MARINA GUIDE TO SPAIN'S BEAUTIFUL BAIONA

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Biscay's fearsome reputation means that many hurry past but, as Tim Good discovered, it pays to tarry along the way

By way of Biscay

Cruising ~ Brittany to Galicia

The never-ending summer days of 2017 in Norway, meandering in and out of its fjords and islands, had made for an exceptional cruising season and it ended at Sutton Harbour in Plymouth after a five day passage down the North Sea from Stavanger. However, plans were afoot for a voyage south to Senegal and therefore, in September, we awaited a weather window to cross Biscay. However, September and October of 2017 were unseasonably stormy and no weather window presented itself. We admitted defeat and put the boat to bed for winter in Sutton Harbour, a well protected, friendly and reasonably priced marina. In hindsight, the decision to delay until Spring 2018 turned out to be rather fortuitous as we would have otherwise missed out on some rather fantastic cruising grounds… Brittany, Asturias and Galicia!

So fast forward to March 2018 and we awaited a favourable forecast in Plymouth to work our way south to the Canary Islands. However, we now had time in our favour and therefore took the decision to take in what Biscay had to offer. The end of March was again quite tempestuous but a 24 hour window appeared. The initial plan had been to cross directly to the West coast of France. However, given the wind direction, we flew across to Roscoff instead. Averaging 6.7kts on a broad reach in about 30kts of wind, perfect conditions for Shadowfax, a heavy displacement →

ABOVE
Anchored on the Odet River

BELOW
Another view of the Odet River (left); the author in pensive mode at the bow of Shadowfax

Falmouth built boat. Roscoff is an easy and safe approach in the dark with a sea running but beware of strong tides at the entrance and through the marina itself.

The town is a pretty fishing town and old fashioned holiday resort of times gone by, with picturesque architecture and a quintessentially Breton character which also offers an incredible array of (edible) sea life to be foraged at low tide! The beach was a beautiful mosaic of differently coloured sea shells and we ended up resorting to collecting winkles (or 'bigorneau' in French) which were easily available. As we were enthusiastically reassured: "Ils sont délicieux pour l'aperitif!"

This theme would continue as foraging shellfish and herbs all along the Brittany coast became a frequent pastime, and significantly contributed to our stores!

Odet River

There are many interesting points along this coast so you feel spoilt for choice but a relaxed few days were spent in the solitude of the Odet River. You enter the river in deep water, passing large chateaux on the riverbanks, their immaculate lawns coming down to the water for great views of the turrets pointed rooftops and detailed metalwork balconies. This gave us a chance to really appreciate the charm of sailing in France, gliding past these historic monuments with the tide, and imagining life on the river in days gone by.

You soon find yourself in the wild with towering trees on either side, and the odd shy heron, neck elegantly silhouetted against the dark banks. These rivers offer excellent shelter and are a great place to weather a gale rather than being forced into a marina. A good anchorage was found up a small tributary to a quiet pool where we 'shore lined' to a tree. We spent three days here and each morning the mist hung atmospherically over the water.

