

“Smelling the Roses” a leisurely sail Lough Swilly to Ayamonte and beyond.

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I decided on Monday 14th May to retire for the third (and probably final) time. A week later we collected *Gwili 3* from winter storage in Ardrossan and somewhere between the Mull of Kintyre and Rathlin Island in the chilly drizzle we made the decision to go south! After that it was a matter of a few weeks to make some preparations and take care of various family commitments so that we could depart Fahan in early July with the ultimate destination of La Gomera in the Canary Islands. The trip was to be in two main parts. Firstly Swilly to Seville for which we allowed nine weeks. Then a month's break back in Ireland followed by the second leg which we hope will take us from Seville to La Gomera and possibly further.

Hardened sailors could have completed our first leg in 9 days but for us even nine weeks was not enough and we didn't actually succeed in making it to Seville. We dallied here and we dallied there and eventually on 4th September we terminated leg one in Ayamonte, Spain just over the border from Portugal and went by bus to Seville in order to meet our flight dead-lines. We took three weeks alone to go from Swilly to Dingle which was our chosen point of departure for La Coruna in Spain giving us the westernmost advantage in Europe to cross the Celtic Sea mostly outside Biscay. Even though Irish weather got bad press this year it was not the cause of our lengthy sojourn down the west coast. (We actually spent only one day stormbound in Burtonport) No! The reason was a change of attitude on my part which Paddy has been advocating for several years. She calls it “smelling the roses” and broadly it means taking your time to appreciate some of the wonderful sights, scenery, wildlife, flora and fauna that sailing opens up to its fortunate practitioners. I'm now almost a total convert and enjoying every minute with my only regret that I didn't listen to her years ago.

So what did we get up to on our first leg? For the first time in our cruising history we kept a blog which entailed uploading information and photographs every few days to a website which family and friends could log into and view to keep in touch with where we were at and what we were doing. The blog comprised over 14,000 words so required substantial editing and censorship to transform it into suitable reading for fellow LSYC members although this was substantially achieved by removing most of the references to eating and drinking of which, on reflection we seemed to do a lot!

When we pulled out of Fahan Marina on the morning of 5th July the weather was wet and miserable (no surprise there) but the forecast was to improve and the wind was from the South giving us reasonable sailing to our first port of call.. Tory Island some 35 nautical miles to the west where we planned to attend the “International Maritime Film Festival”. On board were myself, Paddy and Tom Gallagher who had been our companion on a previous very memorable cruise through the Hebrides to St Kilda in 2002. Even though Tory is considerably closer Tom had never set foot on it let alone

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attend a film festival there so his anticipation was palpable. Tory has changed immeasurably in the last five years with the completion of a safe harbour (compliments of the EU taxpayer) which in turn allowed the establishment of a year round regular ferry service to the mainland and a full service hotel. In the summer months one now finds significant numbers of tourists who come to walk the cliffs, to watch the numerous species of seabirds, to listen to the corncrakes, to admire the Derek Hill inspired Tory school of primitive painting (where anything goes and even I could aspire to becoming an artist!) or just to enjoy the music and the craic in the hotel and an Club. It's also the only place in Ireland or possibly the world where every visitor will be greeted on arrival by a real live monarch. His highness, King Patsy Dan duly met us as we tied up outside the only other yacht in the harbour. They were from Shetlands and had come "South" looking for better weather. God help them! Nice people though and very generous with invitations to call on them if we ever came to the Shetlands which given our present frame of mind and direction is highly unlikely. The King duly invited us to the official opening of the film festival at 6.00PM that evening to be followed by drinks and buffet in the community hall. Regrettably none of us are native speakers (one of the problems of a northern education) and so we sat through 15 speeches politely nodding and clapping at appropriate places. We thought we spotted several celebrities including Tom



Cruise and Pamela Anderson but couldn't be 100% sure as they were probably heavily disguised.

I have to say the organisation of the film festival was impressive with island related films from all over the world including Ireland, British Isles, France, Japan and the Pacific. We elected to go and see "Man of Aran" the 1934 Hollywood classic and therefore in a sort of English. Director Robert Flaherty recreates his romantic view of

life for Inishman fishermen in the early 1900's and given that the film was made when it was and special effects were in their infancy he managed to convey the sheer power and ferocity of western storms very convincingly. The film deals with hunting basking sharks which apparently never happened in the Aran Islands but was actually practised widely by the Achill Islanders. No amount of money or strong drink was able to persuade Inishmanners to recreate the shark hunting scenes for the movie and ultimately the director had to send for a team of Achill men!

