

## Vancouver to the Vendée

I was able to launch the good ship Picaro (Vancouver 34) early this season, on the 15<sup>th</sup> April, and after a quiet night off Harty Ferry to gather my wits and confirm that the boat wasn't sinking I motored off in calm weather heading for Brittany. A longish day later I stopped at Sovereign Harbour (Eastbourne), and then another trek, under motor but in hot sunshine, to anchor off Bembridge on the Isle of Wight, this leg timed on getting through the Looe Channel, off Selsey, before the new flood started. The Bembridge anchorage is new to me, but is very sheltered from the SW, and isn't far off the route though the Solent.

I was joined by a novice crew for two days in Portsmouth, and had good sailing to Newton Creek and up Southampton Water, said crew being a professional chef so for two days the meals were pretty good. The fast beam reach in a W-6 up to Southampton caused the exhaust outlet to be under water, and on approaching the marina at Hythe Village the motor wouldn't turn as the sea had crept into the cylinders. Had a prompt tow into the marina from the local "Sea-Start" guy, and we quickly sorted the problem. I found that the exhaust swan-neck – really just a big loop in the exhaust hose - had fallen horizontal and thus didn't stop water ingress. This was sorted, plus I fitted a Plastimo swan-neck as well, so all should now be double-safe.

A change of crew and we motored from Newton Creek to Cherbourg under sunshine but no wind, with dinner ashore in that interesting town. Next day we had a civilised departure after lunch towards Guernsey, but the currents off Cap Hague had other ideas so we allowed ourselves to be swept towards Jersey for the night in St Helier; St Peter Port (Guernsey) is a nicer place, in my view, but for one night who cares. We shopped in the beautifully restored Victorian indoor food-market, and topped-up with the cheapest fuel this side of Kuwait.

Still little wind, but fine weather, so more motoring to the R. Trieux in Brittany, but the day was saved by a final gentle engineless sail via the narrow channel south of the Isle de Brehat, to pick up a mooring and to salute the tranquil river with proper (ie large) G&Ts in the cockpit.

I've sailed on this coast several times and, having some way yet to go, didn't need to peek into any of the tempting harbours and rivers on this coast, just making a course westwards to Morlaix Bay, in an ENE-2 breeze, experimenting with the cruising chute but finding that F2 isn't enough to make a Vancouver do a useful speed. Warm and sunny (again). Morlaix is a historic town up a

drying river at the back of a wide bay practically filled with rocks, forts, and craggy islands, all well marked the French way with unlit stone towers; we arrived at LW so passed a quiet night on what may be a Visitors Buoy – probably unofficial and ill-maintained, but okay in calm weather. Then we were able to choose our time and take the tide seven miles up to Morlaix town, through the lock and spent a warm night in the "bassin à flott". The harbourside restaurant had "sold out" of food, so we were told, only having a bit of quiche left. So we chose quiche; this was one of the best meals I ate this summer – a giant chunk of thick home-made quiche with salad, bread, and wine. Simple and perfect.

The next leg of the cruise was to the very corner where Brittany turns to the Atlantic, and tides can be fierce, and rocks extend two miles offshore. It was misty enough for us to use radar, and this is no place to fool about in thick weather, but things cleared to a fine evening with a useful NW-4 for us to sail into the perfect port, well sheltered up a horrific rock-strewn channel, of L'Aber-Wrach. The next leg includes the infamous Channel de Four, where tides are fierce and Atlantic seas turn the corner around Ushant; timing is important through the Four so accordingly we didn't need to leave L'Aber until midday. This gave us time to climb the hill to the pretty village of Landéda, for supplies and for the views, and to visit the old semaphore station overlooking L'Aber and the Ushant corner. It's interesting here that the place names are so similar to those in Wales, the Celtic link being maintained with, for example, dual-language road signs.

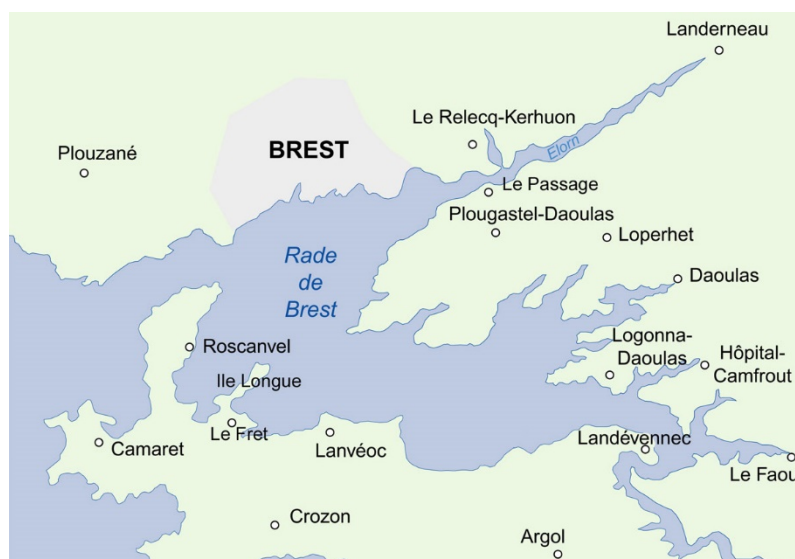


The wind was SW-4, against our course, as was the tide in the approach to the Channel de Four, so we did beat/tack for an hour or two, but got almost nowhere so then had to motor – or miss our tidal window. In the event the Four was, as I've found