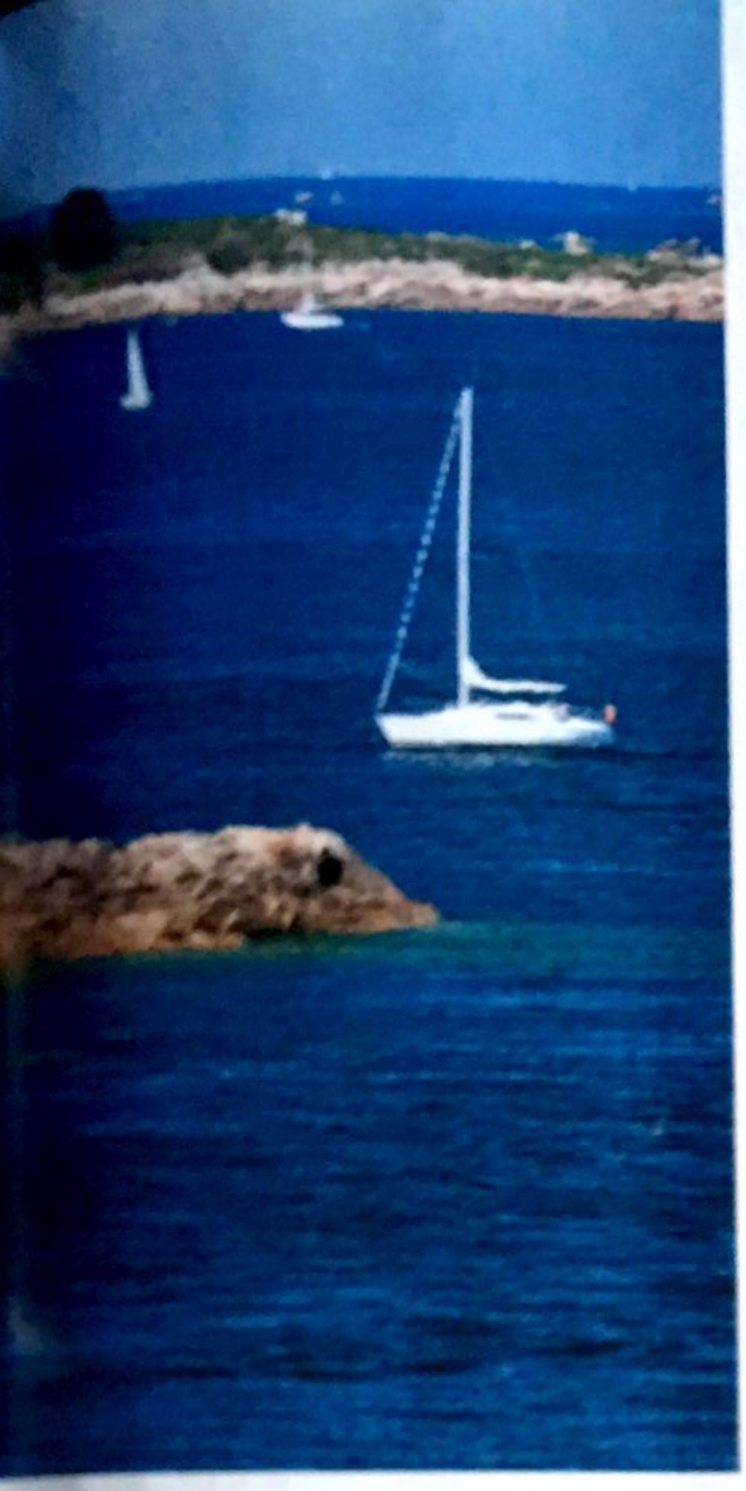
Ashore, wild oysters were found on the banks along with Alexanders, wild rocket and an abundance of fennel.

Our pilot book was "Secret Anchorages of Brittany" by Peter Cumberlidge which made clear that the 'Ils du Glenans' were not to be missed. Being only 10nm from the Odet River, the islands were a short hop with favourable winds. They are rich in a kind of island beauty; their remoteness, turquoise waters, white sandy beaches and unique plant species. It is the only place to find a rare narcissus which grow on one of the islands. Different to other varieties, its head dips demurely and perhaps rather sadly more like a bluebell than the happy daffodil family. Heading further South from the 'Glenans', the sea began to take

'Heading south, the sea started to take on the longer and larger rhythm of the Atlantic ocean'

ABOVE
Ile de Brehat

BELOW
Drying out in the harbour of Sauzon and taking the time to inspect the anodes

