

Boys Charter In Brittany

Photos:
Rick Buettner

Left: Patrick, Andrew and the author scour the horizon for a suitable lunch stop. **Far right:** Sunset from Ile de Houat. **Inset:** A friendly welcome at Crouesty, one of the biggest marinas in Brittany. **Below:** Port Haliguen entrance on the tip of the Quiberon peninsular.

The harbour entrance was obvious from a distance, despite a hundred or so dinghies doing their level best to obscure it. The constant stream of cruising yachts pouring out gave it away.

We picked our way in and glided alongside the relatively empty visitors' pontoon. The last time I was here we were rafted three deep, but then that was mid-August. Now, at the end of September, there were few visitors, although the marina buzzed with local activity. We checked into the marina office (one night's mooring was a very reasonable €20 including electricity) and headed for the Bar du Midi, beside the old harbour. Fortunately there had been little



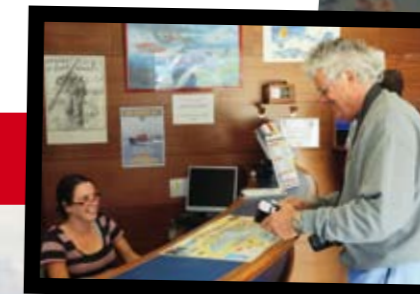
an excellent pizza at the top of the main street.

The marina is extremely sheltered, so we had a sound night's sleep with no noise from nearby bars or discos to disturb us. Breakfast was minimalist, as is typical in France, and we were soon on our way to visit Belle Ile, some 10 miles south as the crow flies. As the yachts sails, however, it was more like 20 miles, because you have to negotiate your way through the tricky Passage de Teignouse, not unlike the Needles Channel in the western Solent.

UNDER SAIL

We had a good stiff breeze, so sailing was the order of the day, although this meant beating across a relatively narrow channel, surrounded by rather ominous looking black, jagged rocks. It was fun, though, and *Knockando* behaved impeccably in the conditions. We were originally heading

at HW±1hr, between 0600 and 2200. As we arrived and motored gently into the inner harbour, the lock gates opened and without even thinking we motored straight through. No sooner had we had a brief recce and turned around, the lock gates were firmly closed – for the night. So this was to be our night stop whether we liked it or not. We berthed *Knockando* in the only remaining quayside spot and took a short walk into town, despite the grey drizzle that had worked its way down my collar. The town is very much a small, working fishing port, but one that clearly becomes a popular tourist destination in the summer. It has just about everything a visiting



Duncan Kent and friends leave their wives behind for a week aboard an alloy-hulled, lifting-keel Ovni 385 – and discover an easy way of exploring the Golfe de Morbihan.

Our charter was to start from the delightful riverside port of La Trinité-sur-mer, in South Brittany, not far from the notorious Golfe du Morbihan. We chose to drive, because the four of us wanted to visit La Rochelle's outdoor boat show, Le Grand Pavois, to compare it with Southampton's equivalent that had taken place the week before. Impressed by the well organised, bustling show (the French offer a fascinating range of sailing boats that you never even catch a glimpse of in the UK), we set off for the charter base in the early evening. The easy drive back up to La Trinité took only a few hours and was punctuated with a first class meal at the motorway service station.

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

La Trinité is a wonderful little town that has changed little in the last century or so. Oyster farming still thrives along the shallow edges of the river, leaving a narrow, winding channel for boat users to negotiate their passage into the busy riverside marina. Strong tides also add to the fun of trying to squeeze 50ft yachts between pontoons that were obviously designed for considerably smaller craft, but it all gives the locals, who regularly promenade along the town quay around the time most charter yachts arrive, something to giggle and gasp about.

