

## ***Freebird* Summer Cruise, 2009**

After the poor summers of the last two years, we decided to give up our berth at Sparkes marina on Hayling Island, and spend most of the summer cruising on our sailing boat, *Freebird*. *Freebird* is a Dufour Classic 32 boat which we have sailed in the Solent and south coast for 6 years, with two cross channel trips. She is fitted with Raymarine instruments and chart plotter with AIS, and we make use of the Seatalk interface between the instruments for passage planning and navigation.

We wanted to spend time this year in the West Country, the Channel Islands, and the Brittany coast, and planned to return in early September with a short return home in mid-July. We didn't want to "waste" time returning home in September, with all the risks of being delayed by the normal bad weather, so we planned to find a suitable boatyard to leave *Freebird* over the winter, wherever we finished up in France. We didn't have a more detailed itinerary, but "planned" to follow our noses and stop for a while wherever we liked a place. Derek is semi-retired but planned to stay in touch with project work using his laptop and wifi – this turned out to be more successful than expected.



So at 0610 on 1 June we set off on our summer cruise, and we were gifted with a glorious F3-4 on the beam; glorious sailing weather. By 0930 it had died to nothing, and we motor sailed – which was to become a feature of the summer. However we caught the tides right, motored past our initial target of Yarmouth and finished the day at Weymouth. Two days later we rounded Portland Bill in a flat calm (race... what race; another feature of the summer. We have rounded

them all in calm conditions.) and spent the next 3 weeks cruising the west country, getting as far west as Helford River. This is beautiful cruising country, and we were treated to good summer weather apart from the lack of wind. Particular highlights were Newton Ferrers because it is beautiful, and our arrival at Helford River on a sunny Friday evening with all the local junior dinghy fleets on the water. Another highlight was the pub quiz at the Ferry Boat Inn in Dittisham where the question master arbitrarily awards some, lots or negative marks depending on his opinion of the question – beware his taste in music; it is possible to get a negative total in the quiz even if you get most of the questions right .... as we found out.

We returned to Salcombe for our channel crossing to St Peter Port in Guernsey, but had to wait for 3 days for the weather to improve. Despite this, we had an uncomfortable 15 hour crossing in lumpy seas, with the last 4 hours in breaking seas. Veronica decided against cooking a hot meal for dinner, and most of the navigation was done from the cockpit. We were given a real treat as we approached Guernsey off Les Hanois rocks when a school of 15-20 dolphins played around the boat for over 20 minutes. They "body surfed" down the breakers, often in pairs, and then dived

under the bow. We had them surfing our bow wave and jumping clear of the water, and all the time we could hear them chattering to each other. Magic !

We spent nearly 2 weeks in the Channel Islands, loved Guernsey (apart from the incessant boy racers on the sea front road) and had a great time there. Also bumped into several crews from Hayling, which was surprising but sociable. We liked St Helier on Jersey much less; the waterfront is a great opportunity wasted and has been ravaged by developers; very industrial and unfriendly. Outside St Helier was much more pleasant, but we failed to see any sign of Bergerac.

We crossed to St Malo for our entry to France and had an interesting few days in the marina, which is just across the road from the walled city. This was an enjoyable and relaxed stay, apart from one sleepless night courtesy of a visiting race fleet; they did apologise handsomely following our 3am email to their commodore. Derek abandoned ship for one night to return to England for a business meeting, then we went through the Rance barrage to a small marina at Plouer who allowed us to leave the boat for 2 weeks (it turned into three) while we returned home by ferry. Liliane, the lady harbour master, has acquired a superb reputation with anyone who has stayed at Plouer, and we can understand why. Our return home on an almost empty ferry was very relaxing, unlike our return on a busy night crossing with no available cabins three week's later. BUT, it was great to get back on *Freebird* for the rest of the summer.

We had one enforced crew change when Mabel died between Guernsey and Jersey. Mabel was our ST2000+ autopilot and toiled under the load (Mabel really wasn't able and always seem to struggle in anything more than a flat calm). She has been replaced by Rod (the name is obvious if you see him) who is the business end of a SPX-5 autopilot, handles the job manfully and steers a mean straight line. We brought the system back with us from England and fitted it successfully ourselves.



