

A FAMILY SAIL TO THE ISLES OF SCILLY MAY-JUN 2022

By Stuart Keegan in BEIJA FLOR

Having decided to take advantage of the extra bank holiday and the timing of the school half term in May/June, we decided to do an early cruise to the Isles of Scilly in our Conway Ketch 'Beija Flor'. A plan was put together which would see us depart Plymouth on the morning of Saturday 28 May, and then return in time for the kids to be at school on Tuesday 7 June. This would give us up to 10 days away from home and approx. a week in the Scillies. Coincidentally, it also had us out in the Scillies just prior to and overlapping with the WOA SW group cruise.

As the weeks ticked off towards departure date I busied myself with boat jobs – climbing the mast twice to replace the backstay, replacing the exhaust elbow (resulting in a complete heat exchanger off job at a local machine shop), replacing the water pump, converting the V-belt to a serpentine belt, fitted a solar charge controller and double the domestic battery bank. We also watched the weather. With interest at first and then a near obsession as departure day approached. As I'd predicted from the Atlantic synoptic charts, we ended up with light Easterlies, building into approx. 15kts from the N as we approached the islands.

Departing Plymouth at 0130 on Saturday we had light winds. I love being out in the dark, although getting out of bed at 0100 is always slightly difficult and we did very briefly consider postponing for a couple of hours. However, with the Lizard tidal gate to make we got ourselves up and cracked on, remembering to start the RYA Safetrx app before we left so our parents would know we were enroute. Daylight came, the kids woke up and we decided to get the 'kite' (actually a cruising chute) up. Naomi's never flown a spinnaker before, and I don't profess to be an expert, so with some trepidation we went for it. Complete anti-climax. It all went well and that was us cruising along under our jubilee appropriate red, white and blue sail. The dolphins clearly liked it as they joined us off the Lizard and stayed with us for at least an hour playing, showing off and generally being brilliant. After the Lizard the wind hole I'd predicted got us and we were left with a long monotonous motor sail across Mount's bay and out into the Atlantic. Minutes after passing Wolf rock the wind came back in from the North and we were suddenly screaming along at 6kts. Approaching the islands we saw what we believed was a Risso's dolphin. After a quick chat we decided not to head for St Mary's, but to go straight for 'The Cove' at St Agnes. The weather was right for it, and it was going to be a sheltered anchorage. Somewhere off St Mary's I made an attempt to close down the Safetrx trip, but had no phone reception. Approaching St Agnes and passing the Spanish ledges, just before dropping the sails I made another attempt to close down Safetrx. St Agnes was busier than I'd hoped and all of the prime anchoring spots were gone. We managed to find somewhere, albeit slightly closer to the rocks than I wanted and dropped the hook. Total trip time 17 hrs – so an average of almost exactly 5.5kts. Not too bad. After setting the anchor and reviewing the position again, I decided not to go ashore. The plan had been to have a leg stretch, nip to the pub and then get our heads down. Instead I decided that staying aboard until low water (2300hrs) was the seamanlike thing to do, so after supper we got the kids in bed, turned off the VHF, checked the anchor alarm one last time, set an alarm clock for low water and piled into bed.

Woken at 2255hrs by a bright light being shone through the windows and someone shouting at us from the deck of a very big motor boat (I couldn't make out any detail with the light in my eyes), it became apparent that my failure to close down the Safetrx trip had

prompted both sets of parents to receive an alarming text message instructing them to dial 999 and report us as missing. After efforts to raise us on VHF failed, a lifeboat was deployed. I *think* that this must be a relatively regular occurrence as the first place they looked was the cove, where they found us sleeping happily at anchor. I was suitably embarrassed, but of course there is a learning point here for all of us – if using Safetrx and you are unable to close the trip down, call the coastguard on VHF Channel 16. That way they will be able to reassure shore contacts and you won't have a lifeboat launch to find you.

Reassured that we were anchored safely, we went ashore on Sunday for the obligatory walk around Gugh and St Agnes. Culminating in a trip to Troytown farm to get an ice cream and a visit to the Turk's Head for a pint. After another night aboard we weighed anchor on Monday morning and headed for New Grimsby sound to pick up a mooring buoy for a couple of nights.

Monday was spent wandering around Bryher in glorious sunshine. Bryher is somewhere I've not spent any time since I was there on a school trip some 28 years ago (crikey I'm old!), so it was great to go back. We saw loads of seals, found some beautiful beaches and the kids loved the fishing net, buoy and pallet wood adventure play area they found.

Tuesday was Tresco day and a visit to the Abbey gardens beckoned. Always stunning, we were once again blessed with beautiful weather and thoroughly enjoyed our time there. Bought some Scilly Isles gin too. In the afternoon we wandered around the north of the Island, including a visit to both castles.

The only negative comments I'd have about New Grimsby sound is that I've previously found it a bit rollie. Although it wasn't too bad this time. And £30/night for a mooring struck me as a bit steep. With hindsight I'd have anchored and paid nothing (aside from a bit more phys rowing ashore).