We spent two very pleasant days and nights on Tory watching films and bird watching (not Pamela Anderson) before setting sail on our first little bit of South about 15 miles to Gola. As we untied we heard a mighty splash in the middle of the small harbour and

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turned to see a dolphin jumping clear of the water. This was matched by another splash as a black Labrador launched himself from the pier wall and proceeded to swim after the dolphin. I heard later that this has been a regular occurrence over several months and that on occasions the owner of the Labrador has had to put to sea to retrieve the dog. When I see what Fungi has done over the years for the economy of Dingle I can only think that this could be a gold-mine for Tory in the years to come!

My first time on Gola and very enjoyable it was with sun shining and warm balmy weather, an auger of things to come. Fabulous views of Errigal as we walked across the island counting numerous skylarks and two corncrakes. Not many people although most of the houses showed signs of recent renovation for summer homes I understand.

Next stop was Gortnasate pier outside Kincashla. There is water deep enough at this pier to take super trawlers but on this occasion we were on our own and were able to admire the view of Daniel O'Donnell's luxury pad across Cruit bay recently sold to an Irish Psychic for €3.2 million. We had arranged to meet Paddy's daughter Niamh and grandson Cian here so they could come with us next day through Owey Sound and inside Aranmore to Burtonport as a kind of final send off since we wouldn't see them again for several weeks. Tom also left that evening returning to Derry with Niamh and Cian and Paddy and I found ourselves on our own for about 15 minutes until cousin Wendy and family arrived from Portnoo to start another round of send-offs on our epic journey.

Next day was the only one in the entire trip that we found ourselves stormbound. W F8-9 and raining heavily kept us in bed until the afternoon and even then we didn't go any further than the pub at the top of the pier. As we call it.. a day for the high stools rather than the high seas. It blew through quickly and the following day in early afternoon with sun shining once again we took the flood tide through the sound of Aran to Crohy Head, round by Slieve League and into Teeling harbour to rest up before tackling the 65 miles across Donegal bay early the following morning. It started off in pleasant conditions but by the time we reached Broadhaven at the northernmost end of the Mullet peninsula it was blowy and wet and we were very glad to find Mayo County Council still have well-maintained visitor moorings around their part of the coast. Donegal used to have visitor moorings but in their wisdom failed to budget for maintenance and subsequently had them sunk or removed to avoid risk!

More sunshine next day and we sailed round and into Rossmoney outside Westport where we had arranged to pick up Paddy's sisters Maeve and Aideen for a weekend cruising the islands of Inishturk, Inishboffin and Clare. All three islands have had substantial work done or being done to their harbours since we last visited. Could it be that the Celtic tiger has finally reached the far west? We anchored off Inishturk the first night and made our way ashore climbing the half mile to the pub with possibly the most spectacular view in Ireland. Good craic but bad Guinness! NE winds made our anchorage a little uncomfortable and consequently we decided against remaining for the Inishturk annual regatta and made instead for the relative shelter of Inishboffin. Cromwell's fort overlooking the harbour once struck fear and terror into the hearts of

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Irishmen and women for miles around and is probably the reason that today some 400 years later none of these islands are Irish speaking.

Maeve unfortunately had to return for work so after dropping her back to Westport we concluded our mini cruise with a visit to Clare where we spent the morning looking for Granuaile's grave. We found her fort which had been turned into a police station in 1826 and even today looks in reasonable shape. The Abbey is worth the few miles walk to see frescoes dating back to God knows when and apparently the like are to be found nowhere else in Ireland.



