

It was mid-afternoon in late August when Chris and I set out in my classic, gunter-rigged pocket cruiser *Aricie* from Saint-Briac-sur-Mer. The medium-term forecast was dire. It was unnaturally warm, but it was August and a break of a couple of days had been forecast: long enough for us to get to Erquy from Saint-Cast, just across the bay. Once docked, we could pause and take stock. I had obtained *Aricie* from the young Pierre-Yves de la Rivière, whom I had met by chance on the quay at Saint Malo in the summer of 2002. He was exhibiting the first of a new series of wood epoxy cruisers designed for coastal navigation by a family friend, François Vivier. ‘*Un bateau pour aller aux îles.*’ The by-line was irresistible.

The mooring at Saint-Briac offered 3-5 hours of water. We loaded her up and set off across the bay on a rising tide. After stopping for a swim at the Ile des Hébihans, we found ourselves at Saint Cast in late afternoon. It had begun to rain. It always seemed to rain at Saint Cast. We went ashore for a council of war and got an update on the forecast, as the rain poured down. An improvement was anticipated for the following day, but with a storm behind. The tide was fair for rounding Cap Fréhel in late morning which should see us to Erquy in late afternoon on a rising tide. Perfect, provided the storm held off.

We set off on a nice breeze at around 0830, the furrow following free at around 2-3 knots bearing NNW, past Fort Lelattré, heading for the Cap.

It was only when we were level with Cap Fréhel that the sports plan began to go pear-shaped. The swell was choppy as we entered the Baie de Paimpol, with nothing between us and Plymouth, but why weren't we being carried WSW as the falling tide picked up momentum? Instead we were heading towards England. Had I miscalculated? Yes I had. As the Channel empties, the water in the bays west of Saint-Malo spew out clockwise before flowing towards the Atlantic. We needed to bear south west, following the backward curve of coastline towards the Pointe d'Erquy. I should have known better, having navigated this stretch before.

We were going nowhere. The wind had veered to the west and dropped. *Aricie* was bucking in the chop and Chris was getting seasick. Oh dear. Should we turn round? We could bumble back under motor to Saint-Cast against the tide, a tough call given the swell around the Cap, or we could press on into the wind. Chris was stoic and left the decision to me. I elected to carry on, but in the direction of a sheltered mooring at the Ilôt Saint-Michel, where we could overnight. We dropped the sail and opened the throttle.

The Ilôt Saint-Michel is a beautiful place with an atmosphere reminiscent of North Cornwall. It is a rocky islet topped by a chapel at the end of a causeway only exposed at low tide. The rocky promontory offers minimal protection from strong westerly winds, but shelter to allow for a seasonal anchorage.

As we snuggled down for the night in our little cabin, there were tell-tale signs of what was to come. The wind started to blow in that sharp insistent way which heralds bad news. Sleep did not come easily. We had been bumped off our in-shore buoy by returning fishermen and felt exposed. Checking the mooring after midnight was disturbing. The clouds were racing by darkly overhead, the rigging was beginning to hum and the sea looked rough. Fortunately Chris was asleep. There was little to do but wait for the morning. When dawn eventually came, we were under no illusions as to where things stood. A gale was raging from the North, the spray was whipping off the crests of the white horses out to sea. The storm had well and truly broken and was getting worse by the second. Two things were clear: Erquy was out and we had to move sharpish. Where to? The bay has a tiny harbour, which we had only spotted the previous evening. But this meant heading into the bay, broadside on to the waves, to avoid the rocky outcrop. Chris was worried about the rocks. Thank God for the outboard, the self drainer and the freeboard. It only remained to see how *Aricie* would handle a bit of surfing. Heart in mouth, I cast off.

*Aricie* handled magnificently, lurching in the fierce gusts of spume attacking us on port side as we broke out into open water. As soon as we were clear of the rocks I took her off the wind. As the rising gale shifted astern we were lifted onto the crest of the rollers and carried headlong towards the beach. Stay cool. Thoughts of the Kon Tiki flashed across my mind. After barely one minute the jetty appeared to starboard. Tentatively I eased *Aricie* round and suddenly we were into calmer waters. The wind rushed by in the bay behind, the rain drove into our faces in intermittent gusts but we were free of danger. It only remained to pick up a free buoy out of range of other boats. I stripped off and jumped overboard. Taking both anchors, I dragged the stern as far as possible towards the east-facing beach. We did our best to restore order, locked up and waded ashore with as much gear as possible. It was two rain soaked hours before a taxi arrived and two days before I was able to sail *Aricie* back. In the meantime, campsites had been cleared all along the North Brittany coast, trees up-rooted and roads flooded in one of the worst storms of the year. *Aricie* had passed the test.

# CAUGHT OUT

Breton seas and an untimely storm make for a testing passage in a Vivier pocket cruiser

WORDS ROBERT CRAWSHAW PHOTO CHRISTOPHE HUCHET



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