

Serafina of Maldon

2008 Journey Log

Saturday 24th May 2008

50 47'.26N 001 24'.594W

1115hrs saw us finally depart our berth at Hamble Point Marina on the first leg of journey.

Wind was blowing 35 + knots and as we sailed out into the Solent there was a fair amount of chaos and carnage amongst the racing fleets.

Our destination today was the Beaulieu River (an epic journey of several miles!) where we met up with a number of others for a Najad Rally and dinner.

We sailed under just our Stay sail and were still making 8 knots which surprised several other makes of boat as we flew along!

We then enjoyed a great evening (though the food was dreadful) and it all ended with several rather emotional goodbyes.

Sunday 25th May 2008

50:45.385N 001:31.83W

Various conflicting weather forecasts were discussed in the morning and many plans were changed.

In our case we decided against a trip of 112 miles in possible Force 8 gales, even though the wind would be behind us and decided to have a gentle run up to Lymington which (apart from the shopping opportunities) was a good location to start from whenever the wind died down.

In the event the Solent enjoyed a lovely sunny afternoon and evening. However Pink Cloud (A Najad 570) set off to Dartmouth and whilst most of their trip was in gentle conditions they finally ran into the bad weather as they neared their destination. Clearly if we had gone too we would have been well behind them and would have had to endure a very difficult trip on to Plymouth which is our intended destination.

In the evening we spotted David & Stevie Prior (They have recently sold their Najad and are enjoying a bit of boat free life!) out for stroll along the marina pontoons and so we joined up and went for a meal followed by coffee in their brand new house.

Monday and Tuesday 26/27th May. Plymouth

50:21.867N 004:09.99W

We woke up on Monday to find Force 7 and 8 gales and very heavy rain. However the forecasts indicated that this should pass through by midday and that the weather would be fine for our next leg to Plymouth.

So at 2.15pm Monday we set out and sailed out through the Needles and clear of the Solent for what should be a very long time.

The sail down to Plymouth was largely uneventful although it did rain very hard through the night and there was still quite a large sea running from the earlier storms. Sarah's planned timings proved perfect again and we tied up in Mayflower Marina in Plymouth at 06.30am on Tuesday 27th May.

This is the venue for the start of the Rally Portugal and we found several of the other boats already here. So after an all too brief nap, we soon got chatting to various of the owners and trying to remember names, faces and boats!

Rally Portugal Preparation

Saturday afternoon and finally we are just about ready for the race start tomorrow at 10 am. We have spent the last few days at Mayflower Marina in Plymouth sorting out the last bits and pieces and meeting the other crews. We also have had a (successful) safety inspection by the Rally Portugal organisers (World Cruising).

There are 16 boats on this year's trip and the sizes range from 38ft to 54ft, with us midway at 46ft, however we appear to be the only 2 person crew with most boats taking 4 crew and some of the bigger boats swarming with hands! We had our first Rally 'event' last night and there is no doubt that the next three weeks are going to be great fun, but right now I think that we are all just a little apprehensive about the Biscay crossing. Once we have that behind us we can afford to relax a bit more. (Well a lot more in our case!)

The weather over the past few days has been very quiet and we may well have a bit of drifting match at the race start, but the weather files on the internet are showing some better winds coming in across the Atlantic around day 2 of the trip which should liven things up a bit.

We will try to update this log each day of the crossing so that you can plot our progress at least on the Google Earth map, but if the weather plays up we might not bother with too many words!

Next stop Bayona on the North West coast of Spain (Approx 570 miles).

Day 1. A spot of bother...

49:39.47N 005:00.58W

Started out at 10.30am in glorious sunshine and virtually no wind at all. Opted to motor for a while to get clear of Plymouth and pick up some decent wind, but 7 hours later we still only had 2 knots of breeze!

Some of the boats came across a pod of basking sharks which they photographed, but all we managed was a solitary dolphin.

6.30 pm and we had our first real drama. We were motoring along on at 7 knots when suddenly the engine choked as we picked up something very substantial around our prop.

We cut the engine and debated our next move. There was less than 2 knots of wind still and the sea was glassy calm, so Sarah (who does not do swimming in anything less than 30°C) decided to go and take a look!

We trailed a line behind us, tied to a fender, we also tied a diving knife to another line and then Sarah went off the back to discover a whole raft of fishing net wrapped firmly around the prop. She then dived a number of times to cut all this free and finally cleared the mess completely.

Celebrated with a hot shower and a cup of hot chocolate. (Don't want to spoil her.)

It was at this point that Queen Mary 2 chose to alter course as we sitting directly in her path, 12 miles distant still, but at 26 knots the distance closes very quickly. Engine started and we were back on our way.

Day 4. Arrival in Bayona

42:07.34N 08:50.73W

Finally arrived in Bayona at 1.30 am and were met by the Rally organisers who took our lines as we reversed into a slot. It seems that we are second to arrive with most of the others some way behind. In fact I am writing this at 1.30 pm on Thursday and only 5 out of the 15 have got here so far.

Got everything stowed and sorted and as we called it a day, the heavens opened and it poured, so we did well to miss that! Just feeling sorry for the others out there still.

Not much excitement during the days sailing although we got checked out by a low flying twin engine Customs plane and then a few hours later a Customs helicopter came out to us and hovered just off our stern. They made no attempt to call us on the radio and eventually flew off, but I have been listening out for tread of heavy boots along the pontoon where we are moored in a follow up visit....

Thursday morning:

Sun is shining and generally all of us that got in during the night are beginning to feel a little more human after showers etc.

Of course there are always jobs to do. I think that I have solved the problem with the generator and seems fine now (fingers crossed) and I have traced the source of the slight smell of diesel that was in the aft cabin. (Tony at Yachting Sports – your ears should be burning!!)

Sarah on the other hand is cleaning the boat. She likes a tidy ship! (Surely this isn't captain's work?)

Tomorrow we are hoping to meet up with Chris Mortimer in his Najad 490 as he is on his way back to the UK from the Med.

We are staying here in Bayona until Tuesday which gives us time to explore the area a bit (Saturday we are going to visit Santiago de Compostela) and get ready for the next leg.

The Rally organisers have a useful website for following the event.

<http://www.worldcruising.com/rallyportugal/news.aspx>

Bayona

Enjoying a few rest days here in Bayona whilst the last of the fleet arrive. It seems that whilst we had thought that we had seen lots of wildlife on the trip across Biscay, quite a few boats saw a number of whales and one even saw a Leatherback turtle.

The encounter that we had with a customs helicopter and aircraft was explained on the front page of the papers the next day. They had been tipped off about a drugs shipment coming in by yacht that day and it seems that not far behind us was the boat in question which was promptly arrested and an enormous amount of drugs seized.

On Saturday we had an organised coach trip to Santiago de Compostela which was brilliant. A guide treated us to a history of the region etc. on the journey up (the travelogue varied between interesting and unintelligible) and then on arrival in Santiago, the enigmatic 'Dolores' (aka Lola!) took over as guide and she treated us to a detailed and amusing tour of the more interesting parts including of course the Cathedral. The City is full of pilgrims who arrive in a constant stream by foot and by bike all with the aim of visiting the holy remains of St James the Apostle.

Certainly the buildings and the interior of the cathedral are impressive, but we were extraordinarily lucky to witness the swinging of the Botafumeiro.

This is a singular censer (a huge silver artefact containing burning incense) which dates from the 13th century, weighs 53kg, reaches a speed of 68km/h, misses hitting the north and south transept vaults by only 51cm while reaching an angle of 82 degrees, fell in 1499 and 1622 and is a perfect, gigantic pendulum conceived three centuries before pendulum physics was worked out. This requires 8 men to swing and is only done around 25 times a year. It also requires a very brave and solid priest to stop it as the swinging ends!

On our return to the marina, Chris Mortimer had arrived in his Najad 490 and so we spent the evening with him and his crew (Izzy and Dennis) quizzing him extensively about the Med and the route he had taken across and back from Gib to Greece and Turkey. However, after several bottles of wine and a good night in a Tapas bar, most of this information has been lost!

Sunday has been sunny and hot although there has been a strong North easterly wind blowing, which apart from anything else, stopped Chris from heading for the UK for another day or so.

At 8 pm tonight we have a 'Welcome party and prize giving on the Club House lawn with tapas'. The dress code is "smart yachting" which has got quite a few of us scratching our heads! This could be the first and only airing of my M & S linen suit. Full report tomorrow.

Last day in Bayona - Spot the winner.

Last night we had the welcome party and prize-giving for the first leg of the rally. One of the prizes was awarded to the skipper, who before leaving Plymouth, made the most accurate estimate of their boat's arrival time across the finishing line in Bayona. We all left Plymouth at 10.30 am on Sunday and in our case we didn't arrive until 1.20 am on Thursday morning, so you will be impressed that Sarah took first prize as she was just 12 minutes out!

Monday has been a day of finishing off a few of the jobs that seem to always need doing, including fixing the generator. Got it running OK again now, but suspect that I will have to replace the impellor, but will give it a run tomorrow whilst we are under way in the race and see if it overheats again.

We put on the bimini (a large sunshade over the cockpit) this afternoon which is something of a statement of intent! Certainly the weather has turned very hot now, but by all accounts it has been raining here for weeks, right up to the day before the rally arrived.

Tempted to break out the fishing gear for tomorrow's trip to see what we can manage. The winds are forecast to be only 15 knots and directly behind us, which pretty much means that we will be keeping up the rear of the fleet! I have a theory that if we start last, no-one gets to overtake us.

Povoa de Varzim

41:22.31N 08:45.93W

Tuesday 10th June.

The race start was less chaotic than the first leg and remarkably we slipped across in 5th place and chose to head offshore to try to pick up more wind. This tactic worked at first and we overhauled several boats to move into second place, but then they all hoisted their cruising chutes and spinnakers and we fell behind. We had a great sail for the first few hours, managing a stately 7 knots in 10+ knots of wind, but then around 1pm the wind died away and we chose to motor for one hour. The promised afternoon sea breeze never materialised, but we were able to just maintain 5 knots through the water and so we continued to sail until 7pm when a large electrical storm developed around us and so we elected to motor the remaining few miles in torrential rain, thunder and lightening. For the most part the day had been wonderful with clear blue sky and a fairly flat sea and every time we began to get a bit bored, another family of dolphins would race over to the boat and start playing alongside the bow. However, they rarely stayed more than 5 minutes as we were probably travelling too slowly for them! It is a real joy to watch them playing and if you ever get a bit bored, you can always try to get a photo of them with a standard digital camera! I will post one soon, but keep hoping that eventually we will get something rather better than the current efforts.

