

Vancouver to the Vendée - part 2

On the 22nd May in my Vancouver 34 we had reached the medieval city of Vannes and my crew, Pete, had flown back to the UK, so I retraced my route back into the Golfe de Morbihan, finding a buoy for a calm night, before nipping in to the marina of Croesty just outside the Morbihan (a marina so large that staff run a free harbour-taxi service to the adjacent supermarket) for shopping and fuel. Diesel, by the way, is expensive in France, costing more than at roadside filling-stations eg £1.55 p litre.

Ten miles offshore are the islands of Hoedic and Houat, set in a chain of rocky shallows that shelter this area from the Atlantic and make it one of France's most popular sailing regions. Further out is the larger island of Belle Isle whose main port of Le Palais, even though fortified by Vaubin, was captured along with the whole island by the Brits in 1761 (later exchanged for Minorca). I spent two days here, safely locked into the inner harbour, cycling and walking in the quiet lanes.

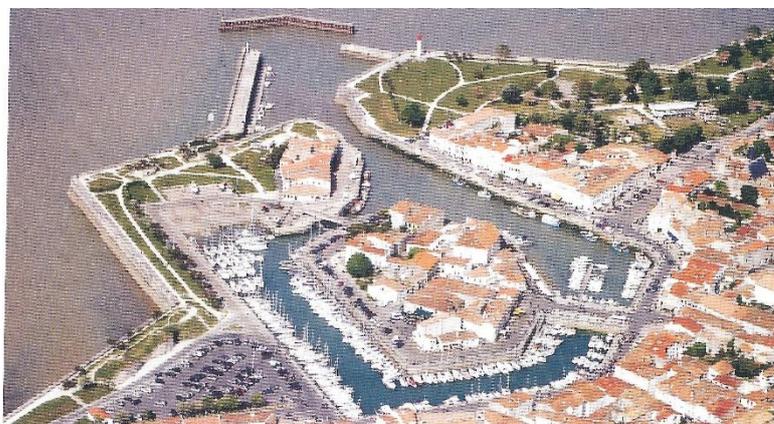
Then back into the Morbihan – hard not to resist this spectacular inland sea – for a night at anchor, then a gentle run south under a poled-out genoa plus main in a N/1-2 light breeze, with thunder and lightning close by, to creep over the bar into the river Vilaine. After five miles of estuary the barrage appeared – this prevents floods, and limits salinity of the river, effectively creating a twenty-mile long fresh-water boating lake amongst the hills and meadows. There is a single lock through the barrage, and with about two thousand boats kept on the river the lock gets busy, so I avoid it at weekends. Once through, all is calm and I anchored for the night five metres from the shore but in five metres of water, keeping cool in the hot weather by swimming around the boat. This was a chance to check for any weed and barnacles, but the hull was clean – helped perhaps by the changes from salt to fresh water both here and back in the Morbihan.

A small technical issue arose : a leak from the hot-water cylinder outlet, so this was plugged as a temporary solution, leaving me with no hot water !! How spoiled we get.

I was due to fly home for a few days so had arranged to leave my boat at Redon, which is the top of the navigable bit of the Vilaine, not far by train from Nantes airport. Redon was a busy commercial port, albeit twenty-five miles from the sea, but it is the junction of three canals serving Brittany; commercial traffic has now ceased, so now the port is a rather shabby (but cheap) marina.

On the 9th June I returned by car, with new crew Robin, left the river and headed south to the small port of Turballe where we were packed in tightly so that no-one could leave unless we all left. Then across to another island, Noirmoutier, but this one now linked to the mainland by a long bridge resulting in a lot of tourist traffic; but the lanes and cycle paths are quiet, and I cycled on sandy tracks through pine forests to a beach on the west, ie Atlantic, side of the island for lunch at a beach café. Robin had been told of a good restaurant on this side, only accessible by boat, so on the next day around we sailed skirting outside the outlying rocks, anchored a half-mile off shore in 3 metres and went ashore by dinghy. His restaurant was shut, as the brief summer season hadn't yet started although the weather was hot. Then we enjoyed a fast broad-reach south to Isle de Yeu, mooring in the port of Joinville for two nights.

Gentle NE breezes were now the regular thing, so we had another run with cruising-chute and main, down to St Martin, in the Isle de Ré. This little town with its fortified harbour is perhaps the most picturesque on this Atlantic coast. The narrow approach between old stone walls is made only near local HW, amongst other boats with the same idea, then turning a corner the town appears like an Italian film-set; cameras click, helmsmen say "Wow!" and forget to steer, then are called into the lock one by one and quizzed by the lock-keeper as to exact length, beam, draught before being escorted to the precise mooring spot – if any available. We scraped in this time, but on the next visit had to stay outside.



The harbour front is wall-to-wall restaurants and bars – impossible to avoid in this hot weather, and what's wrong with being a tourist once in a while ?

Having come over 250 miles south from the Channel we've now left behind the sombre northern style of architecture of slate roofs and stone walls to a Mediterranean style – white rendered walls and clay barrel (Spanish) tiles – and small windows to keep out the heat. We're feeling the heat too; tee-shirts and shorts here, while the foul-weather gear is a distant memory. Sailing is easy – remember, almost no tidal currents – and the NE breezes, warmed by their passage over France, allow broad-reach sailing in either direction along this coast.

A few days later we motored up the twisty river Charente, past fishing-shacks on stilts where optimistic Frenchman while away their leisure hoping fish will swim into their submerged square nets, to the “hidden” historic naval shipyard of Rochefort, built at the decree of Louis XIV in the vain hope that the British wouldn’t get at it. Over forty ships were built here, the yard having its own ropewalk still elegant after 350 years which is surprising as the foundations were reeds, not stone, and the buildings have been sinking ever since.



The ropewalk at Rocheforte

A couple of days later we passed under the modern bridge linking Isle de Ré with the mainland, and into the newish marina of Les Minimes which serves the historic port of La Rochelle. Les Minimes should be called Les Maximes, as it is the largest marina on this coast with over 4,000 berths; it can be a long walk to the showers. But from here an electric ferry does a shuttle service up to the town 1 km away, where we walked in the old arcaded lanes and dined off languostines in a quiet square under the stars.

On the morning of the 24th June my crew returned home via Easyjet , and I sailed out of the marina in a NE 4-5, under genoa and main, later chute + main, for a brilliant broad reach for fifty miles on one tack back north-west to St.Gilles once again, where I stayed for a few days in the scorching heat doing minor jobs (re-bedding chainplates, cleaning the teak) and resting in the shade. A minor problem with the fresh-water tank (ie: a leak) filled the bilges with water, submerging the electric pump, so this was dismantled and allowed to dry in the sun. The problem remains, in that when filling the tank there’s no indication as to when it is filled, and the surplus seems to flow into the bilges.

I sailed once again out to Joinville, Isle de Yeu, only twenty miles off, sheltering in the cockpit under a parasol (golfing umbrella) while every other yacht used a bimini. I possess a bimini, and ought to use it, but it’s in my shed at home as I hadn’t anticipated this hot summer. Then back to the Morbihan, and a very gentle run of eight miles up to Auray, where I picked up a buoy for a calm and silent night amongst the woods and meadows, enjoying the solitude before the French holiday season that’s due to start next week

From mid-July (Bastille Day) until the end of August local advice for the British is to get back home

And so through the barrage and into the Vilaine once again – now my (temporary) home port – where the boat was lifted ashore for a rest while I escaped from the mad French holiday crush, not due to return here until late August.



La Roche Bernard, on the river Vilaine.