We had a date in Clifden to meet with Gerry McCormack an old friend of Paddy and Aideen's from childhood days in Derry. Gerry now runs a very successful business called Connemara Safari's which organise walking tours round the Connemara including the Islands. We anchored off the Lifeboat station and met Gerry ashore in the Yacht Club bar where after a few pints we persuaded him to come back out to the boat

with us for dinner. He ended up staying the night which seemed the safest course and I ran him ashore at the crack of dawn next morning to resume his safari with a group of German hillwalkers. Kilronan in the Aran Islands was our next stop to let Aideen off to catch a ferry and bus back home leaving Paddy and I once more on our own. The wind was light and from the east so we took the opportunity to motor across under the Cliffs of Mohr and into Liscannor which under normal conditions is untenable (not for nothing do surfers from all over the world flock to this particular spot). On this occasion it was benign and we went ashore to view two churches at Lahinch and Enistymon which were designed back in the 50's by Paddy's father who was at that time in partnership with Liam McCormick. We were not overly impressed. They were functional and basic and one has to keep in mind these churches were built to a budget at a time when there was not a whole lot of money about. Corr and McCormick's round church of St Aengus at Burt just below where we live ourselves and built some 10 years later went on to win several awards and to be acclaimed building of the century by the Institute of Irish Architects.

A brief sojourn in Kilrush marina before crossing the Shannon and through the Blaskets completed three weeks of "rose-smelling" down the west coast of Ireland and we found ourselves safely in Dingle marina awaiting arrival of my son, Sean with beautiful and charming Swedish girlfriend, Sofia to set out on our passage to La Corunna.

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We ended up waiting 5 days in Dingle until we had a favourable weather forecast for the 530 mile trip to Spain and finally set off at the crack of noon in brilliant sunshine and F4 from the west. Longer term the prognosis was good with some easterly but mostly W/SW F5 occasionally 6. We opted for a 4 hourly watch system with Sean & Sofia, volunteering to do midnight to 4.00AM (the graveyard shift) and we proceeded under full main and no.1 genoa to put the miles between us and Ireland.

By mid afternoon next day we had covered almost 140 miles and the wind was blowing a good F6 from the SW which made me very glad we had chosen Dingle as our starting point so that in the gusts we were able to run a little in front of the wind without wandering too far off our course. That day we saw a yacht in the distance coming in the opposite direction. We passed within a few hundred metres and they hailed us on the VHF. Strange to hear another northern accent out there in the middle of nowhere but they told us they were the Yacht *Granuaile* out of Strangford and Bangor and had been away for thirteen months having sailed to the Canaries, crossed the Atlantic and just left the Azores a week before and now heading for Kinvara to meet up with some friends they had met in La Gomera. Turned out the friends included Sean McDonagh. We told them if they had any sense they would turn around and go back and I'll bet by now they wish they had taken our advice. Shortly after this we heard a watery blow quite close by and saw our first whale black with fin very far back and about twice the size of *Gwili 3*. It was a magnificent sight cruising majestically across the bow about 30 metres in front of us. After that we saw several more including a group of two adults and a calf but fortunately none of them took more than a passing interest in us and just kept gliding by at their own leisurely pace.

We were making good speed since the winds remained strong but the swell made it uncomfortable down below and it was difficult to prepare food beyond the odd sandwich or pot noodle. On the third day in keeping with the forecast the wind swung right round to the east but still a good F5-6 and we were able to run out to the west of our course line so that when it returned to the SW we had a bit of leeway to make La Coruna. And swing it did on the last day back round to SW and then blew up to gale force 8 which was not in the forecast! We reefed the main right down and put several turns on the furling genoa but still managed to keep moving at 8+ knots. It was exhilarating sailing but also heavy rain which soaked everybody and everything. Sometime during the day our GPS packed up. We had a spare hand-held Garmin but it's old, takes forever to pick up satellites and eats batteries. I also had a TomTom and found that it was vastly superior allowing us to get almost instant fixes which we then plotted on the chart to keep track of our progress and position. Are we the first yacht to navigate across Biscay by TomTom I wonder? Forty miles from La Coruna at 3.00AM we had no GPS, it was blowing stink, horizontal rain and pitch dark and just when I thought it can't get any worse we ran into a forest of lights. Maybe thirty or forty large trawlers apparently fishing in pairs and we're in the middle of them. Thankfully Sean a recent graduate of yachtmaster school was able instantly to interpret the lights and pick a safe course through the fleet without fouling any gear and two hours later the rain stopped the sky cleared and the most beautiful full moon I have ever seen appeared to help shepherd us safely towards the Spanish coast. By 8.00AM the sky was blue the sun was shining and

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we were at the entrance to Darsena Deportiva marina. The trials and tribulations of the previous 24 hours were quickly forgotten as we hauled up all our gear to dry out in the warm sunshine and tuck into good old bacon and eggs washed down with a few beers before collapsing in our bunks for a well-earned nap.