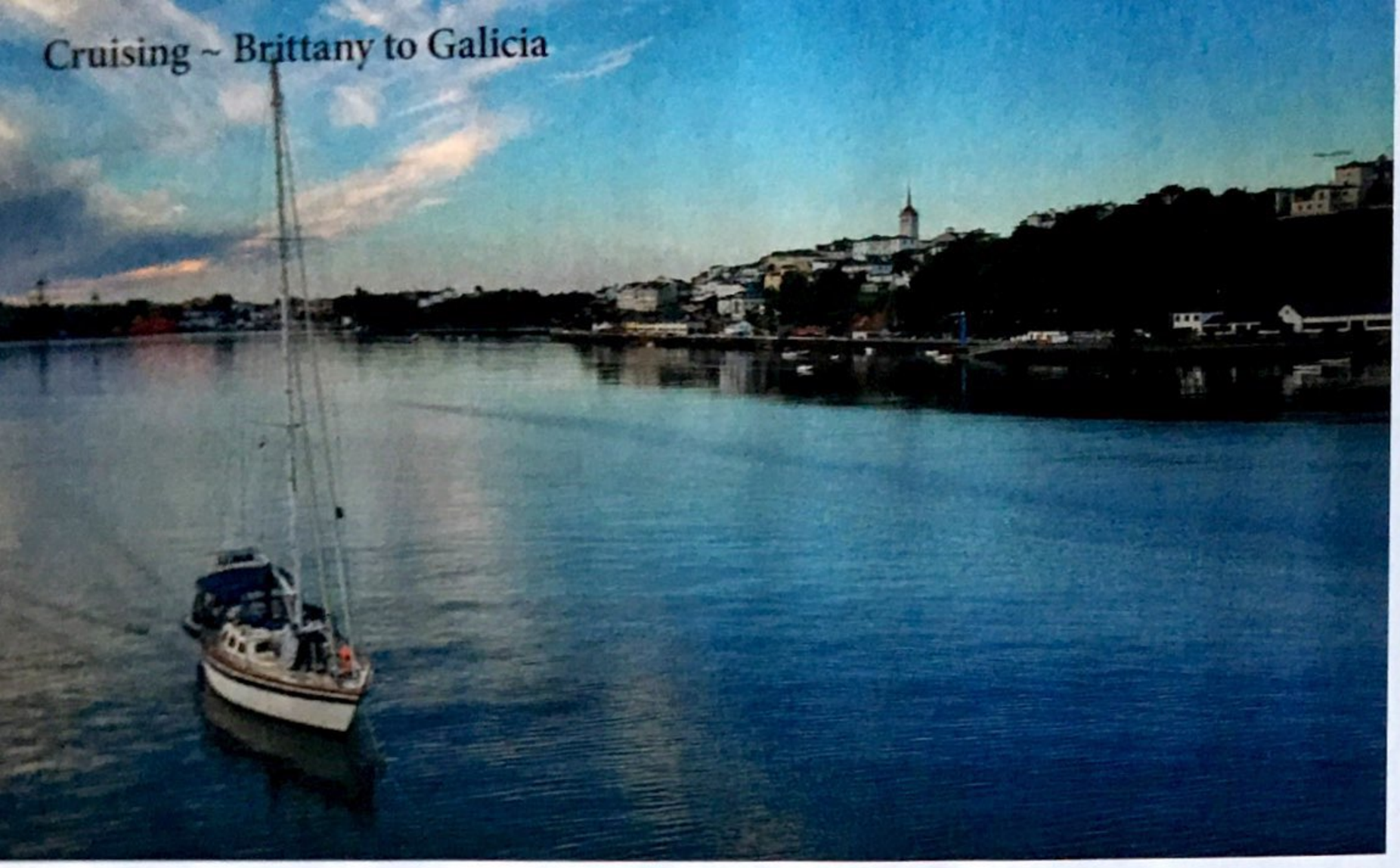


on the longer and larger rhythm of the Atlantic ocean. We bypassed Ile de Groix and sailed directly to to Belle Isle, approximately 40nm away, making landfall at Sauzon. Belle Île has an old world unique Gallic charm to it that seduced us, as it has many other visitors. Little houses stacked up against each other, their golden lights gently glistening in the dark that evening. The village is serene and tranquil with many creperies. The colours on the windows, shutters and wooden shop signs are a light pastel colour and many people travel by bike.

ABOVE
La Rochelle, with the dramatic entrance in the background

BELOW
A rugged Brittany anchorage

From Belle Île the obvious choice is the Gulf of Morbihan which has two destinations really. Morbihan itself and the D'Auray River, both accessed via an area of strong tides, namely "Le Grand Mounton", where tides can reach 10kts! We took nice walks ashore on the islands and →



cycled between quaint towns while sampling local oyster bars.

A gale was then forecast and so we made our way into the protection of the D'Auray River, with its high sided wooded banks. There we barely noticed the wind and took short trips in the dinghy to watch birds and collect marsh samphire from tidal inlets.

Ile de Re

En route to La Rochelle we took time to anchor off the islands of Houat, Hoëdic, finally taking a mooring at the lovely town of Saint Martin de Rè on Île de Rè. The town is ringed by star-shaped 17th-century ramparts, with a huge, preserved citadel on the eastern side. Things were starting to feel distinctly Mediterranean now in both climate and architecture. A few days were spent in La Rochelle, steeped in history through various ages of occupation. Notably linked to the Romans, Knights Templar, the Hundred Years' War, Huguenot rebellions and the list goes on. We'd have happily spent a few more days in La Rochelle but a good weather window appeared for crossing Biscay and we had out sights firming fixed on a cycle trip into the Picos De Europa, a mountain range in Northern Spain! The 240nm passage from La Rochelle to the small town of Ribadesella was plain sailing apart from steep seas around the Pointe De Chassiron, leaving La Rochelle. Perhaps I should have left a little more sea room, as an Atlantic swell running against a strong tide saw a good deal of green water over the deck! This soon passed and the forecast of 20kts on the beam settled in nicely.

As we approached Spain, we were lucky as the swell had dropped significantly, allowing us to enter the harbour town of Ribadesella safely in daylight and on a rising tide. Regularly, this harbour is closed due to breaking waves onto the surf beach at the harbour entrance. We took a very reasonably priced visitors pontoon berth and were now tantalisingly close to the snow covered summits where we enjoyed a spectacular, if rather exhausting cycle trip, into the thick of the mountains. It's an opportunity you should definitely not miss given half the chance!

