

What I Learned Going Dinghy Cruising



I HAD DONE DINGHY SAILING before, but never had the opportunity to go dinghy cruising until this year, when I went sailing with Roger Barnes on Avel Dro. After a couple of short trips in the UK, I agreed to join him for a long weekend living aboard and cruising along the north Breton coast, out of Roscoff. This is what I learnt.

Getting ashore has a cost. There is a trade off between having water to sail in, and having beers to wallow in. The dilemma is easily resolved because after enough beers you don't need to dash off so quickly the next morning anyway.

Hold tight to the rope when asked to jump ashore. Not because you are worried about letting go of the boat, but because, only when you

land, do you discover what you are actually jumping onto.

Waterproof socks need to be pulled right up.

Penknife envy is a real psychological phenomenon. When I was a child I was in awe of people with shiny Swiss army knives, complete with many strange appendages that disappointingly never seemed to get used. On a boat people frequently get the opportunity to expose their penknives in multitudinous ways. Penknives are top of my Christmas list this year.

On a boat there is a use for everything. Or more accurately, everything has more than one purpose. Plates are saucepan lids, cushions are mattress levellers, fenders are beached boat levellers;

the oars hold out the sail, lever the boat level, and sometimes get used for rowing as well.

Always put your waterproofs on.

Always look forward in rough sea, especially when sitting on the edge bit thingy, so you can see the big waves coming.

Terminology. At stressful times don't admit to not knowing what the gunwale is, or the halyard, thwart, or the bit the chain goes through. Do not show surprise at the mention of a horse or a painter being located somewhere on the boat; they are very effective stowaways.

Hardly anybody else actually sails.

99% of boats are on moorings, 1% are under motor, even when they are pretending to be sailing. Notably,

by Mary Dooley



Baie de Morlaix – hidden topography

nobody else is sailing without an outboard.

You need to find rowing fun at times. Sometimes for quite long periods of time.

Pontoons are very nice but can make you seasick. Marinas may seem like lovely cosy places with easy mooring, electricity and hot showers, but actually they are to be despised. Instead you find a charming inaccessible creek where there is a gamble as to what is underneath once the tide has drained out. There are old chains to get anchors stuck on, old anchors to get hulls stuck on, and thick sticky boot sucking mud that people get stuck in. There is a whole hidden unexpected topography.

Knots. I had been told that a bowline was the only knot you need and can be used for virtually everything. Roger seems to think it is a pretentious knot over-used by the sissies who sail on white yachts.

Rope should be wound clockwise. There appears to be no scientific reason for this. But if a rope tangles there is an accusation of anti-clockwise coiling.

Hygiene. As in childbirth, on a boat you stop caring about acts of personal hygiene that are normally conducted coily and discreetly. Acts of hygiene are generally kept to a complete minimum.

Shepees are very good on land, but can lead to nasty accidents at sea. Boys (who don't need shepees)

don't warn you of the dangers that they are all too familiar with. Do not pee into the wind. Bring plenty of underwear.

Long hair is a problem. Amazingly you can buy products called 'sea spray' or 'sea salt'. Clearly these people have never been at sea.

Most of the time, nobody at sea really knows exactly where they are.

The French have lots of spiky rocks, and they may think that the waves that roll in from the Atlantic are dramatic, but actually this is all very tame compared to Watchet in the Bristol Channel.

Navigation. Even so, rocks are

everywhere in Brittany. If you are a mathematician you can make magical calculations about the height of the forthcoming rock and the state of the tide in order to work out if a crash is imminent. This of course is ignoring the aforesaid point that actually it is unlikely that you know exactly where you are on the chart, so you may be calculating the wrong rock. Anyway the simple solution seems to be that cunning mathematicians are hard to find and so you use good old-fashioned techniques like: Can you see a rock sticking out? Can you see the shadow of a rock just below the surface when standing on the foredeck? Can you see water breaking over something that may be a hidden rock? Is the chartplotter showing a red stripy zone? Have you hit a rock here previously? If the answer to all the aforementioned is no, and depending how fast you are going and how hungry or thirsty you are, then it is possible to sail across areas covered in rocks without having an advanced mathematical qualification.

Seamarks. There are loads of sticking out things in the sea that have secret meanings. Sometimes they are huge and obvious, at other times they look like the kind of sticks carried by shamans. But the size of the marker doesn't necessarily indicate the importance of what they are marking. For example, you

Morning tea





Evening at Ile de Batz

can have a huge green lighthouse type structure and a spindly green stick, both marking the same channel. Because they are green they should be passed to starboard (otherwise known as the right), unless you are facing the other way in the channel in which case they are on the left. Yes, I hear you say, obviously that is when you are coming out, but when several islands are involved it is hard to tell which is going in and which is coming

out. Then there are other sticks that mark hazards; there are sticks that mark lobster pots and sticks that mark oyster beds. In fact there are a lot of sticks at sea, far more than I had expected.

Cardinal marks are like big friendly bees. They are yellow bees and if they are wearing a black vest they are warning you of something nasty to the south, if they are wearing black knickers it is to the

Mornina at Ile de Batz



north. This is all very helpful, but the bees at the entrance to Roscoff harbour seem to me to be mischievous, or to have put their underwear on incorrectly. At night the bees turn into flashing clocks.

Tidal streams. You are meant to be able to tell the direction of tides by looking at moored boats and the flow of water around buoys. Notice my scepticism.

A tidal race is something to be feared, but should not be confused with overfalls. These look like a race but apparently are friendlier in their own very mean way.

Waves can be confused, or disturbed. As with confused teenagers, these times make life difficult for all. The surface of the water reveals great secrets – to the experienced eye only.

Baby seagulls use pester power by squawking at their mothers in exactly the same way as human young do, which gets very annoying when they are not your baby seagulls. It is advisable to carry suitable ammunition or some foul-tasting bird food to prevent this, although apparently curry powder also has the desired effect (on both birds and children). Cormorants don't talk to each other. Wading birds march along the shoreline in an orderly line at exactly low tide.

Early mornings. In tidal waters, boats sometimes have to be moved around in the early morning dark. The biggest problem is not that you can't actually see, but that your hands are so cold that they stop working properly, and you feel in danger of the futile activity of whingeing.

Luckily after all these more challenging moments there is always the cheering, essential and quintessentially British activity of being made a cup of tea by the amazingly talented sailor who brought you to this perfect world. *MD*