We went further up the Rance but could not go as far as Dinan because our keel is too deep. However, we cycled to Dinan on our little folding bikes ... much to the amusement of the locals who couldn't believe adults could ride on anything so silly, outside of a circus. Later along the coast, we went inland on the Trieux river to a sleepy town called Pontrioux, famous for its lavoirs - old washing places by the river, now decorated with flowers. We

risked low water in the river as both the rocks *Esperance* and *Guarantie* were uncovered (local lore; if *Guarantie* is covered, you are sure of 3m depth upriver, if *Esperance* is covered then you can only hope for 3m).

We slowly made our way west along the very rocky N.Brittany coast and finally reached L'Aberwrac'h after 2 weeks. We had heard stories of boats waiting weeks for suitable conditions to get through the Chenal de Four – but we had an eerily calm ride through, and into Camaret. At last, we were going south again, and the sun appeared on schedule. Camaret had free concerts and parades the next evening;

French rock (a contradiction in terms), sea shanties, a Breton pipe band (where both fighting cats appeared to lose) and very deep, dark jazz - a good evening. We were tempted to linger in Douarnenez Bay, but perfect weather and tides for the Raz de Sein (another unpredictable and potentially nasty race) encouraged us to sail on; we went through the Raz in a flat, oily calm (5 minutes ahead of the passage plan) and then spent a few very pleasant days in Audierne – a small marina in the centre of the town.



We delighted in Loctudy, a small seaside resort with a big fishing fleet and took advantage of the poissoneries on the quayside - all of 50m from the fishing fleet. However the “fresh seafood” poissonerie in Loctudy was a massive disappointment. The langoustines were excellent, but the long-anticipated lobster was inedible and had to be refunded before we left the next day.

We sailed across to the Iles de Glenan in a horrible rolling Atlantic swell, being well-beaten on the water by a solo windsurfer complete with backpack and another bag on his board. We were lucky to pick up a visitors buoy, which seemed to be packed incredibly close together, and we sat back and watched the world go by. Thanks to the very large spring tide, the beach between Baranec and St Nicholas disappeared into a bikini sized triangle and we had to endure the swell again for a short time.

Derek was woken early the next morning by the collector of mooring fees banging on the side of the boat. After waiting for the wind to drop and the tide to rise, we had a beautiful sail for the whole passage ... of 10nm and arrived in Concarneau, where the marina is right under the walls of the old city - a fairytale setting. It is also in the centre of the city and we could revert to our favourite leisure occupation – watching the world go by. We were joined for a day’s sail in a gentle, warm breeze by Keith (our son) and friend Adrian who had come over by motorbike. We tried not to lose Keith as the wind picked up after he dived overboard for a swim.

We had heard good accounts of Port Louis. Small, friendly, interesting. The omens were good as we left Concarneau under sail, but as we got closer the wind dropped and we had 3 successive hours with 3 hours to go to the final waypoint as our speed diminished. Eventually patience wore thin and we motored the last miles and into the River Blavet. Dodging the ferries, we motored past the citadel and found the entrance to Port Louis .... with a big red sign “closed for repair” (also in French). We later found it had been closed for the season for major renovation; perhaps we will be lucky the next time. A quick change of plan and we motored past the massive U-boat pens and the pride of the French navy (circa 1930) moored as a breakwater, and into Lorient port de plaisance. We berthed in the tidal marina below the lock into the inner port, and found it a really friendly port; and right in the centre of the city (back to people watching again). It is a pity that one of our memories will be of having our ensign stolen (we think as a souvenir); the only thing we have ever lost (so far). It took visits to 3 chandlers to find an under-sized replacement. However, we visited 8 chandlers in 5 ports before we found the local SHOM chart available for sale !!!

We had camped many years ago near Carnac, and a good day's sailing took us to the sailing centre of La Trinite. Of course, we took the tourist train to the stones of Carnac, but we hardly recognised the area (not surprising from 30 years ago). Over the weekend we watched a regatta of local gaff-rigged centre-plate dinghies, with multi-coloured sails. The courses were all within the harbour area amongst the moorings. With some downwind starts, normal harbour traffic and light winds the entertainment value was very high and it all took place within easy viewing from the quayside. Excellent !! On the other side of the breakwater there was an exhibition in memory of local sailor Loic Caradel, who was lost in the Route de Rhum in 1986, and also a wonderful collection of huge multi-hulls in the water. And the sun shone.