We recharged our batteries in La Coruna for 4 days during which time I got the GPS repaired, found a sailmaker to fix a tear in the genoa and restock *Gwili 3* from the nearby Carrefour. This was a major shock to me since everything was half the price we pay in Ireland! When I paid the bill I couldn't believe it and thought a mistake had been made but this was to be our experience all the way down the coast of Spain and Portugal and it just brought home to us how damned expensive the cost of living has become in Ireland. I also decided to mail order a JRC radar from the UK given our experience with the trawlers and the reputation which this coast has for fog. This was subsequently delivered to the sailmaker and we planned to drive up from Vigo a few days later to pick up it and the mended sail as well as taking in a short tour of Santiago Compostella (all made possible by our trusty TomTom).

Before leaving La Corunna we saw two other Irish boats. *Northabout*, on this occasion skippered by Rory Casey en route to the Canaries in preparation for an Atlantic crossing and *Island Life* with ICC Commodore, Cormac McHenry on solo passage from France to Rota where he plans to keep the boat over this winter. We were to meet up with Cormac a couple more times as we journeyed South and grateful for his advice and craic which included discovering a mutual interest in Irish ladies underwear in the distant past when he worked for Glen Abbey and I with W.P McCarter. In the 70's

between us we covered the asses of Ireland's masses!



The coast of Galicia is gorgeous and we promised ourselves to come back for more extended and detailed cruising in the future. It's like Donegal but with sunshine! We made our way gently round the coast stopping at Corme and Laxe before continuing on to Camarinas. Here unfortunately we lost Sean who got a call from friends in Palma looking for delivery crew for *Patches*, Eamon Conneeley's

racing machine which needed to be transported from Palma to Portomaio for a forthcoming regatta. Sofia opted to stay on with us for a few days and join up again with Sean later in Portugal. We stayed a couple of days in Camarinas which has a nice little marina with all facilities and close proximity to town with plenty of shops, bars and restaurants that every cruising mans needs occasionally to sustain life. Then frankly each little place was nicer than the last. Muros, Portosin, San Vincente and then into the city

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of Vigo where we found a berth at the Royal Club Nautico a superb location with fabulous facilities and right in the city centre.



Sadly we said goodbye to Sofia as she headed off by train and bus to meet up with Sean in Lisbon but hopefully we will have the pleasure of their company again in October for our passage to Madeira and La Gomera. Meanwhile we busied ourselves with exploring Vigo in between bouts of boat cleaning and fixing minor problems. We rented a car and had TomTom take us to the sailmaker in La

Coruna where we picked up our genoa, a new bimini cover and collected our JRC radar which had been sent out by mail order from UK. We toured back through Santiago Compostella and visited the cathedral of St James which was not designed by Corr & McCormick but impressive nevertheless. Each year almost 100,000 pilgrims make the famous Camino walk through France and Spain to visit this place and we felt in our own small way that we had made similar sacrifices by coming all the way from Lough Swilly by boat and car! Back in Vigo we installed the radar using a garden rake strapped securely to the pushpit to mount the randomer. Crude but effective and will have to do until we can get a proper stainless steel post made up in La Gomera.

After delaying our departure to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption with the citizens of Vigo we reluctantly pulled out and headed round the coast to Bayonne where we found the town Marina full but no problem getting a berth in the Club Nautico facilities which although not quite matching the grandeur of RCN Vigo were still excellent. We had a drink on board *Island Life* with Cormac and Barbara who was heading off the next day to Samarkand and was pleased to know that not only did I know this was in Uzbekistan but also had been there on business several times.