Ran up the generator and all seemed well for nearly 2 minutes, when it started to issue steam and shut down with a new error message about 'coolant temperature'. I went into the engine room to shut off the seacock and found that it had been spraying its coolant around the compartment! An email to Najad and Mastervolt is planned for tomorrow, to see if they can get this fixed properly when we get to Lagos.

The other excitement was that the chart plotter in the cockpit switched itself off and then on again several times over 30 minutes just as we were approaching the harbour. Strangely, another boat coming in at the same time reported exactly the same fault, so we will see what happens when we set out on the next leg in a couple of days.

Wednesday 11th June.

Tour of the area in a coach was the this morning's entertainment. Great commentary from our guide, but the bus's air con had broken so we got hotter and hotter. Finally we stopped to view very fine old church and like frightened rabbits we all nipped into the church to cool off. Locals must have thought we were religious fanatics the way we dashed inside!

Prize giving and reception dinner tonight in the yacht club, but I have made a note not to sit too close to the crew of Blue Beyond (from Lowestoft) as we went to the restaurant with them last night and I (Rob) drank far too much wine before the three bottles of port.

Off to Porto by coach tomorrow, the visit includes a tour of Taylors Port Wine Lodge (yes, more port tasting!) I could think of worse places to be.

Pavoa to Figueira de Foz

40:08.85N 08:51.59W

Wednesday Evening.

Prize giving and buffet dinner turned into another marathon session, but showing astonishing maturity, we retired around midnight, which was a good move according to reports the next morning! However, before we left the dinner, we did have a long chat with the owners of a couple of cruising yachts that were staying in the same marina, both of whom are on their way to the Caribbean. Ria (from Salcombe) and Indian Summer.

Thursday 12th June.

Trip to Porto mainly to have a tour of the Taylor's Wine lodge. Actually very interesting and the tasting was no hardship.

Sarah, who is a veteran of Port Wine Lodge tours, having spent a week cruising up and down the river here with her mother a few years ago, went off to visit the city centre and met up with the rest of us when we were dropped off to spend a few hours wandering/eating/drinking.

Worried about the oil leak that seems to have developed in the engine during the last leg, but a phone call to the ever reliable and wise Robert Forsdike resolved the issue and as it has turned out all is well. Have yet to fix the generator and see what happens with the Chart plotter tomorrow.

Early night for us as the 70 mile race to Figueira de Foz tomorrow starts at 7.00am.

Friday 13th June.

Yes, well if something is going to go badly wrong then today has to be the day!

6.00am and not a breath of wind (and a forecast for less later!!) so the race start was abandoned and we all motored off together just like a good old fashioned flotilla. Chart plotter immediately started playing up, but we discovered over the VHF that two others were having the exact same problem. 15/20 miles later all three plotters recovered and has been fine since. No shortage of theories (16 boats, so roughly 17 theories!) but no answers yet.

Mid morning the weather started to get misty, by 1100 we were in a thick fog bank – visibility 20 m or less. Good news: we have a radar so could pick up other boats (although one boat did not register a large trawler that suddenly loomed out of the gloom); bad news: it does not pick up the hundreds of fishing pots laid everywhere – so very good lookout required. The weirdest part of the whole thing was that the boat was in sunshine, in that there was blue sky above us. The side of you facing into the sun was warm, the other side was wet and very cold with the mist – hence elegant hairdo in the photo – and Sarah's sunglasses on one lens constantly completely misted over. Finally we motored out of the fog after 1 ½ hours and continued with what is optimistically called motorsailing. Every day that we have been in port has been breezy (good for the washing – and yes the washing machine is working very nicely, thank you!), but as soon as we poke our bow out of a harbour the Atlantic becomes glassy smooth.

Arrived in Figueira da Foz and all squeezed ourselves into some fairly interesting corners in the marina, who then treated us to a fantastic sardine supper. Rob was incredibly brave and finally overcame his childhood horror of small fish bones in the light of the equal disaster of no other food being available – and ate at least a dozen! Somehow the endless free wine was replaced around 11.00pm by bottles of port (where does all this stuff come from?) and things deteriorated from there.

Race honours on the way to Peniche.

39:21.13N 09:22.61W

Saturday 14th June

Decided not to go on the coach trip today. Too much culture! Spent the day sorting out some repairs, maintenance and storage issues on board. Found what appears to be the problem with the generator, in that the raw water impellor has lost most of its vanes. However the missing bits have travelled on into the heat exchanger which is underneath the body of the engine! Contacted Najad who are taking a robust line with the manufacturers (Mastervolt), so we now have to wait to see what they say.

Highlight of the day (well, night really) was a trip to the Casino to see a performance of 'Hot Legs' which was billed as a raunchy dance performance. Given that it started at 11.30 pm you might have expected it to be unsuitable for children, but in the event it was a moderate, end of the pier, Summer Show. Quite fun, but midnight is a bit late!

Sunday was a rest day, and so out came the Hoover, chrome polish etc. Things took a turn for the worse when the crew of Bali Hai invited everyone on board for drinks at 4.00pm. It was sort of raining at the time, but this didn't slow things down much and the evening went downhill fast. Mindful that the next day was a 55 mile race and the weather forecast was for some serious wind, we retired early and had dinner on board. However the party continued down the pontoon, transferring for a while to the yacht Vision, and finally back to Bali Hai around midnight.

Monday 16th June

And boy did they pay for their sins.... Extracted ourselves from the very tight moorings in the marina and set off down to the river entrance for the 9.00am race start, to find a fast rising wind and a very heavy swell running up the river mouth. Some very poorly crews were discovering that you should only party on the night before a rest day, not a race day! Reports on the radio during the day were very entertaining - well they were for those who were not staring downwards at the sea.

We inherited Robbie (19 year old from Blue Beyond, who is hoping to get involved in the sailing world – Bell boys please note!) as crew for the day – definitely a lucky mascot: Swept across the start line in third place and promptly moved into second place leaving everyone behind with a wonderful 15 to 20 knots of wind blowing across the deck. Sadly after an hour, this wind died away leaving us drifting at just 3 knots, so we started the engine and motored for an hour until the wind filled in again. Eventually all the boats gave in for a while, but when the wind freshened up, Serafina simply flew away from them all. 8 and 9 knots through the water, moderate to rough seaway, all makes for perfect Najad conditions and for hours we raced down the coast well ahead of everyone. As we approached the destination, Rally control who had driven ahead by car, tried to call up Bouzouki (Beneteau Oceanis 50) as they assumed they were the leading boat, to find where they were. We were able to put them very straight on who exactly was in the lead at this point!! However, we could see what we assumed was Bouzouki a long way behind us, but definitely getting larger all the time. It was now that the superb wind started to die away and we still had 6 miles to go with a very much faster boat hunting us down. We cleared the last headland, 2 miles from the finish, only about a mile ahead and now the wind dropped to just a few knots, directly behind us and a very lumpy sea was running. We were just able to manage 3.5 knots through the water and held on to cross the line barely 100 yards ahead. (As everyone knows, Rob is NOT interested in getting involved in any of the racing....) And through all this Sarah struggled with grim seasickness – what a waste of a brilliant day's sailing.

We had been visited by a group of at least 12 dolphins in mid afternoon who were clearly impressed by our 8 knots and they were a spectacular diversion for some time. This group

had some very young ones who presumably were learning how to entertain yachtsmen. It is a wonderful sight and I am only sorry that we cannot capture this in a meaningful way to show you all.

Peniche is a really lovely old town but the marina is part of what is actually a fairly major (and very busy) fishing harbour, so the wash from speeding trawlers, along with the very strong associated aromas, is distinctive.....

Had a great dinner on board Arwen (Hanse 41) who are rafted up alongside us here and discovered that Jackie's brother lives in Oxted. Small world really as we had found out the other day, that the crew of Scott Free (Contest 43) also used to live in Oxted and both their sons had been pupils at the County School. (This is where I used to teach in an earlier life.)

Rest day today, another 50+ mile race tomorrow, so it will be interesting to see if the party animals have worked this out tonight.

Just had a phone call from Mastervolt in Holland (their head office) to go over the details of the problem, which they now think might be a lot more involved. But they are on the case and their Portuguese agent has been tasked to come to Lagos when we get there and sort it all out properly!! Great news and thank you Najad.

Champagne day and dentistry

38:40.55N 09:19.05W

Wednesday 18th June

50+ mile race today from Peniche to Oerias, which is close to Lisbon.

We have been joined now on Serafina by Ray & Bev who are escapees from Blue Beyond (Moody 54). They are also the parents of Robbie who came as crew on the last leg.

This has to have been the very best day's sailing we have ever had in our lives.

Exciting race start at 9.00am with the entire fleet of 16 boats crossing the start line within 30 seconds of the gun. We made a poorer start than usual and were in 12th place, but quickly began to take advantage of the stronger breeze and worked our way up to 4th or 5th, choosing again to head further offshore than most. At this point however, most of the boats with coloured sails (spinnakers and chutes) hoisted them for the 30 mile downwind leg and promptly raced away from us. This left us leading the rest of the pack, but in 6th place overall. The wind gradually increased and although we were sailing goose-winged, directly downwind, we had a fantastic roller coaster ride making 6 to 7 knots all the way. Around midday a pod of over 20 dolphins raced up to the boat from all directions and treated us to an unbelievable two hours of entertainment. We believe (can anyone enlighten us?) that their antics today were probably to do with mating. Some were jumping and deliberately slamming their bodies onto the surface of the sea, whilst others leapt out and corkscrewed in midair. Pairs would race alongside then roll over and brush against each other before diving fast under the bows. There were the (now) usual groups of 4 or 5 locked together almost as one, that race towards you, turn and then swim alongside you before also playing on the bow wave. And finally there are those that simply leap gracefully clear out of the water just metres away.

