

Hector 2017- Trip South

The big question for 2017 was it to be North or South? I felt I had unfinished business in the North namely a transit of the Gota Canal across Sweden. However it is a long way up to the Baltic and watching the Athletics on the television from Stockholm in August with the rain lashing down did not help my cause. Sheila clearly had a preference to head south and an article called the "Beyond the Blue Line" in MBY seemed to indicate once you pass the mouth of the Loire you would be engulfed in a climate equal to the Mediterranean, I was not to convinced by this but it did read well !

The debate continued and in the end I lost out and we were heading South, oh well the North will still be there for another year. So preparations began and off we went on our first sea trial of the year and the rudder indicator failed. This required a lift out but I felt we really needed not to take problems with us as we planned to be away from the UK for at least a year. Next sea trial and the Raymarine autopilot decided to pack up and this did not require a lift out but plenty of expense. Just to add to the fun our stern thruster then decided it would only work in one direction and guess what, you needed a lift out to access the relays. I was beginning to despair a bit by now and although I could manage without the stern thruster it was crazy to set off without it functioning. So Cobbs Quay staff helped me out again and out of the water we came. I will not relate what transpired on fixing it but as ever nothing is as straight forward as it should be it seems with boats.

So back in the water and as we had not renewed our annual contract with Cobbs Quay we were assigned a temporary berth, our old berth already having been occupied. It seemed strange not be walking to berth D62 after all these years. Anyway at last we were ready to go and on 07 May we set off in good conditions to St Peter Port. It is always a pleasure to arrive at St. Peter Port out of season and be one of only a few boats in the harbour, it did get a little busier as we approached Liberation Day but not a rafted boat in sight. The good news also was that the passage went well and everything was still working.

So now for the real business and the next leg was to Perros Guirec and out with the tide tables and making adjustments for French time and Summer time and all that good stuff. Perros Guirec approach dries and you have to get your timing right and also taking into account the tidal coefficient which when really low gives very limited access, if at all. Anyway we were fine and made it with plenty of water under the keel as we approached the narrow gate to the harbour which always looks a lot narrower than stated 6 metre width. Through the gate and tied up so all was well.



Approach to Perros Guirec at Low Tide

Perros Guirec is a great place to visit having a fine beach and some beautiful coastal walks past the pink granite rocks. However it would soon be time to move on and make for the magical “Blue Line” The next ports were very much transit ports as we required to pass through the tidal gates of the “Chenal du Four” and the “Raz de Seine”. These passages take up plenty of pages of advice in the Pilot Guides and we have always followed the recommended timings and chosen fair weather so have had no bad experiences to date. So with the tidal gates behind us we can relax and the next port was Benodet always an enjoyable visit positioned in a sheltered river entrance.

From Benodet it was then just a short hop to Concarneau with its impressive walled city from the 14th century. During our stay here we took a short bus ride to Port Aven which Sheila wanted to visit, it was cheaper and easier to take the bus even though they did not accept our bus passes, perhaps it was Brexit!



The walled town of Concarneau

Then it was time to visit our first Island and we set course for Port Tudy on the Ile de Groix. For a Thursday in May the water did seem to be rather busy as we approached Port Tudy and the harbour master signalled us away from the small number of berths which were all occupied and offered us fore and aft moorings amongst numerous yachts. Panic stations for a few minutes as we sourced suitable ropes and with some assistance we were secure. Then we checked our diary and yes it was All Saints Day, a French public holiday hence the traffic and holiday atmosphere prevailing. We got the dinghy out and went ashore where restaurants and cycle hire establishments were the centre of business. Had a pleasant wander about in the sunshine and returned to Hector which now appeared to be the centre of a raft of small boats who between them did not appear to own one fender. I decided this would only get worse and made the decision to extricate ourselves while we could. Eventually we were on our way with no problems and heading towards Lorient with a stream of boats passing us heading for Port Tudy, for me a good decision although Sheila did accuse me of being anti social. All was well in Lorient with no trouble finding a berth, they were all in Port Tudy. Part of my future planning will now include knowing when it is a French Public Holiday.

Time to move on again and this time it was to that popular stopping off harbour for those heading south, Port Hauligen. On entering the harbour it was clear things were beginning to get busier now we were into June but we just managed to squeeze into a slot on the visitors pontoon helped by the invaluable thrusters. Alongside for a short period and the harbour master came along and recognising our shape was not ideal for rafting yachts alongside we

were offered a finger berth, it is surprising how quickly you can get ready to move with the right incentive. There is an interesting plaque on the harbour wall recognising this is where Capitaine Dreyfus landed on his return to France from imprisonment in the Caribbean, he was the central character from the book and film "An Officer and a Spy"

Next stop was the Golfe Du Morbihan a large inland tidal sea somewhat like Poole harbour but with a rocky bottom. Once inside we planned to head up the Riviere D'Auray to Auray , this was a nice tranquil transit and a change from some of the challenges of the coastal trip so far. Pottering along at 6 knots in the river and keeping in the channel was very pleasant. Arrived at Auray and this time we were prepared for the fore and aft mooring in the middle of the river and all went well. We felt a large vessel amongst the others but were made to feel welcome all the same in this lovely setting. From pictures displayed on the waterfront this area has changed little in the last hundred years just the type of boats that are now in the harbour.