The following morning was glorious but with little wind as we motored out in the direction of Portugal. However by lunchtime the wind was up to 20 knots on our tail and by the time we reached Povoia de Varzim it was gusting 35 knots. This was to be the pattern all the way down the Portuguese coast and actually made for very pleasant sailing although in the afternoon northerly winds it was really quite cold despite the ubiquitous sunshine. Entry into Portugal was painless despite all the stuff we had read in the pilot books and heard from other travellers. A complete absence of officials marked our entire time in Portugal and the only paperwork we had was marina registration forms when we opted to go into harbour. It would appear that in the last few years the Portuguese authorities have come to accept that they are now in the EU and that the right of freedom to travel is something to be encouraged after all! It was tempting to stay a few extra days in Povoia (marina charge €13 high season) and take the metro into Porto but we were starting to feel slightly under pressure as we had flights booked back to Dublin from Seville and we had barely reached Portugal with only another 3 weeks to go so decision was taken to press on and spend a few days in Lisbon instead.

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We continued south via Leixos before entering the lagoon at Aveiro. We followed the pilot directions all the way up the Canal Principal to the AVELA (Associacao Aveirense de Vela de Cruzeiro) pontoon where we tied up outside a local boat. This is a fascinating area of salt marshes very low lying with a veritable maze of canals and waterways. From our berth at the pontoon we were only a ten minute walk into the town of Aveiro itself which is known as the “Venice of Portugal”. It is a bit like a miniature Venice but not as smelly, quite beautiful and very colourful with several canals, bridges and even gondolas.



Figueira da Foz ate up a few more days as we waited for a forecast northerly gale to pass through. It was a pleasant little seaside town with a great food market on the shorefront. We passed some of the time going by bus and train for a very small amount of euros’ to Fatima (which had been a long-time ambition of Paddy’s since she read the story as a child but in terms of church architecture

it leaves a lot to be desired!) and Coimbra which used to be the capital of Portugal and is home to one of the oldest (and highest) universities in Europe.

As soon as the forecast eased we headed for Lisbon stopping only to anchor overnight off Peniche and took Cormac McHenry’s advice to stay in the excellent marina at Cascais which is well connected by train to the city and saved us a day’s sailing time going in and then having to come back out. Cascais in itself is worth a visit with very pleasant development of restaurants, bars and shops around the marina and a very convenient overhead walkway into the old town. The train into the centre of Lisbon runs every 30 minutes and costs 3€return which is very good value and allowed us to spend a day enjoying the city sights.

Becoming increasingly conscious of time pressure to get to Seville by September 5 we had to compromise on smelling the roses and departed Cascais after just a short whiff of Lisbon to sail the 120 miles to Lagos in the Algarve with only a brief overnight stop to anchor off Sines, the last harbour before rounding Cabo St Vincent.

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Finally as we turned the corner the strong Northerly Portuguese trades eased, the swell settled and the temperature went up a good 10 degrees. In Lagos marina we refilled with water, fuel and provisions for the final leg of our trip east to Seville. The following day was windless and such a scorcher that we decided to motor over to the beautiful sandy



beach off the entrance to Alvor lagoon and go swimming and picnicking for the day. This was extremely pleasant but meant we shot our deadline to get to Seville under sail and instead decided to make for Ayamonte on the Guadiana River and leave *Gwili 3* there while we continued on by train and bus. With the new plan made we headed the next day for the lagoon at Faro and with some difficulty made our way up the Olhao canal only to find the marina

totally full and so had to find our way back down the narrow channel and anchor for the night off Isla da Culatra at Ponte Cais. It looked such a charming little place that we had to take the dinghy and go ashore and what a contrast it proved to be from the massive tourist developments all along the Algarve. This was the Portuguese equivalent of Tory Island (even the inhabitants were equally unintelligible.) No roads no cars beautiful!



The Guadiana River marks the border between Portugal and Spain. On the Portuguese side just inside the entrance is Vila Real de San Antonio and a little further up stream on the opposite side is the Spanish town of Ayamonte. Both have good marinas and both are worth visiting. We opted to leave the boat in Ayamonte primarily because we could get a bus from there to Seville and it was less tidal than the marina in Vila Real. With our berthing arrangements completed and a day to

kill before departing for Ireland we opted to do one final bit of exploration and took the flood tide up the Guadiana river where we found the towns of Alcoutim (Portugal) and Sanlucar (Spanish). The passage is unmarked but reasonably straight forward with adequate clearance under the huge suspension bridge and most depth to be found on the outside of the river bends.