As we approached Cabo de Roca the boats at the front of the fleet called up on the radio to warn us of much stronger winds (23 knots) off the headland that marks the entrance to the River Tejo, which leads up to Lisbon.

We elected to press on under full sail as we were now broad reaching and a boat like ours revels in the stronger conditions. In the event, we experienced 35 knots of wind which drove us on at 10 knots up towards the finishing line at Oeiras. Although this localised wind reduced a bit, we still crossed the line at 9 knots, in 6th place!

The marina, which is very smart and new, proved a tricky place to moor with the very strong diagonal cross wind blowing. We slid neatly into our berth, but the two boats either side of us sadly fared less well and both struck the pontoons damaging their hulls.

The only downside to the whole day was at lunchtime when Sarah suddenly announced that she had just broken a tooth (soft rolls and pate) and at first thought that it was one of her crowns. As soon as we arrived at the marina, we were met by a young lady with a bag of goodies for the crew and a cheerful welcome from the Marina and town. Sarah asked her if there was a chance of seeing a dentist whilst we were there. She went back to her office and returned 5 minutes later to say that they had fixed an appointment in one hours time (7.45pm) and that they would drive her there. By 8.30pm Sarah was back with a repair done and a bill for just 15 euros.

We then joined up with the crews of Blue Beyond (Moody 54) and Scott Free (Contest 43) and went for a meal in a restaurant in an old railway carriage!

Thursday 19th June
Clear blue sky again....

Free day today with a trip planned for the afternoon and a prize giving and dinner with the Mayor and various dignitaries from the region.

The day slipped away with coffee on Scott Free, lunch on Blue Beyond and an incredibly dull coach tour of the area in the afternoon. Ray and his son Robbie went up Blue Beyond's mast to drill and bolt their radar dome back on! It got tangled with their staysail during the race and was torn clean off the front of the mast.

We hosted drinks on Serafina before we all walked up to the venue for the prize giving and dinner. This was a stunning location with a fantastic view across the bay, flanked on one side by a fort which serves as the official residence of the Minister of Defence. The meal was by far and away the best on the whole trip so far and the icing on the cake was that Sarah again won the prize for the most accurate calculation/guess of the time we would cross the finish line on yesterday's race. We took roughly 9 hours and she was 19 seconds out!

Friday 20th June
A second rest day here in Oeiras, which gives everyone a chance to take the short train ride into Lisbon for the day. Tomorrow is another 50 mile race to Sines, but we might now be taking all this a little less seriously now that we have discovered that the handicapping system is set so squarely against us ever winning a race!

Whales and a submarine!

37:57.05N 08:51.97W

Saturday 21st June
9.00 am the Rally organisers come round and inform us that the start has been brought forward from 11.00 am to 10.00 am. So madcap panic to get the boat ready and get out to the start line. Light wind from the South West and a strong tide under us made judging the approach to the start line very tricky. (engines have to be turned off 5 minutes before the start) In the event, we got it just about right and swept over the start line in second place

behind Bouzouki (who else!). Arwen slipped past us, but we kept up our boat speed and overtook Bouzouki to stay second. The three of us then opened up a substantial lead over the rest of the fleet, although Bali Hai began to close up on us after an hour or so. At this point the wind came round to the North West and so of course all the boats with spinnakers etc. hoisted them up and away they started to fly. However, although Arwen and Bouzouki quickly pulled away and Bali Hai swept past us, cameras clicking, the rest of the fleet took forever to gain any ground. In fact it was not until the 30 mile mark that Blonde Moment and Sea Lion finally caught us putting us into 6th place. Sadly for everyone, the wind died about 10 miles from the destination and so eventually all but Blonde Moment switched on their engines and motored in.

The excitement for us on this leg was the sighting of a pod of 5 pilot whales, but Arwen (who were only 200 yards from us at the time) were surrounded briefly by 50 to 60 dolphins. They swam off ignoring us totally, presumably because we were playing David Bowie in the cockpit at the time. (Very intelligent animals by all accounts!) An hour later Orchid (Bavaria 47) called the boat behind them as they had just witnessed a mass of bubbles around their boat. In fact it transpired that they had been watching what looked like a white horse (breaking wave top) except that it was travelling along at speed! It was then confirmed that there was a periscope passing across their bow which was all very exciting. We were in a submarine exercise area so it was not as unlikely as it sounded, but bloody typical that we finally see some whales and then miss a submarine.

Hopes for a quiet couple of nights before the 75 mile final leg to Lagos were dashed when we were ushered into a finger pontoon berth alongside Bali Hai. In the event, we had drinks on board Bali Hai along with the crews from Blonde Moment and Sea Lion until around 10 pm when we retired to Serafina and Sarah cooked some salmon, new potatoes, broad beans and peas. Very civilised!

Sunday 22nd June

Sines is a commercial and fishing port and it provides the first shelter and refuge after 35 miles of unbroken sand dunes running south down the coast of Portugal from the Rio Sado. Like so many of these harbours, it is overlooked by a fourteenth century fort which has the added distinction of being where Vasco de Gama was born.

Prize giving was at 11.00 am in the town hall and was as usual an entertaining mix. We then all headed into the town for lunch and we joined up with the adults (!) from Blue Beyond and chose a wonderful little restaurant.

It was not long before we were joined there by the newly extended crew off Arwen and then Bali Hai. Sarah and Bev headed off from there to find a supermarket whilst Ray, Mark, Maxine and I headed back to Blue Beyond to prepare some mid-afternoon Pimms. Bali Hai skipper, Neal joined us briefly, but left leaving a half filled glass! Late afternoon, Sarah cut my hair and we settled for a quiet night aboard ready for a very early morning tomorrow.

Gales round Cape St Vincent

37:06.64N 08:40.53W

Sorry for the delay in reporting, but no internet at the last stop.

Monday 23rd June

Race started in nearly 2 knots of wind, with Serafina pottering directly along the line on starboard inviting all the others to turn away! Rally control then lifted the motoring restriction and with a roar of diesel engines, the fleet set off for Lagos, some 75 miles distant.

Gradually the wind began to fill in, and at around 45 miles the speed had increased to 15 – 20 knots and we were all flying along happily. Bouzouki (Beneteau 50), Blue Beyond (Moody 54) and Bali Hai (Moody 49) who were slightly ahead of us, called the rally as they approached Cape St Vincent, to report winds of 30 knots. Then as they continued round the cape to the next headland, this figure was revised upwards to 40 knots, which borders on Force 9. As we approached the first headland, we reefed down the main and replaced the genoa with our hard wind jib. The wind quickly started to rise and we found ourselves close to Sea Lion, blazing through the quite heavy seas, mixed with the Atlantic swell at 8 to 9 knots. Sarah was proved right at this point (she had suggested a bigger reef in the first place!) and we (Sarah) put in a further reef in the main sail. (We all agree that racing *is* just in some people's blood forever....) This actually made Serafina more balanced and when at the second headland the wind speed rose to 38 knots, we finally pulled past Sea Lion, busily photographing each other. An added bonus is that the rally organisers had set themselves up on the second headland with some special camera equipment (borrowed off Blue Beyond) and took a load of pictures of us, Sea Lion and Blonde Moment, who were about a mile ahead of us.

The wind speed eased to a more respectable 25 – 30 knots for the 20 mile leg across the bay towards Lagos and Serafina raced away from Sea Lion, past Vision (Lavranos 50) and closed down on Blond Moment. The final leg was just over a mile, hard on the wind and we all managed to make the line without tacking, which surprised all the boats ahead who had had to make several tacks and subsequently lost time.

Sails down and motored up a narrow river entrance to the very fine marina in Lagos. Party organised by Blue Beyond (with a pirate theme) got under way on the pontoon followed by a Chinese meal. (well it is Portugal!)

Lots of photos were taken during this excitement and to do them justice, we will probably post these in a photos section on the website later this week.

A fantastic sail and sadly the joy was tempered by the discovery during the final part of the sail, that Ray had not closed the forward roof hatch as well as he thought and the waves that had been pouring over our decks had also been running into the forepeak bedroom. Total carnage in there and a major exercise in drying, washing, dry cleaning and dumping is under way as I write.

Big final prize giving and dinner tonight.

Drying out and prize giving.

Tuesday 24th June

Hot and busy day cleaning, rinsing and drying stuff from the forepeak. We have to be the only boat in Lagos with a 2kw fan heater running on full heat inside the lockers! Not too much real damage, although we will have see what state the seat and bed mattress covers return in from the dry cleaners. We soaked the foam mattresses with a hose until they were fully saturated, to rinse out the salt and they are strapped on the coach roof drying in the very hot sun.

Final dinner and prize giving in the evening which was great fun, and of course tinged with sadness as many of the crews are returning home now. None of the fleet are returning to UK this year although we all seem to heading to very different destinations. One of the fleet will be heading out to Madeira and then later to the Canaries prior to crossing the Atlantic with the ARC in November. Most of the boats seem to be planning to stay here in Lagos for most, if not all the summer and a few of us are off to the Med and a range of planned (and

unplanned) destinations. Email means that it is easy for us all to stay in touch and of course those of us with the regular web logs can be tracked on Google earth.

Every boat picked up a prize for something real or imagined, but we were more than a little surprised to be the very final boat called up and awarded a special prize for the boat that most epitomised the ideal spirit of a rally. (Apparently that is a good thing!!)

Party boat was Bali Hai and they got a special mention as probably being the best party boat in the 15 years that the rally has been running.

Pictures:

I will certainly be creating a picture library on the site shortly as we have now got some good shots of Serafina sailing. In the meantime here are two.

Updates on various issues:

Sarah's tooth seems to be holding up OK for now.

Mastervolt have been in touch and the parts for our generator arrive here in Lagos tomorrow and hopefully the local dealer will be able to get to work straight away.

We plan to move on towards the Med on Saturday, assuming all is OK with the generator. We did consider having a guard made for our radar dome following the incident on Blue Beyond, when their genoa swept their radar dome clean off their mast, but this would take time to make and we are keen to move on and get back into our own cruising mode after all the excitement of the rally!

Sarah has been introduced to a sea sickness tablet that actually works for her. Traveleeze seems to do the trick as she was cheerfully preparing lunch for us as we crashed through the seas off the Capes the other day. This really is a big bonus all round, as the pills she used before had little effect and made her very sleepy, which was rather less than helpful!