This was to be a rare 'boys only' trip for me and my crew, Andrew, Patrick and Rick. We are all accomplished yachtsmen, so I felt a little more relaxed than the

last time I sailed in these waters, with just my wife, who, though an accomplished yachtswoman, is a little petite for manhandling our hefty Nich 35 in tight quarters. We arrived late in the evening and, despite arranging for the keys to be left in the anchor locker, found the boat open for us. Unfortunately, we also discovered that there was only enough bedding for three of us, despite informing the charter operator, Spi Bretagne, well in advance that we were four and one would be sleeping in the saloon. Short straw drawing Rick, *Sailing Today's* photographer, bravely volunteered to sleep under the spinnaker with his fleece as a pillow.

The following morning we walked along to the office to complete the paperwork, where we were informed that most

customers brought their own bedding and that normally, outside the months of July and August, there was a charge for bedding. We persuaded them that if they wanted to encourage more customers from the UK, inclusive bedding would be a must. Furthermore, that Brits prefer pillows to be a tad larger than a ladies handkerchief.

Still, they were very friendly and helpful and we soon had the boat briefing sorted. More importantly, the base staff told us that, should we be interested in watching England play Samoa in the rugby world cup that afternoon, where the nearest bar with TV was likely to be.

After a visit to the supermarket 200m away and a quick stop at the fish market for a few dozen local oysters, we familiarised



ourselves with the vagaries of our lifting keel Ovni 385 before setting off across Quiberon Bay for the smart marina of Port Haliguen, on the southeastern tip of the Quiberon peninsular – the large 'leg' of land that offers excellent protection to the bay and creates a 'Solent-like' sailing area much frequented by local sailing boats of all sizes.

Haliguen marina is very large, with two distinctly separate basins and numerous visitors' berths alongside a long pontoon immediately to starboard after negotiating the narrow entrance.

wind on the 1½ hour crossing from La Trinité, so we didn't feel too guilty about wasting two hours of sailing time sitting in the bar and watching the rugby.

There are several bars and restaurants around the marina, many of which provide good sustenance, but wherever you choose to go it's a reasonably long hike from the visitors' pontoon. Provisions can be bought in the town, a mile or so from the pontoon, but there are no large supermarkets within walking distance. After the game, we wandered up the hill and took in

for the island's second port, Sauzon, but with a strong westerly blowing, together with an east-going tide, we settled for the island's capital, Le Palais. We were a little unsure of what we'd find in the harbour, though. According to the pilot book you could take up a mooring in the outer harbour, but it's also the island's only ferry port and the ferry dock was right beside these buoys. Further inside the town's harbour it dries at LW±1hr, but it wasn't clear where or even if one could moor in the wet basin, inside the lock, which incidentally opens only

yachtsman might need, including a chandler and car and bike hire, along with a good choice of restaurants – particularly if you're a seafood fan.

NOISY NIGHTS

Unfortunately, the 'in place' for early hours drinking turned out to be the bar right beside our mooring, Les Matelots, so our sleep was disturbed by regular screams and shouts from inside and outside the bar. Thankfully it was all over by 0200 when the last of the revellers relieved himself into the harbour and

ON THE WATER

GETTING THERE

It takes around 2½ hours to drive down to La Trinité from St Malo and 3½ hours from Cherbourg or Caen. If you prefer you can fly to Rennes or Nantes in the summer months, but neither is near enough for an easy public transport connection. There is a train to Vannes, but you'll still need a cab for the last 20 miles or so, so driving is often the more sensible option. You can leave the car in the boatyard car park opposite Spi Bretagne's office, but there is no security, so don't leave anything valuable on show.

Spi also has a base in L'Orient, still in S Brittany, but 30M or so further west, which

is not quite so convenient for discovering the Morbihan, but better for Les Iles Glénans.

COST AND BOOKING

The UK agent for Spi Bretagne is Nautilus Yachting, which offers charters worldwide through a selection of operators.

Spi offers bareboat or skippered charters from several bases in Brittany and southern France and has a good selection of 140 modern boats up to 50ft in length.

Our 6-8 berth Ovni 385 cost £1,250 per week in the first week of October.