Hector moored at Auray

Time to move on and we set our bearings for another river the Vilaine. This involved passing through the locks at Arzal to enter the fresh water river. The locks were an experience where fenders, a boat hook and a high sense of awareness were all valuable. The Lock Master was clearly a man of great understanding and patience and I took pride in the fact I received a nod of acceptance that at least I was doing what was asked. The locks opened and we were out into the river and a gentle potter within the speed limit of 5 knots up to La Roche Bernard, this is quite a British enclave with plenty of Red Dusters on display. High winds were forecast to be coming right up the river so we decided after a couple of nights to go further upstream and made it to Redon. I had one incident here I was lucky to get away with. In the act of assembling Sheila's bike I was attending to the front wheel when in slow motion I saw the bike begin to topple and then make a large splash as it disappeared under the water. Now I remembered my longest boat hook was my newly purchased at great expense Hook and Moor 3 metre so I rushed into the cabin to retrieve it and with full extension and arm fully in the water and a passing local helpfully holding my ankles I snagged something . Carefully and slowly raised to the surface and yes I had caught a bike, oh what a relief. Many thanks to my helper and apologies for the language used and all was well except for a slightly bent hook and now for the WD40.

Now back down the river with an overnight stay alongside a tranquil pontoon at Rieux and then the locks and back out to sea. Turning south and taking in the marinas of Pornichet and Pornic before heading out to the Ile de Yeu and Port Joinville. By now temperatures were up to 30deg C and clear blue skies, perhaps this "Blue Line" is real. Ile de Yeu is a lovely island to visit especially when you get the bikes out and take to the many paths and quiet roads. We were reluctant to leave Ile de Yeu but it was time to move on (not really sure why) and head to Les Sables D'Olonne famous for the start and finish of the Vendee globe race and all I can say is they chose a good place for it. We also felt this was a potential place we could leave Hector for the winter.

Our next planned stop was St. Martin-De-Re on the Ile de Re with some trepidation having read how crowded it could become and pictures in the pilot guides did give the impression of a beautiful setting turned into a crowded boat parking lot. Timing of one's arrival is important with a drying approach and a harbour gate. All was well as we entered the harbour which is really entering into the middle of a citadel and we were assigned our berth alongside. Now to wait and see how many would raft on us, soon a French motorboat came alongside and no problems at all. Then fore and aft of us the rafts went out about 6 boats but we sat there just the two of us. I am not sure of the influence of my French neighbour but it worked. This really was a unique setting with its ramparts and fortifications constructed by France's great military engineer Vauban in the 17th century all around you and again a great island for cycling.

Now for a real change as we headed off the short distance to La Rochelle with a marina capacity for over 5,000 boats and a waiting list. We berthed in the visitors section and after a few days sightseeing we took the direct flight from La Rochelle to Southampton for a trip home to catch up with family and other obligations.

Rested and ready to go we flew back to La Rochelle and all was well except for finding the rubbing strip and alloy support strip had been chewed up on starboard side. Clearly in our absence a boat berthing next to us at a guess had hit us with its anchor and left it at that. I was not over impressed with the visitor berths at La Rochelle, no gate security at all and a rather casual approach from the staff, a symptom I suppose of such a large marina. Saying that, I had been warned by a fellow boater on the way down of the shortcomings of leaving a boat at La Rochelle.

Next stop was Port Medoc on the Gironde River and again on reading the Pilot Books and tales of 4 metre waves in good conditions in the entrance to the Gironde it was somewhat of a relief to make it. Saying that on the approach to the estuary and in the mouth there certainly were some interesting currents and conditions but nothing Hector could not cope with. This made one realise how brave the Royal Marines were who became known as the Cockleshell heroes as they set off from here in the Second World War towards the port of Bordeaux in their canoes. Port Medoc a fairly new marina seemed quiet and we were assigned a finger berth away from the visitor area so that was a relief. So now we were on the edge of Medoc wine country so time to try the local reds, always a pleasure. We took a boat trip out to the Corduan lighthouse which is the oldest working lighthouse in France; it is an interesting trip and must be the only lighthouse equipped with a King's apartment though I hear he never visited. After a few days at Port Medoc we set off down the Gironde noting the wine chateaux on the riverbank and timed our arrival for the riverside Marina at Paulliac. On the approach to the marina the main navigation mark on the seawall was a 30ft high bottle of red wine, now we knew it was getting serious.



The wine bottle at the entrance to Pauillac Marina

From Pauillac we decided to take the train down to Bordeaux rather than take Hector, the marinas in Bordeaux did not read that well and the train was of course a fraction of the fuel cost. Spent a night in a hotel in Bordeaux which is an attractive city which clearly had a prosperous past. It is amazing how things have changed with it once being a major port and now not a commercial vessel in sight. Still the old docks have made for a beautiful esplanade.

We now both seemed to have picked up bad coughs and we had come as far south as we intended for 2017 so decided we would make for our winter port which was Les Sables D'Olonne. It meant back tracking but we felt confident this was the port we could leave Hector in for the winter without too much worry and also had good logistics from the UK with flights from Southampton to Nantes all year round and then a direct train from Nantes to Les Sables.

Trip back north all went well soon we were heading back into Les Sables and our winter berth.

So another years adventures were over and it was with an element of sadness we departed Les Sables on the train to Nantes for the trip home. It had been a great trip and we had been blessed with such good weather. Hector had performed well and the only notable problems were the need to replace the battery charger which failed mid trip and a shower sump drains pump so the preparation paid off.

The next challenge will be the winter maintenance but that will be another story.



Hector's Trip South 2017