Sitting around in Lagos.

Wednesday 25th June - Friday 27th June.

Mastervolt have not exactly covered themselves in glory dealing with our generator. Despite promises galore and copies of emails etc. the local agent here has failed to show up at all yet! I get to speak to him on his mobile and for the first few days he claimed that the spares had not yet arrived. Today (Friday) he promised that an engineer would come at 1.00pm and replace the impellor etc. and then if there was still a problem, he would send an electrical engineer out. (All this despite the clear email from Holland explaining exactly what parts were being shipped and needed fitting.) Needless to say it was late afternoon before they appeared, borrowed an impellor from me (not sure yet where the special shipment has gone) and simply fitted it. No backwash or other tests! They then ran the generator for 5 minutes and declared it fine. My Portuguese was little better than their English so now we are waiting to hear from their boss, but I will be emailing Mastervolt in Holland before we leave to register our total lack of confidence in their efforts to date.

Sarah has been busy cleaning and shopping (!) and having decided on Tuesday that we both needed to go on diets (trousers were a bit tighter than usual for the prize giving) she has gone on to invite different crews to dinner on Thursday (China Blue and Neal from Bali Hai), Friday (Blue Beyond), and Saturday (Scott Free)! Oh yes and on Sunday she wants to go to the restaurant that the gourmets on the rally all recommended.

Still trying to get the foam mattresses dry. It has been extremely hot but very little breeze for the past few days, so although you would think by now they would be OK, it turns out that the very dense foam is very reluctant to release all the moisture.

Only a very few of the rally boats still on the same pontoon as us now. All the ones staying for a while have been moved elsewhere, so it is just those of us who are moving on, mostly waiting for spares or for work to be done. In addition a lot of the crews have now flown home so we are now ready to head off on the next stage as soon as we can.

As it happens, the dry cleaners who are dealing with the water damaged upholstery have also now announced that they will not be ready until Monday, so hopes of a weekend departure have been dashed. Still there is plenty to see and do in Lagos.

Lagos has a long and chequered past, including being the location where Henry the Navigator set up school of navigation and it also has the distinction of repelling an attack in 1587 by Sir Francis Drake. In 1755 it was largely destroyed by an earthquake however certain key features remain in the old town including the imposing fortress overlooking the harbour. Nowadays it is quite hard to distinguish between the old and new town as the modern sprawl continues and one quickly gets to realise that this is predominately a resort favoured by Brits. Sarah has been impressed so far by the shopping opportunities and I suspect that the enforced stay over the weekend will be hard on the credit card.

Still in Lagos!

They call this Velcro city, because yachts find it so hard to tear themselves away. Rob believes they are only staying here because they all still waiting for work to be done! This lot make the British Marine Trade look almost professional.

Saturday 28th June – Tuesday 1st July

Rob spent much of the weekend planning his approach for Monday to the Mastervolt repair engineers which started with a very caustic text, several unanswered phone calls, quite a few empty promises from the engineers, further emails/calls to the powers-that-be in Lisbon and finally, today Tuesday, the engineer came and has put on every single new part sent from Holland regardless of need in the hopes that we will depart! Even better, the engineer has proffered a suggestion as to why it may fail to work at sea – Najad may want to watch this space!

The upholstery returned in pristine condition yesterday (Monday) but unfortunately the foam is still (secretly) holding water – 6 days later, even with temps in the mid 30s!

Sarah went on a dinghy trip to the grottos (Rob continued to wait onboard for elusive engineers) which was really impressive; both the rock formations (the driver insisted on pointing out rock formations that looked like anything from elephants to Michael Jackson, possibly the Queen Victoria one was a little lost on the young German couples who were the only other crew!) and the boat handling, as we dashed in and out of very narrow caves hotly pursued by other small boats. There was also an offshore crag with an egret nesting ground, surrounded by hungry looking seagulls.

We both finally ventured into town for a wander together. Lagos is particularly pretty, but crammed with touristy shops. Happily for Rob, the shopping has revealed no desperate requirements of the credit card. And there are the obligatory human statues dotted over the town.

Sarah 'did' the culture: the Ponta da Bandeira Fort with its fantastic rooftop display of robotic working steel windvanes; the museum and Church of Maritime Compromise (possibly lost something in translation?) with amazing gilt carving everywhere and St Sebastian's Church, which was astonishingly simple and really attractively lit.

Tomorrow we hope to leave Lagos at last as it has proved to be an expensive wait for mechanics. We are heading for Babate by the weekend to meet up with Rob's sister, Anne and then on to Gibraltar.

Lagos to Vilamoura. On our way again!

37:04.59N 08:07.24W

Wednesday 2nd July

Cast off from Marina de Lagos and as we headed for the lift bridge, various crews came on deck to wave us off. We followed 'Blue Beyond' down the river and out into the bay as they were on their way to PortiMao to get craned out and get their leaking rudder gland fixed (again).

The promised strong winds picked up at once and with a single reef in the main sail and just the hard wind jib set, we were soon flying eastwards at speeds up to 9 knots. Sadly this was to be the highest wind of the day for us and for most of the 30 mile trip, we pottered along at between 5 to 6 knots.

We took this opportunity to test our newly repaired generator (!) and you will all not perhaps be too surprised to hear that after just 5 minutes it came to a halt, this time with the error message 'Failure Oil Pressure'. Cue long emails to Holland, Sweden et al.....

The coast along this part of Portugal is very impressive, with many caves (grottos) and sweeping sandy beaches, broken up by unbelievably ugly modern town and city developments. Sarah spent a depressing hour or two trying to recognise the villa and beach where she went to stay just after her A levels (a mere 32 years ago!). However she cheered up when we spotted firstly, a spectacular flying fish and then what appeared to be a pod of pilot whales, but when we sailed over, turned out to be 6 very large dolphins, some of whom turned and swam with us for a short while.

Finally we arrived at the marina at Vilamoura and motored in through the outer harbour wall to stop at their very smart reception pontoon. In fact as this was empty, we took the opportunity to stop on the fuel bay and top up midships fuel tank which we had last filled at Bayona in Northern Spain.

This is one very smart marina and I was a pleased and surprised to see that it had a 5 anchor rating (the best) from the Yacht Harbour Association, which is a UK organisation of which Viking Afloat was also a member!

We were allocated a berth close to a proper super yacht (photo to follow soon on the website) and then we had a brief walk around the 'town'. Clearly this is a little bit of England we know very little about, or actually need to!! Although this is a huge resort and we found it almost impossible to find anything written anywhere in Portuguese (or any other language) other than English. Loads of Irish theme bars (even a replica Irish street scene), Sky Sports, Full English Breakfasts (Double sausages, double bacon, double everything!) Pizza Express and thank the Lord...MacDonald's, of course.

Returned to the boat and were hugely entertained by the efforts of a huge Sunseeker gin palace trying to moor on a pontoon parallel to us. They took six attempts to get in and each failure was even more spectacular, with lots of people shouting, pulling on ropes and a determined effort by the owner/driver to set off into the evening sun towing most of the marina infrastructure behind him.

Scott Free then arrived and moored up and so we radioed them to invite them over for drinks. To our surprise Sea Lion replied as they were moored close to Scott Free, so both crews came over later for a few drinks and nibbles.

Early night (loud disco bars permitting). We have a 6 am start tomorrow (she is tough my skipper) as we are heading to Rota (Nr Cadiz, Spain) which is a full 100 miles away. The destination the following day is Barbate where we are meeting up with my sister Anne, who although she lives in Seville, also has a beach house just 5 minutes away from Barbate by bus (or so she says).

Thank you to all of you who are sending us emails, it is nice to hear what you are all doing as well!

Africa and Whales

36:08.95N 05:21.22W

But first...

Saturday 5th July

Well a quiet night would have been nice but a disco nearby kept up a remorseless and VERY loud output of Spanish rock music until 3.00am. Heaven knows how loud it must have been inside!

Ann arrived on foot around 9.30 and was most impressed with our labours. She broke the bad news that she has 'lent' her car to her god-daughter in Madrid and that we needed to get the bus out to her beach house in Zahara. This actually involved a 25 minute walk to the bus station, a 15 minute wait and a very pleasant 10 minute ride in an air conditioned coach to her 'village'. What she has failed to notice over the past 10 years is that they have developed her village into quite a serious Spanish beach resort. We walked along the beach to her house which turned out to be a very nice maisonette with a great roof terrace, from which, with difficulty, you could see the sea. We had a great day with her and finally we caught the last coach back to Barbate at 8.30pm and walked back to the marina.

Barbate as a town has become a victim of the demise of the Spanish fishing fleets. By all accounts it was once a thriving fishing port, but with the decline in fish stocks it has become fairly seedy and has something of a reputation for drug trafficking.

Sunday 6th July.

A quiet night, at least until 3.00am which is when the disco started this time. Last song finished playing at 7 am.

Up at 8.00am and set off for Gibraltar around 10.00am, passing Zahara and yet more tuna nets an hour later.

The wind quickly built up to a fresh 15 - 20 knots and we made great progress down the coast to Tarifa. Ahead of us all the way and clearly visible, was the coast of North Africa and Tangiers. As we rounded the southernmost point of Spain, we were a mere 6 miles from Africa and into the Straights of Gibraltar. This was a very important milestone for us in terms

of our trip so far and as the wind rose to 30 knots and Serafina flew along, reefed now, at 8 knots plus, the day was made as two huge fin whales very close together, came powering past us heading in the opposite direction towards the Atlantic, blowing massive spouts of water into the air as their backs arched in a series of rolling dives.

Gibraltar itself loomed large as did the frightening amount of very large ships heading in all directions, added to which, there were all the ferries heading back and forth to Morocco.

We sailed into Gibraltar harbour and on to Marina Bay where we had booked a berth for two nights. The wind remained very strong and the berth we were given required us to reverse, downwind onto a concrete quay and pick up a lazy line. This we managed without incident and after a quick stroll round the bit of town nearby, we retired to the boat for a celebratory G & T and copy of today's Sunday Telegraph. Yet another really great days sailing.