We had been talking with other sailors about possibilities for leaving *Freebird* over the winter, and had decided the River Vilaine would probably be suitable; sheltered, attractive, reasonable travel connections. We stopped overnight at Port Crouesty, which has grown enormously since a nearby family holiday some 20 years ago, and headed for the contact sport known as the Arzal lock, into the Vilaine. We have watched this sport from the dockside and remembered it as related to the Eton wall game but played with boats. On the downstream side, all the boats assemble at the entrance to the lock, but the road bridge shuts off half the lock until the bridge opens. Then the mass of boats is moved forward under the orchestration of a very laid back lock master. We were lucky and were tied up to a very substantial French boat, but others were less fortunate. However, apart from one over-stressed French motor launch owner, no-one lost their paintwork or their cool.

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The wind picked up as we sailed under 50% genny up river, and we needed all the practice of the last months to raft gently alongside a similar sized (unoccupied) yacht on the end of a pontoon at La Roche Bernard. As the wind picked up, we doubted the security of the inner boat's mooring, and backed up their warps with two of our own. Just as well, as it blew F6-7 overnight. Next day, we found that nearly all the visitor's berths were occupied by long stay boats, and if we wanted to leave our precarious raft, we needed to watch for the one boat that was known to be leaving after their French lunch. About 3pm the boat suddenly moved; we dropped our moorings (ready prepared) in a gusting F5, and we shot round to successfully win the berth. Sad, isn't it. But we were glad, as the wind gathered strength during the evening.

We then arranged to leave *Freebird* in the water at La Roche Bernard over the winter, and planned to return in late September to winterise her and take our gear home ... by car. Our passage planning for the journey home seemed good, apart from suffering an early start. First stage was the (only) bus to Redon (the local school run leaving at 0630) and we were the only passengers over 15 years. TGV and local train took us to Caen and a very rough channel crossing. Thanks to the early start and a day cabin on

the ferry, we slept until the ferry was in the lee of the Isle of Wight, and then had a leisurely meal. Others did not have such a calm crossing.

We returned to *Freebird* by car in late September and had a week of glorious sailing – a taster for next season we hope. Despite forgetting to set our alarm to French time (again) we passed through the Arzal lock as planned, and enjoyed a sunny sail to the entrance of the Morbihan (“little sea”). I thought that Chicester harbour was a beautiful sailing area, but Morbihan took our breath away. We also had to learn to contend with tidal streams which reach 9 kts



at springs; fortunately we only had to contend with 5-6 kt at neap tides. After picking up a mooring near the entrance for the first night, we sailed up to the port in the centre of Vannes. The city was in the midst of a city-wide art festival, including maritime photographs around the city walls. It was strange to see Sam Davies feted as a local celebrity for her achievements in the Vendee Globe. We sailed back with the ebb tide to pick up “our” mooring near the entrance, and then enjoyed two days gentle, warm sailing to Piriac and then back to our winter berth at La Roche Bernard. Two more hectic days saw *Freebird* winterised and our departure for the afternoon ferry from Ouistreham.

The summer has been far more successful than we dared to hope. We have been in new waters for most of the time and logged very nearly 1 000 nm. We tried to make typical passages of 5-6 hours, a comfortable time, and only made 3 passages of over 10 hours. Surprisingly, we motored or motor-sailed about 75% of the time; not because we prefer to motor, but due to light winds. We hit some wonderful tidal & weather windows, especially through the Portland race, Chanel de Four and the Raz du Sein; we passed through all of them in oily calm conditions. The downside was we skipped some great cruising areas (notably the Bay of Douarnanez) to catch the weather window. We can go back in future years. Highlights on the French coast have been the fairy tale setting of Concarneau, and the magnificent scenery and sailing of the Morbihan.

*Freebird* has carried us through some rough conditions, and we have lots of confidence in her. Derek would like standing headroom in the heads, and Veronica would like to get out of bed at the side .... but despite some wishful thinking at the Southampton boat show we will accept the compromises. What about 2010? We have a berth for the summer at La Roche Bernard and we will use that as our cruising base for this year – there is lots to explore along the South Brittany coast and perhaps we will start by cruising in the Bay of Quiberon and in Morbihan. But part of the fun is planning through the winter, and then seeing what happens when we get back on the water. We had fun this year, and hope we can repeat it next year.

Derek & Veronica Russell

*Freebird*