Contact: Nautilus Yachting
Tel 01732 867445 **Website** www.nautilus-yachting.com

THE AREA

Southern Brittany is a truly beautiful part of France and has an abundance of fascinating islands, bays, inlets and rivers to explore. Anchorages are plentiful, especially around the island shores, but care has to be taken around the rocky approaches and you will need to be aware of the tidal state at all times.

The locals are friendly, helpful and respectful of both the sea and sailors, so we found ourselves welcomed wherever we went. In July and August things

get pretty hectic and you'll be pushed to find a spot to anchor if you leave it too late in the day. Remember, also, that the French are fairly rigid about their eating times, so don't leave it later than 2000 to find a restaurant table and lunch is invariably 1200-1400. Temperatures 12-22°C at night and 18-38°C during the day.



SOUTH BRITTANY

THE BOAT AND OPERATOR

Our boat, an aluminium Ovni 385, is one of around 20 or so Spi Bretagne boats based at La Trinité. Apart from

the lack of bedding, which to be fair was mentioned in the details, our only other slight grouse was the lack of an English translation to the boat instruction manuals. Stupidly, I had left

my book of French boaty bit descriptions at home, but using a combination of the base manager's pidgin English and my best Franglais, we worked most of it out without too

much difficulty.

La Trinité-sur-mer itself is a quaint little town, with scenic coastal walks, good shops for provisioning and trinket buying, and numerous excellent restaurants.



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www.nautilus-yachting.com

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In Brittany

LOG

TOTAL DISTANCE 56.5M

- ◆ 22/9 La Trinité – Port Haliguen (6.3M)
- ◆ 23/9 Haliguen – Le Palais/Belle Isle (20.2M)
- ◆ 24/9 Le Palais – Ile Houat (8.1M)
- ◆ 25/9 Ile Houat – Port Crouesty (12.7M)
- ◆ 27/6 Crouesty – La Trinité (9.2M)

CHARTS

TOTAL DISTANCE 56.5M

- ◆ Admiralty 2353, 2357, 2358, SC5700
- ◆ Imray C39
- ◆ SHOM 7033, 7034, 6992
- ◆ Navicarte 545, 546



for the best holding, but in the first week of October we were one of only two, so we could poote about unhindered and find the best spot for the night.

With the anchor well dug in and enough chain out for a restful night, we settled down to an entrée of local oysters, washed down with a glass of perfectly chilled Chablis. Decadent though this might seem, the No1 local oysters cost us 50p each and the wine was at French supermarket prices,

so it was cheaper than the average British takeaway pizza and pint of lager. Main course was a healthy fish pasta, after which we settled down to stargazing in the cockpit, well fleeced up against the chilly offshore breeze mind you.

We slept like babies that night, rocked to our slumbers by a gentle, almost unnoticeable swell and the gentle slapping of tiny wavelets tapping harmlessly on the hull.

The disadvantage of so few boats around was apparent in the morning when we were interrogated, albeit extremely politely, by smiling customs officers. The paperwork was no problem, however, and they were soon on their way wishing us a

cheery *bonne journée* as they left.

After a brief bowl of muesli and fruit (honest – no bacon in sight), we set off back across the bay towards the large, modern harbour at Crouesty, enjoying a cracking, full canvas reach in the F4 nor'westerly. Only the persistent drizzle marred the fantastic sail as we wove our way between the unfamiliar marks of this wonderful cruising ground.

SLIDING IN

After a good day's sailing we entered the crowded port of Crouesty and, because we were experiencing the highest tidal range of the year, entering at nearly LW wouldn't have been thinkable had it not been for the lifting keel. As it was, we needed a foot or so off our draught, because the echo sounder registered 0.0m just as we entered the narrowest part of the channel. At least we were on a slack tide, however, which allowed us to moor without any embarrassing moments. Apparently the visitors pontoons in Crouesty can be a tad playful mid-tide, particularly at springs.