The marina seems a bit run down, but this may be because it has been sold to the huge development that is being built around it. Sadly we get the impression that the current financial situation has stopped all of this dead in its tracks, but doubtless we will learn more tomorrow. The one thing we are sure of is that the marina lies directly alongside the airport runway, but so far (it is Sunday) only a couple of planes have landed or taken off. (The EasyJet flight needed every last inch of the runway for its landing and I was sure it was going to drop off the end of the runway into the marina approach. Surely cannot be as bad as last night though? A lot of the boats here look a bit sad, with a very neglected air and quite a few 'For Sale' signs dotted about. However, Sarah tells me there is an M & S here as well as a Morrisons, so it may not be all bad!

The generator saga continued with a phone call from Mastervolt in Holland to say that the Spanish agent was all set to send a dealer to see us in Rota. He had rather missed the point that we had already left Rota at this point! Plan B seems to be for us to discuss a suitable venue with the Spanish agent in Madrid. They did get me to do some more checks and run it up in the marina and sure enough it stopped again after just 3 minutes with the same oil pressure failure message. Might be time to start taking bets as to when this might actually get fixed (or replaced).

Retail therapy day in Gibraltar tomorrow!

A few days off in Gibraltar

Monday 7th & Tuesday 8th July

Well the marina is not the only tired and run down thing around here!

Gibraltar is no paradise and by all accounts the shopping rates as very poor. Excitement over loads of duty free shopping evaporated when Sarah made her first excursion into the 'town' and discovered lots of duty free shops, but they all sold the standard airport duty free fare. In fact there are loads of these shops but no variety!

The building work next to the marina is certainly continuing apace, with a huge casino, restaurants and shops as well as a new very smart marina. (Well the pictures look good!) I seem to recall that Gib is the home of the Internet gambling companies, so that might explain the continued expensive developments. The building firms involved are clearly contracted to keep the area clear and clean despite the works, so there are as many people working at keeping everything clean as working on the building. Quite unusual to see a polishing machine being run over the pavement just minutes after a concrete lorry made a delivery!

Sarah spent part of the morning polishing more of the stainless fittings on deck, so in the afternoon I was able to do my bit by converting our fender board into a passerelle (fancy yachting term for a boarding plank). We had chatted to a friendly local Stainless Steel fabricator here (Mike) and between us we came up with a very workable solution, hopefully, and by this afternoon he had produced the goods. It just needed fitting to the boat and to the teak board we had brought on deck from UK. A bit of sawing and drilling and we now have a hinged and lifting (topping lift) passerelle which is at least a whole lot better than messing about climbing in and out of the dinghy to get onto the 4 ft high concrete quay.

We were going to move on to Puerto Banus on Wednesday, but a well timed text from a friend (Cathy Hunter) told us that she was flying in to Gibraltar for a few days on Thursday pm and would we like spend the day (Friday) at their hotel pool. Brilliant, so we immediately modified plans and now plan to depart on Saturday. (Makes a change from sitting on a yacht, surrounded by water.....)

Exciting few exchanges with my good friend Jan Frans at Mastervolt in Amsterdam as well as Alythea in Valencia. Short version is that we are now bound for Palma in Majorca to see if Electro Marine can work some magic on our generator. The up side is that the owner of Electro, Charles Whitehead, phoned us yesterday to discuss the whole issue and determine a plan of action. The main catch is going to be getting a berth in Palma in the height of the season! Charles had some local information to offer on this subject and so we will see in due course. However we will not arrive in Palma for at least 9 or more days, so at least you will have to put up with any more whining about this from me for a while!

Sarah checked out the other marina here this afternoon and it seems that if we call them at 12 tomorrow, we might be able to get a berth there for the rest of the week. It has the advantage of being:

1. Very much nicer.
2. Closer to Cathy's hotel.
3. Much cheaper!

Downside is that we are just starting to get know folks here in Marina Bay, but such is the way of things.

Hope to do the tourist bit over the next day or so as we gather the caves/tunnels and a ride to the top of the rock are worthwhile things to do.

[We now suspect that Neal on Bali Hai is out to top anything we do. He emailed us yesterday to say that he narrowly avoided bumping into a large sperm whale off the Costa del Sol!]

Fog and apes

Wednesday 9th & Thursday 10th July 2008

Moved yesterday to Queensway Quay Marina which is soooo much nicer and far more secure (Marina Bay had no security at all, allowing any Tom, Dick or Harry to mooch along the pontoons), it even puts up a boom across the entrance to the marina at night. Perhaps this is also to deter non-payers escaping in the early hours? But like the majority of Gib, it is also a building site. Water is metered here as it is de-salinated for the Rock, so Serafina is likely to stay dusty until we move on now. She is now sporting a well-laundered, polished and re-inflated set of fenders which took hours!

We have also decided that we are not going to view the fleshpots at Puerto Banus. The pilot book implied it was a fairly cheap stop (which did seem unlikely); it would probably cost £200 for a night's berth! We have been working out the next few stops, particularly in the light of height of the season prices and reckon we can get to Palma for the Mastervolt engineer in 8/9 days, and possibly to Sicily within a fortnight, winds allowing.

We have also decided that Gib is not as bad as we first reported: we took the bus (very small mini-bus) up to the World War 2 tunnels. Normal buses/coaches cannot get up the Rock and, as a lady on the bus pointed out, if you can drive in Gib you can drive anywhere! The roads are really narrow, parking is at a premium so cars are abandoned anywhere and everywhere, masses of suicidal scooters; but there is a lot of evidence of some less than successful drivers around. The narrow streets up the Rock are often very picturesque and the views are unbelievable, particularly today when there has been fog covering the lower levels and the sea, with the occasional mast or crane sticking up out of the fog. In fact we wondered whether Cathy and Richard's plane would be able to land (it did). The fog was announced very early by incessant fog horns from the harbour at 3 am onwards!

We didn't do the whole tourist experience; it either involved a lot of hot walking or a very expensive taxi trip (£65), but went for our own personal guided tour (nobody else turned up) into the WWII tunnels which were extraordinary and beautifully cool. Drilled out by 5000 troops between July 1940 and November 1943, there are some 33 miles of tunnels which housed all the troops, 3 hospitals (treating casualties from N Africa), fuel water and RAF personnel in a small city underground (or rather halfway up the Rock). The men worked 3, eight hour shift systems, hot bedding with 2 others and for 6 days out of 7 never came into daylight! Incredibly the Germans didn't find out about it. And we saw a Barbary ape at the entrance accepting peanuts from the taxi drivers, standard routine by all accounts.

Rob has treated himself to a smart new (duty free) camera to increase the likelihood of wildlife photos, probably just as the sightings become fewer as we leave the Atlantic, but spurred on by the whale spotting and me, once he gets to work out how to use it!

He also invested in a personal mosi repeller. Much to his great disgust, after 28 years of relying on his own decoy (me), he has become delectable to mosquitoes. And I am happy to report that I haven't been bitten yet. Is this the best side effect yet of HRT?

Decadence!

Friday 11th July 2008

Casual morning spent sorting out the boat and getting ready for setting sail on Saturday, as we suspected that we might not get the chance later!

Around 11.00am we walked up to the Rock Hotel to join our friends Cathy, Richard and Franchesca Hunter at their hotel pool. Very nice day spent mostly gossiping and a bit of swimming as well as a pleasant lunch. (I have promised not to mention Richard's choice of Beefburger & Chips!).

Returned to the marina around 5 pm and found both Sea Lion and Scott Free from the rally were moored on our pontoon. A quick catch up turned into a social drink or three and

suddenly it was 8 pm and Cathy, Richard and Franchesca were standing at the marina gate as agreed, for a tour of Serafina and a pre-dinner drink! We then went with them to a fish restaurant on the east side of the Rock and had a great evening, returning to the marina around 1pm.

Turtle, Whales and 35 knots of wind.

36:44.8N 04:03.9W

Saturday 12th July

Up at 07.30am and away from Gibraltar at 08.30am with bright skies and a fresh 15 -20knots of wind on the starboard bow.

As we cleared the bay, past the remains of a recent wreck that is being salvaged, the wind increased to 20+ knots and there just 50 metres in front of us were two Fin Whales again. Sadly they dived as we approached and so the fancy new camera failed to get a shot!

We then altered course to head East along the Costa del Sol and after around half an hour, three dolphins came to play. Sadly they made just two passes and vanished, but the upside was that whilst peering over the side, camera in hand, we got to see a 4ft turtle swim by.

By midday the wind, which was directly behind us, had risen to 30 knots and we decided to furl the genoa and use just the hard wind jib. (We had already put the main away as it had become a liability in the rising seas, constantly wanting to gybe.)

We saw quite a few dolphins swimming along in the opposite direction to us, but the ones living here in the Med clearly are not as playful as the ones in the Atlantic.

The gusts of wind were now reaching 35 knots and the sea was white with breaking wave tops as we sailed past Marbella and later Malaga. It was at this point that a 300 metre container ship which had been following us and gaining ground fast, chose to alter course across our stern and head into Malaga. Given its speed and proximity, we were more than a little apprehensive as it veered across behind us.

Finally, thankfully, the wind started to ease as we approached Velez-Malaga which is a very small fishing harbour with a bit of a marina. We were ushered into a space that was clearly too small for us to reverse into, although we did at least try, but at the last minute, we aborted and turned round and eased into the space forwards, edging the boats either side apart. The marinas here in Spain all seem to favour the system of lazy lines, which have a lot of merit. They are lines laid from the quay out to a fixed 'anchor' point and mean that you do not need to lay an anchor, which saves all the grief of crossed anchor chains etc. It also allows them to fit a lot more boats into a space than nice spacious finger pontoons!

The other feature of Spanish ports is the amount of red tape and paperwork that needs to be exchanged, photocopied, signed and stamped! However, the nice official here in Velez-Malaga excelled himself as he studied our papers and asked, "Maldon, it is where the sea salt comes from yes?" When I confirmed this, he declared an undying love for Maldon Sea Salt and nothing was too much trouble from then on.

We had an extended walk around the town and the immediate area, which caused us to revise our first impression that this was quite a quaint little Spanish fishing port frequented by the Spanish! This is the Costa del Sol and don't you forget it!

Had an expensive fish for dinner and were undecided as to the significance of the night sky.

