Coruña. Occasionally, very occasionally, for fuel was scarce and I might need it later, I called off the talks and motored.



Left: the world's oldest working lighthouse, the Torre de Hercules, off La Coruña. Above: the Navik windvane self-steering 'helmed' for just under 100 miles for the first 24 hours. Facing page: safely berthed in La Coruña, it was time for a celebration drink



flights of airborne dolphins. They even came at night forming whirling patterns of phosphorescence that hissed and glowed in my own, private son et lumière.

If my sums were right, then by lunchtime on the fifth day the north coast of Spain, 26 miles away and backed by cliffs and mountains, ought to be putting in an appearance. It was not, but was this due to poor visibility or bad navigation?

I had not seen land since the Lizard, 400 miles to the north. If I let my imagination loose I could be anywhere. A trimaran crept northwards in the light winds but that told me nothing. Then a fishing boat appeared and then another and another stretching out in a long line, but was this the tuna fleet in the middle of the bay, or the inshore boats out from La Coruña for the day? Everything pointed towards the latter, but the best dramas usually happen when you are absolutely certain that you are correct. I would keep an open mind.

This is Byron's 'restless bay'. Despite the light winds of the last couple of days giving the appearance of a calm, even at times a mirror-like, sea, it is never still. The swell is ever present, usually with the remains of local winds superimposed. Looking at the fishing boats, I realised, for the first time, that there was a 10ft swell running. Out here it passed for calm. Inshore, where the wave length would be shorter and the waves steeper, it would be rough.

Land, grey and featureless but definitely terra firma, appeared. The most westerly point introduced itself as Cabo Prior. The plot and the GPS agreed. Beyond it the Tower of Hercules waited for its cue to appear. The world's oldest working lighthouse, built by the Romans and used by their friends and countrymen ever since, is a most conspicuous day mark for anyone making for La Coruña.

I left it to starboard, rounded the breakwater and made for the masts under the yacht club bar. There I found the pontoons and a berth. It had been 130 hours since I had left Falmouth. There was a bottle of wine in the bilges that I had been given to drink when there was something to celebrate. It was drunk. □

*Alastair Buchan (51) is a firm advocate of the belief that small yachts can sail anywhere larger yachts can go, providing preparations are thorough. His dream of sailing off into the sunset has been made possible by retirement. This January, having made a successful Atlantic crossing, he arrived in Barbados. As we went to press, he was making his return trip in Mintaka, via the Azores. We will be reporting on his passage to paradise and return in forthcoming issues*

Apart from a couple of hours late one evening, the sky remained overcast and the sextant in its box. During the day, I estimated visibility to be around three to four miles. I suspected that it closed in at night, though without a horizon it was difficult to be sure. I saw nothing that could give me a clue, for once south of Ushant the sea appeared empty of shipping. Nights were spent in anxious catnaps in case this was an illusion.

Life was anything but dull. There was always something happening. There would be a flash of white off the starboard bow where none should be. A shoal? Ridiculous. Flotsam? Possible. Of course, a dolphin jumping for joy at finding a new plaything. Within seconds he has told his friends over the

Biscay Internet and they would surround *Mintaka*, putting on a display of marine aeronautics that would leave the Red Arrows dumb with envy. One even played tag with the log spinner, flicking it out of the water when he won. Perhaps it is all part of their game, but they are camera shy. Point a lens at them and all that comes out is a sea of smirking shadows where an instant before there had been

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