ABOVE
Anchored off Castopol, Asturias

BELOW
Approaching Picos de Europa (left); A spectacular anchorage off Ribadeao, Asturias (right)

Our first attempt at leaving the harbour was thwarted, the swell had become too large and at the river mouth our depth monitor touched zero below the keel so we beat a hasty retreat and tied up once more on the pontoon. We took the opportunity to explore new pastures and cycle west along the 'dinosaur cycle highway' until conditions allowed us to leave Ribadesella.

We were told it is difficult to make progress along this coast with the prevailing winds tending to blow from the west. However, we took our time to enjoy all that Asturias has to offer and easily made progress when the wind was favourable. Inland adventures by hired car or by bicycle are easy in Northern Spain and the countryside, old villages, Spanish hospitality and Asturian charm is fantastic. Many ports like Santander, Aviles and Gijón have good marinas and local car hire. Aviles, in particular, is a convenient place to leave your boat and fly home should you need to, with an engaging and jovial marina manager named Angel.

Leaving Asturias we entered Galicia. In traditional local folklore the forests of Galicia are said to be inhabited by a variety of elves, fairies and ghosts. We didn't see any evidence to support this but it is one of the strongholds for wolves in Spain and we were lucky enough, although a little unnerved, to hear the piecing howl of one shortly after the sun had set whilst camping out during an inland foray! →

Top Tip:

To anchor off the Atlantic Islands you need to apply online which is straightforward (www.iatlanticas.es). Some pilot books suggest you need to apply two weeks in advance but we found we could apply on the same day and permission was granted immediately. You are limited to 10 days in total per year.

Roving around the Rias

A favourite anchorage in Asturias was in the river at Ribadeo, surrounded by lovely countryside and two interesting towns on either side. Trust your charts and enter on a rising tide to anchor in 3-5m of water.

For the sailor however, the Galician coastline has many 'rías', river valleys which flooded after the last ice age. These make for picturesque and sheltered anchorages. We'd heard the North East of Galicia is quieter and less frequented, progressively becoming busier from A Coruña as you move South. As such, we took our time to enjoy Ría Viveiro, Ría Barqueiro, Ría Ortigueira and Ría Cedeira.

A highlight was to go on 'dinghy adventures', armed with some fishing tackle and a picnic, lazily drifting miles up the ría with the tide. The inlets wind their way up into the hills of Galicia, often forested on either side and it is an interesting way to see the countryside. Rounding the corner towards A Coruña the winds tend to be strong north easterlies during summer months. However, they are relatively localised and we found that even in 35kts of wind there wasn't much seaway, which made for fast and enjoyable hops down he coast between the rías.

We did spend some time around A Coruña but the most memorable moments were found in the less frequented rías. In Ría Camariñas we happened to arrive a day before the Festival of the "Virxe do Carme", the Patron saint of sailors! Of course it would have been unseamanlike not to have joined in and paid our respects! We joined the flotilla of perhaps 50 boats, large and small, all decorated in branches and colourful flags, fog horns blasting out, and accompanied by music of all varieties whilst passengers danced on the decks still heady with the festivities of the previous evening! Once in open water we all motored in a huge anticlockwise direction, with a refreshing disregard for col-regs, circling a huge garland of flowers to commemorate and celebrate those sailors who had been lost at sea.

Moving South there are many more rías to be explored and enjoyed but it is worth mentioning the Atlantic Islands of Galicia National Park. These consist of Illa de Sálvora, Illa de Ons and finally Islas Cíes. We anchored for a night at each of these islands and although the landscape is lovely, we thought they were over-rated.

Our advice would be go for walks early in the morning or during sundown to avoid the boat loads of tourists that flood in each day and line the beaches. They are nature and marine reserves but it was sad to see these so called protected areas full of fisherman and even trawlers whilst the islands are so frequented by people it seemed the fauna and flora was hardly given a chance.

This marked the end of our elongated Biscay crossing before heading south into Portugal. France and Spain had suddenly shown themselves in a whole new light and they each have their own very distinct charm and character.

Looking back, we couldn't imagine crossing Biscay directly and missing out on such varied cruising, whether it be the wild landscapes, clear waters or uncrowded anchorages.

ABOVE
A quiet and scenic anchorage on the Ria Viveiro. If you brave the cold water, it's incredibly clear and good for the circulation!

BELOW
The Virxe do Carmine or 'festival of sailors'

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Tim Good, grew up racing squibs and J24's on the East Coast from Bridlington. Ambitions include sailing to Patagonia, Alaska and other high latitudes.

Emmie, successful artist and adventurer. Travels frequently in search of inspiration for her next exhibition.