Venez-Malaga

The marina is pretty basic, but has all the facilities you need. We visited on a Saturday evening and left early on Sunday so we have no idea of what it might be like when the large fishing fleet gets under way. Certainly other boaters might want to note that it does provide good shelter, although the approach in heavy seas and a South Westerly wind is lively and the entrance needs to be taken carefully!

Swordfish and screaming reels!

36:41.8N 02:47.46W

Well not quite the reels bit.

Sunday 13th July 2008

Got under way around 07.30am and motored into a gentle force 2 which was bang on the nose. Gradually this wind built up which again had us nosing through our weather books to try to fathom out what the odd early morning formations had really meant. We had not bothered to find an internet connection last night so we had no up to date grib files (web based weather files that you download and run in special software to give you very good weather maps, sourced from the US Navy!) so we were rather running on old information.

However there was no need for panic as the headwinds rose no higher than 18 knots before dying away for a while around midday, leaving us with a very Greek glassy flat sea.

At was at this point, as Sarah sat in the cockpit sewing a repair to one of our fender covers, that a fully grown swordfish leapt clear into the air, barely 2 metres from us in the typical pose that you only see on postcards and adverts. I of course missed this spectacle, but it induced a feverish scramble to dig out the fishing rod and start trailing (trolling) our lure. Last time we tried our hand at this fishing lark near Cadiz, we had to abandon the exercise after an hour or so, because the shearwaters were completely fooled (unlike any fish) and 15 of them wheeled and dived on the lure as it broke the surface. The chances of hooking a shearwater were very real. Today of course, being July 13th meant that nothing at all happened and even the odd stray shearwater ignored the lure completely.

Almerimar and some light fingers!

Monday 14th July & Tuesday 15th July

Firstly an apology as we are not in Almeria as stated in Sundays log, but Almerimar which is very close in more ways than one!

Strange place in many ways. It is all fairly new, but half the retail units are closed up and everything is very quiet. The marina is a popular wintering hole for livaboards and judging from the state of many of the boats, they don't get much (if any) real use. We gather from at least one shopkeeper that this something of a resort for the Spanish, rather than Brits, but there seems no shortage of English being spoken on the streets.

Fair old gale blowing outside with forecasts of gusts of 50+ knots over the next few days. Lots of conflicting information about what is expected over the rest of the week, but we are not in any rush, so along with several other boats, we are happy to sit it out.

Never seems to be any shortage of things to do on board, so in a way these days ashore are more industrious than the passage making trips. Quite a bit of rain today which left the boat very dirty to add to the duties!

Very upset yesterday as having filled up with water and left the hose unattended for a few minutes after we had finished, we came back out to find that some kind person had relieved us of the tap fitting that we had brought from UK. They are an essential item and clearly not everyone is prepared to buy one! Made a mental note to be a good deal more careful from here on. This is the second item 'removed' from the boat. At some point since we crossed Biscay we had an emergency light that is attached to a lifebuoy on the stern of Serafina stolen. It did not just fall off, unless of course it untied itself from the life buoy and pulled the release pin at the same time.

Walking tour of this end of the town was fairly dull and inconclusive, although we did find a chandlers and a fishing shop where I managed to buy some smaller lures etc. for another attempt at catching supper. Very helpful shopkeeper, but he had less English than I had Spanish, so with some help from a mate of his who had a bit of English and a pen and paper, we managed to resolve our problem and he made a very small sale. Now do I get the gas BBQ out of the locker ready for the fresh fish..... Sarah thinks not!

Latest plan is to wait here until Thursday late afternoon and then set out overnight on a 111 mile trip to Cartagena which by all accounts is a place well worth spending a couple of days.

We arrived at Almeria around 4.30pm and made our way into a very spacious port and marina. Big reception pontoon and fuel dock and VERY helpful staff who managed all the usual paperwork and ushered us into a very nice space close to a set of showers and toilets. It is fairly central in the town, so doubtless we will get to see lots of traffic and spectators, but first impressions have been OK.

The bad news is that all the signs are that there is a spell of bad weather due tonight, giving force 7 + winds from the North East (yes, we are trying to sail towards the North East) until Friday.

Virgen del Carmen

Wednesday 16th July

I don't quite know what it is, but we do seem to cross paths with festivals and fiestas! Last year we managed to celebrate Midsummer Day in both Sweden and Denmark, as well as being stuck in Cuxhaven for the South Saxony Show (3 days) (highlights including 'Right Said Fred' and 'Middle of the Road'.)

[Go to www.rhbell.com and click on '2007']

This year we have stumbled upon the Fiestas en honor de la Virgen del Carmen, in Almerimar. This actually is a 5 day event, but it all culminated in today's tumultuous events. Awoken (for the third day running) at 8.00am by 8 very large and loud rockets going off. This was the start of a very long day of fireworks and processions etc. I did mention to one shopkeeper that letting fireworks off on bright sunny days didn't really perhaps do them justice, but the reply was a confident, 'But they make lots of noise!' No argument there, as these things are small but VERY loud, especially with the sound echoing around all the buildings. These aimless rockets continued to be let off seemingly at random throughout the day, but the pace heated up around 6.00pm with the local junior marching band, 'Pasacalles, Bandas de Tambores y Cornetas,' Who were preceded by two chaps armed with dozens of the rockets which they let off every few minutes, surrounded by eager young children.

Then around an hour later the main procession came round, as before preceded by fireworks all the way. The town is basically centred around the marina which dominates everything and the Virgen appears to be the protector of the port, so these parades wind around the marina making sure that we none of us miss any of the excitement!

Finally the statue, dignitaries and the entire band got into various boats, along with rather too many other people and the flotilla set off out of the harbour, round the bay and back.

On their return, we were treated to a very sudden, short, enthusiastic, but rather unimpressive fireworks display, which did just have the benefit of slightly more darkness.

We are given to understand that it might yet be a long night.....

37:35.7N 00:59.0W

Night passage to Cartagena

37:35.7N 00:59.0W

Thursday 17th July

Yet another apology to make. The fireworks that greeted the return of the Virgen into the port of Almerimar, were just a gentle curtain raiser. The main event kicked off at 00.30am (thank you God!) with a much grander affair. Lots of quite impressive rockets etc. but there was always something about it all that reminded me of school events, in that no-one actually knew what any of the fireworks would do. This resulted in some of the best ones, surely destined for the grand finale, being let off very early and the event ended on quite a tame note and just petered out. Sarah, for the very first time in her life failed to even get up to watch them, but then what they lacked in sparkle they made up for in sheer noise.

9.30am saw the arrival of Mike Hughes, who is the local expert on ham radio and SSB long range radio. Sarah is our expert in this field, having spent a week on a very difficult and boring course to get qualified, but on the trip down with the rally, she had found that although she could hear all transmissions perfectly, the others could not really hear her. Mike is an expat whose wife runs a yacht brokerage in Almerimar as well as a large book swap shop, whilst he is happy to help solve electrical and electronic faults etc. when not tending his olive grove. Lots of boxes of test equipment were opened and connected up and a whole myriad of tests run. One interesting side effect of the RF leakage (oh yes, he explained all these wonderful terms!) was that on full power, when you spoke, the bow thruster came on! This will have to be looked into in due course (Mike Jennings are you reading this?). The extraordinary result of all these tests was that the microphone which was supplied with the boat and radio is the type that features something known as noise cancelling (to cut out background noise on a boat) but because Sarah is softly spoken over the radio, it is her voice that it tends to cancel! Now there are some amongst you all (Tom, Ewan and me for a start) who will find it hard to credit Sarah with being softly spoken, at least not when she really wants to be heard!! However, I watched the dials for myself and she struggled to make them move. Anyway the outcome is the need to buy a proper phone handset for SSB and we await some suggestions from the manufacturer.

We left Almerimar at 3.00pm and set off for an overnight sail to Cartagena, which was a trip of some 111 miles, meaning that we should be arriving around 9.00am in the morning. The wind was barely able to ripple the ensign, so we had to set off under motor. This was the chance to try the new fishing lures, so the rod was rigged and the complicated assortment of feathers (fancy lures with hooks) and a spinner was set to weave its magic behind us. Needless to say very little happened and it was at least an hour later that Sarah glanced behind us to see the head of a very large fish rear up out of the water as it took the spinner! Cue for general excitement and panic in which we did none of the right things for sure and right enough, the fish was soon gone, but so too was the spinner and the line, leaving just the feathers dancing in our wake. Mmm. the book says we should have put a trace line on which is tougher than the 50lbs breaking strain line that we use, to stop them biting clean through. But we only went for the smaller lures to try to catch smaller fish, so it is clearly a very complicated game when there are so many very genuine game and sports fish lurking

around us. Once we reached the Cabo de Gata , the seas increased in size and there was a modest increase in wind strength, but sadly only to 10 knots and this was bang on the nose, so we opted to continue motor sailing to minimise the increasingly violent pitching of the boat.

Friday 18th July

It was a full moon and a clear sky all night so it never truly got dark, which meant that on our different watches we both saw dolphins that joined us along the way. The seas eventually began to settle a bit, but the wave size and frequency made Serafina buck like a rodeo horse at times. Around 2.00am a Fred Olsen Lines cruise ship passed us, destination Carthagena, which was giving us clues as to the size of the harbour. Full daylight broke in time to help us weave through fleets of fast moving working trawlers, next the Greenpeace boat 'Arctic Sunrise' (Photo on the website www.rhbell.com) came past and then Sarah pointed out a swordfish jumping. Finally as we made our approach into the chicane entrance to the main harbour, between two hills bristling with mainly 19th century defences, we met a submarine coming out to add to the complications. (Photo on the website www.rhbell.com)

The harbour is very extensive and we now know that it is the principle home of the Spanish Navy's Mediterranean fleet, as well as taking in the odd cruise ship, and indeed, just by the marina we were heading for was the Fred Olsen ship 'The Braemar' that had passed us earlier.