At this point the wind was rising and several squalls drove us below for a hot brew. Glad to be tied up in the worsening conditions, our minds turned to

PILOT BOOKS

RCC Pilotage Foundation
North Biscay by Mike and Gill Barron £35 and **Secret Anchorages of Brittany** by Peter Cumberlidge £25 – both published by Imray.

A 10% discount is available to our readers. Just call Imray on 01480 462114 and quote *Sailing Today* (www.imray.com)

where we should eat that night. Although the large harbour is surrounded by shops and restaurants, no more than a third of these were still open at this time of the year. We chose one of the cosiest and had a tasty meal, though not particularly of the gourmet variety.

The following morning the wind had far from abated and this, along with the huge tides, had us questioning the sense of entering the infamous Golfe de Morbihan – renowned for tidal streams of up to 7kn at the entrance. At times of strong southerly winds and a full ebb, a disturbing wall of white water can build up at the entrance. Entering just before HW slack tide is possibly the best choice

– any earlier and you'll be pushed through the long series of whirlpools at a frightening pace, unable to turn the boat easily. Before attempting to enter you should study the lie of the waters and make a list that you can keep alongside the helm of important marks along your route.

With the wind still blowing 25kn we decided to walk around to Port Navalo, a small harbour right beside the entrance to the gulf, partly for the exercise and partly to check on the conditions. It's a good walk, taking some 40 minutes, but most of it is along the water's edge once you circumnavigate the huge marina. If you have the dinghy launched, you can knock at least 15 minutes off this time by simply rowing across the marina from the visitors' pontoon.

Standing on the quay overlooking the swirling entrance channel a thought occurred to me as I watched the tripper boat pull away from the quay and enter the maelstrom. As the tide times were all wrong for entering and we only had one more night of our holiday left, taking the tripper boat seemed like a sensible way to explore the Morbihan. It would take us right around the Gulf, stopping at Ile aux Moines for lunch and returning us to Navalo

Above, left and right: Port Haliguen harbour, a typical little Breton fishing village that offers shelter from the notorious Cote Sauvage or savage coast and looks out over Quiberon Bay, described by the locals, at least, as one of the most beautiful bays in the world. Above, centre: this stone-built town house on a cobbled street leading to the market square, dates back to the 17th Century and is one of Auray's many fascinating buildings.

at 1600. Furthermore, it would give us a higher and more stable platform for taking photographs. The crew took little persuading and we were soon hunkering down behind the deckhouse of the vedette, trying to keep out of the wind and nipping out between rainstorms to shoot a few photos of the whirlpools as the skipper kept the throttles at maximum revs.

FAST AND FURIOUS

I had visited the Morbihan previously in my own boat and well remember entering the Gulf for the first time. My wife, Helen, and I had studied the pilot books and large scale charts meticulously before going for it, but even then it was pretty unnerving as we flew in under reduced sail at 12kn+, ticking off the marks from our crib sheet along the way. The tidal effect does reduce somewhat once you're well inside, but there are still a large number of narrow channels where the stream runs at an alarming rate, so be prepared for it – especially when picking up a mooring buoy or choosing a place to anchor.

Our vedette trip was well worth

the effort and for journalistic purposes it scored well, enabling us to see most of the Gulf from an elevated position. We also had a couple of hours to wander over Ile aux Moines, the largest inhabited island in the Gulf and there was a good choice of restaurants and cafes in the small town, just a mile or so uphill from the harbour.

That night we walked back to the marina and saw a few brave fishermen being spat out of the entrance on the outgoing tide, occasionally disappearing beneath breaking waves in the most disturbed areas. Local knowledge is definitely a help around these parts, but don't be put off – once you're in and tucked behind one of the many little islets, it is a stunning destination.

Next day the wind had settled back to a steady F4 and we set off early to make the most of our last day. Reaching across the bay was exhilarating and it was sad to have to be returning so soon, but we had to be back in Cherbourg the following afternoon, so we needed to hand the boat back and check out, ready for a relatively early start. ■