There are pontoons at both villages and a one Euro ferry ride will take you on the international crossing from Spain to Portugal! We tied up on the Alcoutim pontoon since

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there was more space there and the following morning were awakened by the marinero to collect his €7.50 berthing fee and ask us to move before 11.00AM since they were expecting “a cruise liner”. We duly moved and then took the ferry across to Sanlucar to have a nosy round and were just sitting down to morning coffee when the cruise liner appeared, dropped anchor in midstream and then fell back onto our earlier berth in Alcotim where they made fast the stern and a stream of tourists disembarked. This persuaded us that it was time to go and bidding farewell to Alcotim and Sanlucar and headed back down river to our berth in Ayamonte.

A few hours to tidy up and then our last inexpensive meal ashore before an early night so that we could rise early and catch the bus to Seville and from there by Ryanair to Dublin. Two months since we set off from Fahan but in truth it seemed like two weeks. I guess that’s the nature of smelling roses.

The month passed quickly and the start of October saw us once more back on Gwili and heading back to the west from Ayamonte to the Algarve in glorious weather to join up with Santa Faustina and crew in Lagos for a few days to help them celebrate their safe arrival in Portugal for the winter. Lagos also saw the arrival of Sean and Sofia again for the final leg of the trip to Madeira and Ultimately La Gomera. The craic was ninety in Lagos and it was great to see all the lads together again but frankly if it had extended beyond the few days we would have been in need of a liver transplant!

So on the morning of Tuesday 9th October we bade an emotional farewell to the Santa Faustiniens and set sail for Porto Santa approximately 420 miles SW of Lagos in almost perfect conditions of F4 from the North. It was great to dry out from the excesses of Lagos and the four of us (Paddy, Sean Sofia and myself) settled back into our four hourly watches. Crossing the shipping separation zones out from Cabo St Vincent in the pitch dark was interesting and we were happy with the assistance of our newly installed radar to avoid any major collisions arising out of several close encounters with some very large vessels. We finally plucked up the courage to fly our spinnaker (which hadn’t seen the light of day for several years) in the daytime and at night reverted to full main with a poled out genoa which allowed us to average over 6 knots for the journey.



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Porto Santo is the smaller of the Madeira Islands but absolutely gorgeous with 12 miles of glorious yellow sandy beach.



Christopher Columbus lived here for a couple of years with one of his many lady friends and house is now a museum. We tied up in the marina and found to our initial delight that the one and only harbour bar/restaurant was showing the England v France rugby semi final on account of it being owned by a Romanian rugby fanatic. Our delight was short-lived when we were joined by the very noisy crew of tall ship "Pelican of London" and as it became clear that the

result was going in a certain direction we cleared out and left them to it!

From Porto Santo it is a relatively short sail of about 40 miles across to the thriving city of Funchal the capital of Madeira where we were fortunate to have our own shipping agent in the guise of Tom Gallagher to make arrangements in the extremely crowded city marina for a berth for two nights. Madeira is a major tourist resort and destination for cruise liners and in the two days we spent there six ships came and went with thousands of extremely large passengers being disgorged daily. For us the highlight of our visit was a trip to the summit by cable car and then to come back down by traditional wicker toboggan guided at considerable speed by two gentlemen in straw hats and



goatskin boots. It was similar to sleighing but without the snow!!

We had to vacate our Funchal berth after two nights on account of Transat racers due to finish a leg of round-the world and so we took ourselves further west to the brand new marina of Calheta. Very nice facilities reasonably priced and also had the advantage of a Pingo Doce supermarket which we took advantage of to provision for the final leg of our trip from Madeira to La Gomera.

The forecast was very light winds for the first day then increasing to F4-5 north-easterly so we resigned ourselves to motoring for nearly twenty hours until the wind came up after which the sailing was perfect under spinnaker all the way to La Gomera. As we now had a crew of five with Tom having decided to join us for the last leg we modified the watch system to 3 hours on and 4 ½ off which worked very well.

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Two days later as dawn broke we sighted El Teide and witnessed a truly magnificent sunrise over the peak. San Sebastian the capital of La Gomera was barely ten miles away and at 10.00AM we happily entered the marina to our waiting berth where we tied up, did a minimal clean-up and retired to the nearest bar to enjoy breakfast washed down with a bottle of champagne generously provided by Tom to celebrate the safe completion of our three month cruise from Fahan to San Sebastian. A wonderful experience of a lifetime and looking forward to the next already!



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