We failed to raise the marina either by phone or radio, so we edged our way in and found space on what would once have been the main town quay. In due course we were able to contact the office and they dispatched a 'Marinero' to give us the details. This is the Spanish way, and the Marinero are generally very helpful middle aged or older men, who direct you to your berth and help you with your lines and in particular the lazy lines. We fell into conversation with a group of watching English folk who were off the cruise ship. They were easy to identify even without the obligatory Fred Olsen Carrier bags! Hordes of them were strolling gently (it was already very hot and just 10.00am) armed with maps looking for something to do. It seems that finding and talking to the nearest English yacht is high on their agendas and so the numbers rose. However, the first couple burst the bubble with the question, "If you come from Worcester, do you know John Bennett of Bennett's Dairies?" Now it was at this point that our (sorry, my) luck changed as we were approached by a blonde Lara Croft (bikini top, long bronzed legs and the hottest hot pants with radio, notepad and phone on a belt, who turned out to be the marinera. (my brother was right, you do need to listen to the words more carefully, an 'a' on the end makes all the difference!) Eventually she was able to direct us away from the very public quay, over to the pontoons in the main section of the marina and for good measure, she then jogged round to take our lines. (Photo on the website www.rhbell.com, you wish....)

The marina is run by the very posh local yacht club, but sadly does not have wi-fi (so no pictures in today's log) or very good security, but the berths are well maintained although there is a pretty constant swell set up by the various ship movements in the main harbour.

Cartagena to Santa Pola

38:11.3N 00:33.6W

Saturday 19th July

Blisteringly hot again today which made it hard to get going!

Cartagena is actually a really good place to visit. Clearly it has had a chequered past, but they have made huge efforts and spent some considerable amounts of someone's money in restoring it to its former glories. It is rich in history from both the Romans and the invaders

from Carthage, a lot of which still remains and more is constantly being found. It has some very interesting sounding museums and generally would provide plenty to see and do if you could spare the time. Our catch was that it was Saturday, so most of the museums etc. shut at lunchtime, coupled with probably the world's least co-operative or helpful Tourist office! We only discovered about all the places to go from a Brit who has been living here on his boat for 4 years and that was just as everything was closing. But a good wander round revealed some fantastic buildings and renovations along with a completely restored city wall and in the heart of the city, a Roman amphitheatre. Sarah found herself beguiled by the thought of shopping at El Corte Ingles (a large department store) and then had to cycle back to the boat down some very unsuitable roads, with the heaviest backpack known to man.

In the afternoon, we watched some wonderful dinghies racing. They seemed to be mini Feluccas (photo on www.rhbell.com) but were well matched and looked to great fun to sail.

In the evening we had a Dutch couple on board for drinks. We had passed them whilst sailing here yesterday and taken some photos as we went by, which we gave them on a memory stick. Their boat is a Regina 43 also built on the same island in Sweden as Serafina. They bought the boat second hand, planning to circumnavigate the world and crossed the Atlantic last winter, but had a dreadful crossing, not helped by bad weather and the forestay breaking on the 3rd day, so they only had the use of their mainsail. Harriet decided that this was not what she wanted to be doing as it had of course frightened her, so they re-crossed back this summer (a very good trip by all accounts) and are on their way to Greece and Turkey. They left around 11pm but the disco over on the town quay stayed in business until 4.00am.

Sunday 20th July

Left Cartegana at 8.00am and were genuinely sorry to be leaving, but it would have been a waste of a day staying on, as everything was shut. Met the Greenpeace ship 'Arctic Sunrise' on station outside the entrance to the harbour, so we need to make a visit to their website to find out what they are doing there. Clearly something not good going on!

Little or no wind to start with, but a strange long swell remained around the headland. In due course the wind got up a bit, but we were still only motorsailing, so to lighten the day up, we set up the fishing rod again, this time with the larger lure (plastic squid). The worry though with this is that it will take a big fish to go for this bait and we are not too sure if that is quite what we want at this stage. No need to worry though, as nothing happened. However, after an hour or so, I saw a swordfish leaping about 100 metres ahead of us. Minutes later it was leaping again only 50 metres from us and then finally we saw it jump clear of the water twice more, off our starboard quarter. Obviously it was taking the mickey, teasing us and saying, 'I didn't get to be this size by falling for the old pink plastic squid trick!' In fact full marks probably go to the nice man on a fishing stand at the Southampton Boat show who knows how to sell lumps of plastic to gullible sailors!!

Wind finally raised enough effort to allow us to sail properly for a couple of hours, which was bliss with the engine turned off. Sadly it was short lived and we ended up motoring the final leg of the 50 odd mile trip into Santa Pola.

Santa Pola seems to be a nice resort and although the old marina is full, they have just completed a brand new marina which had plenty of spaces left. Proper pontoon fingers to moor on, which caught us out for a minute or two as we were all set up to moor stern-to with lazy lines. Brilliant facilities, but at a price. They charge 54 euros a night, which is the most expensive we have come across since leaving UK. Power and water would be extra. Must be the proximity to Alicante, so we are only staying the one night and pressing on in the morning to Marina Greenwich (You might be able to guess why from the East West position.)

From there on, we are hoping to head across to the islands and eventually Mallorca to get the generator fixed. Chances are that we will be lying to an anchor for a few of these nights, so updates to the log may become haphazard.

Photos are added to www.rhbell.com whenever we get a good connection.

Sunshine cruise to Ibiza

39:05.3N 01:26.9E

Left Marina Greenwich at 6.00am heading for a bay on the North coast of Ibiza, with a gentle breeze blowing from the East and a very slight swell still left over from the day before.

As we started heading away from mainland Spain the wind picked a bit and before long we had a near perfect 12 - 15 knots of wind allowing us to sail on a very fine reach to our waypoint off the North Western tip of Ibiza. The sea was pretty flat and we skipped along at a respectable 7+ knots pretty much all the way. Saw quite a few yachts at sea for the first time since we finished the rally, although mostly headed the other way from us. We did have a couple heading our way, but we soon left them far behind as we cruised along through a clear blue sea in brilliant sunshine. Took the opportunity to drag our plastic squid for another 70 miles to no effect of course. Hope to get something rather more successful in Palma tomorrow.

After around 8 hours we found ourselves on a collision course with a container ship which was ploughing along at 18 knots. It is a remarkable fact of life about sailing in the open sea, that with hundreds of miles of room to play with, you always seem to find yourself on a constant bearing with a ship or another yacht, meaning that avoiding action needs to be taken by someone, usually you!! (as was the case again today.)

Around 5.00pm we arrived at the bay and anchorage that we had selected as being both well protected and handy for tomorrow's trip of another 75+ miles to Palma. Plenty of yachts already here at anchor, but still some room, so we selected a spot carefully and anchored in about 11 metres of water. Over the next hour or so the wind dropped, but the big swell out at sea seemed to alter course slightly into the bay and set all of us rolling quite badly, but such is life! Sarah decided that I badly needed a haircut, so she did this (she has been cutting my hair for years now) on the back of the boat. Fine, except that with the rolling, I was lucky to keep both ears.

Both went swimming in the beautiful clear blue warm water and whilst Sarah went off to inspect the other boats in the anchorage, I checked the lie and hold of our anchor and dived under our boat a few times to inspect the water intake for the generator in preparation for the repair on Thursday.

A really great day and if only we could have caught a fish to put on the BBQ it might have been perfect.

Early start again tomorrow.

Palma, Mallorca

39:34.02N 02:37.89E

Wednesday 23rd July

Well, if you are wondering where all the money missing from our economy has gone, don't panic because we have just found it! It is here tied up in huge and in some cases stunning, super yachts. This place is wall to wall monstrous motor boats, vast yachts and things that are even bigger but defy description! We have crept into a very smart new marina which is actually home to a number of charter boats/fleets (just like home...) and they allow visitors to moor midweek, whilst the charter boats are out. Having said that, the fees are staggeringly expensive with one night here costing the same as two nights at Berthon's marina in Lymington or whole week in Gibraltar!

The trip from Ibiza began around 6.00am in a flat calm and an interesting sunrise that Sarah has tried to capture on film. (photos will be posted at www.rhbell.com when we next get to a proper internet connection.) We raised our anchor quietly and slipped away from the anchorage which had been very pleasant, but fairly uncomfortable for most of the night due to the swell. The 65 mile trip to Palma was very uneventful in general, with no wind and no waves so we motored the whole way, taking it in turns to catch up on some sleep. Briefly visited by a pod of around 8 dolphins who were happily playing games with each other but pretty much ignored us we slid past. Quite a few more yachts out and about today and when we arrived at Palma there was some very high profile yacht racing going on in the bay, which we managed to stay out of the way of!

Tied up in Marina Alboran and now await the arrival of the Mastervolt dealer to sort out our generator. We stick out a bit on our pontoon, not because we are the smallest boat (which we are) but because we are the only one without a uniformed crew. We also probably look a bit quaint and eccentric as we have put up our wind scoops to direct the breeze down through the boat. They of course have air conditioning, but then the very good news is, so does the marina toilet and shower block. We ran a load through our washing machine as soon as we arrived and are now braced ready to be told to remove it all from the rigging where it is hanging out to dry! Took the opportunity to fill up with fuel as they have a very neat system here with the fuel piped to all areas of the marina and so they simply connect up the nozzle by your boat and away you go. No prattling about moving the boat to the fuel bay.

Suspect that we will be heading into the sunset just the moment the generator is fixed, probably sooner if they can't sort it quickly.

A day in Palma

39:30.90N 02:32.53E

Awoke bright and early, with me all excited about the prospect of a working generator and Sarah sorting out places to visit during the day. Enjoyed fresh croissants for breakfast while we waited for Palma to wake up and start buzzing. Lots of activity on the pontoon around us as staff busied themselves preparing their boats. It was fascinating late last night as one by one the boats around came to life with the owners suddenly appearing on their rear deck/patios to wine and dine and try to look cooler than anyone else! We took our washing in.

At 9.00am Sarah cycled off and this is her report: Firstly I went to visit the cathedral which had wonderful multi-coloured stained glass windows, and some rather typical Gaudi additions including an unimposing central crucifix (but possibly much more exciting lit by the special 'floating' lanterns?) and an extraordinary side chapel depicting the sea and the bounty of earth which looked as though paint had been fairly randomly chucked around, surrounded by black stained glass! Then to Palau March Museu d'Art with a Dali exhibition (rather along the lines of that on the Embankment!), 2 wonderful Josep Sert murals and outdoor sculpture. Finally to the Es Baluard, a modern concrete building on the city fortifications with more modern sculpture, Miro (yuk – cannot work any enthusiasm for

him), some lovely early 20th century paintings of Mallorca etc and a beautiful Giacometti pencil portrait. (Yes, I must get round to getting my drawing out!) Then a couple of hours of energetic cycling to various chandleries (in search of such important kit: fishing spinners and a oil pump); yet another abortive shopping attempt and provisioning.