before, in a placid mood, and as the route turned more south we had a pleasant beat into the glorious Rade de Brest to moor in Camaret.

One could spend a week in this natural harbour (French = "rade"); we motored ten miles up the River Aulne and stayed one night alongside the town wall (zero facilities but very pleasant, and free !), but the fine weather turned to

rain later in the second day so we came back down for a night in the fleshpots of Brest. Now well into May, with long hours of daylight and local summer-time always encouraging us to linger over a sundowner into twilight around 11pm, the continuing fine weather shaped our domestic timetable into what normal people expect on a holiday. Local tides down this coast are strangely small – the sea seems to go in and out, and up and down, but not along the coast, so the



effect on any sailing is negligible. All this means that at last we never had to start the days before dawn – our departures were now governed by the time when the local boulangerie opened.

Sailing south overnight stops included Loctudy – very pretty -, anchoring off Morgat, and then into the River Odet, all in a variable NW breeze and under a warm sun. This seemed easy sailing, with the main plus cruising-chute, while crew lolled in the cockpit with one eye glancing ahead and one eye asleep. One of us should have had an eye astern, then we might have seen the squall that blew out the chute clew fitting and broke the masthead halyard block. I have a snuffer on the chute, but even by lying on my back under the sail pulling this down seemed a life-and-death affair until the squall moved away. On reflection we felt lucky that the clew snap-shackle had burst, as this probably saved the sail – and a broach. Lesson learned.

The River Odet winds for ten miles between wooded banks alive with herons, swans, and moorhens, and we crept up a smaller tributary that I found ten years ago in my previous boat, anchoring in two metres for afternoon tea. Well, we are British. We spent the night in the main river before calling into Benodet, at the river mouth, to replace the broken chute fittings, and then went on for a night in the ancient fortified harbour of Concarneau. Ate ashore, with dessert of pancakes back on board.

The Isle de Groix, a few miles off L'Orient, was well worth a visit, and we stayed two nights in the (only) harbour of Port Tudy, cycling on the sandy tracks amongst pine woods and heathland. Like the other local islands, tourism, and especially cycling, is encouraged, and there are as many miles of cycle routes as there are of tarmac lanes. And no heavy vehicles here, as there is no Ro-Ro dock, everything having to be hoisted on/off the small supply ships.

The next island – Houat (pronounced “what”) we approached from the Atlantic side, and as the only decent shelter was full we anchored in a somewhat exposed position under cliffs facing the ocean, but the weather was settled and calm. Not a light could be seen on land to check our position during the night, and I heard my crew sneaking to the plotter to check that we weren’t drifting during the night.

Hoat is one of the islands off the Quiberon peninsula, with two fabulous beaches – the south



beach shown here - and one small village, visited a week later.

In the morning we sailed around, still in hot sunshine, into the sheltered Golfe de Morbihan, an inland sea of about fifty square miles with sixty islands, entry only possible either at slack water or with the tide – the current in the narrow mouth can over six knots. It’s a little like Poole Harbour, but with deep water and is of course much larger. The shore is generally wooded as are most islands, with anchorages aplenty. We anchored for a night in one sheltered area with seven other yachts, all at anchor but pointing different ways due to the strangely deflected currents; even here, in comparative calm and flat water, we were only fifty yards from the tide surging up the main channel at five knots.

One could cruise for a week or more just in the Morbihan, visiting historic towns of Auray, Le Bono, and Vannes. We moored six miles up the river that leads to Auray, making the last mile in the dinghy, eating ashore and swimming off the boat. My crew had to return home, via Vannes and Easyjet, so we sailed and motored to the inland port of Vannes, ancient home to the maritime tribe of the Veneti\*, who were finally defeated in Quiberon Bay by the Romans in 56BC whose galleys at first couldn’t match the well-sailed Veneto ships until the Romans later used sharp boathooks to cut the hallyards, causing the heavy leather (!) sails to collapse. I digress. Today Vannes is a city destination for visitors by sea or by land, perfectly sheltered being two hours from the sea, and from which I continued without crew – see next instalment.

Ken M “Picaro”

*\*Not to be confused with the Adriatic Veneti, who founded Venice.*