Wednesday saw another early start with us moving around to St Helen's pool. Some quick mental maths had us selecting a spot where we'd have a metre under the keel at low water. With light winds and no swell forecast, it was a position I was comfortable with. There was loads of space, so I dropped 30 metres of chain – more than enough – and got the anchor ball up. On dropping the anchor a seal swam by close enough for us to see it's whiskers. After breakfast the paddle board and kayak were deployed and we cut about all of the little tidal islets for a few hours.

Thursday saw us dressing Beija Flor overall – although my measuring was a bit haphazard (had I done it after a beer...?) and so we didn't quite get all of the signal flags on, nor all in exactly the right order. Still, at least we made an effort, unlike most others! Once we'd got Beija Flor dressed, we visiting Tean and St Martins by dinghy, with an obligatory stop at the Seven Stones pub for a refreshing drink whilst the kids found another adventure playground Scillies style that we'd visited last time we were on the Islands. A stroll around the rest of St Martin's followed and a discussion about why we hadn't anchored 'there' (Naomi pointing to Great Ganilly). We'll just have to come back in August when we've more time, we decided. In the evening it was time for the WOA meet ashore on Tean. Great to meet everyone and we look forward to seeing you all out on the water again soon.

Unfortunately Friday looked to be the best time for us to leave as Saturday had quite a strong Easterly forecast. I worked out that a departure at 1000hrs would see us approach the Lizard at slack water with the tide running with us as we rounded the headland. Initially

motor sailing in very light winds, we ended up at 6.3kts SOG with 2 reefs in and a knot of tide against us. Neither uncomfortable or feeling over pressed, I was really pleased with how the old girl picked up her skirts and went for it when she had some wind to fill her sails. Rounding the Lizard and heading in towards the Helford, the wind came onto the nose so the genoa was furled away, the main and mizzen pinned in and the engine did most of the work. We think we saw the same solitary Risso's dolphin as we approached the manacles cardinal – certainly a very similar creature. Notably we'd spent all day dodging pots and some lunatic had even put one about 10m away from the manacles cardinal buoy. We considered anchoring, but knowing an Easterly blow was coming, I elected to pick up a visitors buoy. We could have gone to Falmouth or St Mawes, but we like the Helford so thought a slightly roly day would be a price worth paying. I doubled up the lines anyway, just to be safe.

Saturday was a wet, windy day in Helford. So windy that the water taxi wasn't running and the harbour master was unable to set out in his boat. We braved the tender ride ashore and enjoyed a fantastic lunch in the wonderful yacht club. We also booked a table in the Shipwright's arms for the following evening and sat on the boat for a family film night watching Swallows and Amazons on the ipad.

Sunday was perfect for a walk to Glendurgan, having the kids running free and burning off loads of energy so they'd sleep through the long night sail back to Plymouth. Dinner at the pub over, we were back to the boat and slipped by 1930hrs. I did consider getting the kite up in the light airs, but we settled for a motor sail instead – no need to get cocky just because we had one success with it! Naomi took the helm from 2000hrs for a 2 hour watch and I was back on at 2200hrs. The watch handover brief included how quiet it was (shipping wise), but how many pot buoys Naomi had been swerving. I took the helm and Naomi clipped on and went forward to sit on the foredeck for a better look forward and of the night sky. Minutes later there was a loud thud, boat speed went from 5.7kts to 0.3kts and we started slewing around to port. I dropped the revs back and the engine started vibrating badly until I dropped it into neutral. A quick look over the side confirmed the worst – we had a pot buoy line wrapped around our stern gear. There was no way to clear it from on deck and my plan to don a wetsuit and divers knife and clear it myself didn't seem so clever in the dark with a small but noticeable swell running. We elected instead to call the coastguard and ask for assistance. About 30 minutes later, after the lifeboat had been launched, we broke free and were again sailing, but only able to make about 0.5kts and with little directional control. We therefore gratefully accepted a tow back into Falmouth, although were more than slightly embarrassed with our second lifeboat encounter for the trip. The crew though were utterly charming and very kind to us.

Monday morning found me over the side with a knife – within the calm and sheltered waters of Falmouth harbour – and I had us cleared and good to go within about 10 minutes. I've thought though the whole scenario again, and although it was eventually easy to sort, I maintain that calling for assistance was the right thing to do. Adding a man overboard, in the dark, to an already stricken yacht would not have been sensible. We eventually got going again with the morning tide and averaged 5.9kts all the way back into Plymouth, getting Beija Flor back onto her berth for 1700hrs – time to get the kids home, bathed, fed and ready for bed so they'd be up and ready to face school the next day. I'm reasonably confident that the boat isn't damaged, but will be checking the shaft for true with a dial gauge, checking the engine mounts, and monitoring the cutlass bearing carefully.

An action packed trip and a great adventure – I heard someone say recently that the difference between an ordeal and an adventure is your state of mind. Ours was definitely an adventure, although at points it felt like an ordeal! I also admit that I made a pretty big mistake with not closing down the Safetrx trip on the way out. My reasons for not doing so were clearly that I was distracted by other 'skipper responsibilities' such as the anchoring, looking after crew (family) etc. But reasons, no matter how good, are not an excuse. Hopefully at least one other person will learn from my mistake and will be prevented from doing the same. At least the kids have gone to school full of stories of deserted sandy islands, seals, dolphins, lifeboat rescues and epic adventures.