At 9.45 am Charles Whitehead (the local Mastervolt agent) called to say he was on his way and would be with us in around 10 minutes. He finally arrived at 10.45am with various bits of equipment. The next 3 hours were spent trying to back-flush the missing impellor bits out of the cooling system and although the flushing was done thoroughly, no bits appeared, which might mean that all is well and they have already passed through the system or.....they haven't.

A quick test of the generator ended in seconds with the oil pressure failure warning as before, which was to be expected at this point. Charles now set about changing the oil pressure sender with the new one specially sent from Holland. He had great difficulty until he spotted that the thread on the old unit had been crossed, which meant that there was probably debris in the thread on the engine. This then required him to go off and get a tap (or is it a die, I never know which is which!) but as it was siesta, he was gone for quite a while, but he was confident that all would be well when he returned. I rather upset him with the suggestion that of course it was possible that the oil pressure sender was fine and that there really was a problem with the oil pressure. He has been dealing with Mastervolt generators almost since they began and cannot remember such a thing ever happening before so it was unlikely, but you could tell he was rattled!

In due course he returned with the tap/die and all seemed well until he found that he still could not fit the new sender. Further inspection revealed that they had indeed sent the wrong unit. As he prepared to hurl himself into the harbour, I mentioned that as we planning on a gentle cruise to Australia (at least), I had taken the precaution of buying a load of spares for the trip and a brief look in our paperwork showed that indeed we had the very part needed. So with considerable relief he fitted the new unit and we tested the generator under load and with the dry exhaust cut out of the system so we could measure the volume of water passing through the engine. This involved catching the water coming out of the exhaust in a bucket on a rope and timing how long it took to pump 10 litres. Rather more complicated than it sounds as the exhaust outlet is hidden by the curve of the hull. Anyway, all was deemed to fine and the job was declared finished. I did warn Charles that the final test would be once we were sailing the next day, as this seems to be the point at which previous repairs have failed.

We then decided that we would head for a bay to anchor in for the night, rather than pay another instalment of the National Debt. But when went to say goodbye to the nice man running the marina, he suddenly lost his command of English and largely in Spanish insisted that we had to pay anyway as it was from midday to midday and it was now 6.30 pm on the second day. He relented in the end and agreed that another time we would know better and so we left good friends and a bit less poor than we could have been.

Left the protection of Palma harbour and found that the swell out in the bay was huge, which was a big surprise given the light winds, however we pressed on to the anchorage at Playa Palma Nova (next door to Magaluf). Sarah had to call Ewan as she was sure he had been on holiday here recently with mates, which turned out to be the case once his memory had been jogged. (He remembered being in Magaluf, but was unsure if it had been Mallorca!!) May not be a peaceful night as we are fairly sure that the resort will burst into life later.

Plan to sail round to Cala Mondrago tomorrow, prior to crossing over to Menorca on Saturday.

East coast of Mallorca

39:22.2N 03:14.0E

Friday 25th July

Surprisingly peaceful night at Playa Palma Nova, despite all the dire warnings from Ewan the previous evening!

Set out for Cala Mondrago around 8.00am but there was no wind and virtually no swell this morning so we sat back for a 6 hour motor sail. As we rounded Punta Salinas (the South Eastern tip of Mallorca) the swell increased from the East, with the wind rising modestly from the South West, which made for a confused sea with two swells running at the same time! Arrived at Cala Mondrago around 2.00pm, but as the pilot book had warned, this was no place to be with the swell coming in from the East and besides that it was full of boats all rolling like mad at anchor! Certainly this was a shame as we had rather looked forward to returning to this beach which had some very good memories of a few summer holidays spent staying in my brother's villa nearby with Tom and Ewan aged only 3 and 1.

Pressed on just a short distance to Cala d'Or, which I recall being a very posh (and expensive) marina, however 'marina Cala d'Or' actually sits in the Cala Llonga and on the North side of this inlet there two further calas, One of these is closed to boats to protect swimmers, but the second, Cala Gran provides shelter and anchoring for a few boats. There were of course already a few boats here, but there was room for us, close to the entrance and so with a bit of fiddling around (fickle wind and current circling around inside the bay) we dropped anchor and went for a swim.

We spent the rest of the afternoon here watching all the comings and goings of the various boats around us as well as the daring exploits of various youngsters jumping off the low cliffs and rocks into the surging sea below. Around 7.00 pm the channel outside our bay, leading to the marina, became something of a race track as all the flash lads came powering past on their way back to their moorings in a variety of large and expensive craft.

We decided that staying the night here was fairly pointless as the swell was still less than comfortable, so at 9.00pm we raised our anchor and set off for a night sail to Menorca.

Slow boat to Menorca

39:52.6N 04:18.4E

Saturday 26th July

The forecast for this trip was the South Westerly wind to continue through the night, which would be ideal, but of course that is not how it all happens at sea! We came out of Cala Gran to find a gentle North Easterly blowing which was just about exactly what we did not want or need. The swell had died away out at sea and with the light headwind, we simply motor sailed for the first three hours. I have a theory that there is no natural swell out in these islands, it is just all the powerboats roaring around like headless chickens that causes it all!

As soon as it got fully dark I started to see lots of faint flashing lights ahead of us on the starboard side. Nothing was showing on the radar, but when viewed through binoculars, each light actually showed up as a group of lights very close together. Given that our course was clear of these, I pressed on and can only assume that they were perhaps marking fishing pots or nets, but if that is the case they are the very first ones we have ever seen lit in any way, in any country!

At Midnight a huge fireworks display started directly behind us, presumably in or near Cala d'Or, but as we were now 20 miles away it was not something we could properly enjoy, but

even at this distance it was possible to see that the display was very impressive and for good measure it continued until 12.45, when the massive finale lit up the sky.

By 2.00am the wind had risen to around 10 knots and had backed enough to allow us to sail. Given that we did not want to arrive until daylight, we unrolled the smaller headsail and cut the engine. We were able to sail our chosen course, but only just and the boat speed through the water varied between 3 knots and a heady 5 knots, however it did mean that whoever was off watch, got a better sleep. Sarah then saw even brighter lights which she thinks may have been marking an underwater cable (?) as again there were no boats showing on the radar.

7.00am saw us approaching the Southern tip of Menorca, with a steady stream of charter flights dropping over our heads as they made their final approach runs into the island (must be Saturday!) but the wind had shifted by now and we were not able to make the course we wanted to cut inside an island (Isla del Aire), but we were still in no hurry so we made the best course we could and had to make several tacks before we were able to finally, in a dying wind, approach Puerto de Mahon which is a very attractive commercial, naval, fishing and yachting port, situated up a long and deep cala. Within the confines of the cala there are a number of brilliant anchorages, providing safe, calm and very picturesque refuges and was in the best of these (cala Taulera) that we found plenty of space and dropped our hook and again went immediately for a swim.

In the late morning we launched the dinghy (Doris) and motored out through the Canal de San Jordi (a man made link to provide a second access route to the bay) and over to a town on the main island to do some essential shopping.

The afternoon and evening was spent lazing and reading a paper (I wonder what poor old Gordon Brown does on his holiday as he certainly will not be wanting to read any papers!)

Tomorrow is to be a day of relaxing and sorting out some of the lockers prior to departing around 9.00pm on our two and half day odyssey to Sicily.

A Passage to Sicily, Part one.

39:14.6N 06:27.5E

Sunday 27th July

Lazy day spent sorting out the deck lockers, not so much tidying them, but reassessing what we need where, now that we have been cruising for nearly two months!

Plenty to watch as well as various huge gin palaces came into our bay and tried to drop anchor, mostly making a pig's ear of it all. Slightly galling was the fact that they were all British flagged and owned! No shortage of advice was forthcoming from various anchored boats, the most vociferous being a Frenchman who ended up getting a short lesson in Anglo Saxon from a very tired and emotional (and embarrassed) skipper on a Sunseeker V70.

At 8.00pm we weighed anchor and potted further into the natural harbour up to Mahon, with Sarah clicking away on the camera. There is no doubt that she is getting almost as much fun out of the new one as me! (Photos will be posted at www.rhbell.com just as soon as we get to wifi. There is quite a backlog waiting to go up!) Added to the fun was the arrival of a stunning yacht, whose size defied any guessing, but it had 6 sets of spreaders on the mast which is a bit of a clue! Picture will be posted.

Left Menorca just before 9.00pm and set a course for Sicily, via the Southern tip of Sardinia. Just a faint breeze blowing absolutely bang on the nose, so we had a gently flapping sail as

well as the engine running. After an hour or so, the wind did come round enough to fill the main sail, but the instruments were still reading 1.5 knots of true wind. Lots of shooting stars were the sole entertainment during the night watches, plus of course a couple of large ships who needed to be in exactly the same bit of the sea as us at the same time.

Monday 28th July

As the sun started to rise, we were enveloped in fog, which then began to clear on our port side but remained down the starboard side and behind us. It was the start of my watch, so with the dawn breaking I thought that it might be time to drag the poor old plastic squid behind us for a while. Now there are those amongst you who think that I am more than a little mad to keep trying with this ridiculous lure and if truth be told I had tried to find a fishing shop on Saturday, but to no avail. So back into the water went the pink squid and I got on with the important business of listening to the Rolling Stones on my Ipod. Less than 30 minutes later the rod is bent right over and the reel is screaming as the line flew out. Such was my lack of confidence in this fishing lark, I did not bother to wake Sarah, but just slowed the boat and began to 'fight' the fish. Well, perhaps that is a bit of an over statement, but it did take nearly 30 mins to reel the line in, by which time I was certain that this was not a fish at all, but a clump of weed or somesuch item. So you can imagine my surprise and joy when I saw the glint of silver from the belly of a real live fish and better still, a rather big tuna. Had to wake Sarah to help me with landing it, which of course is something we had not quite got round to planning! I got the fish close to the back of the boat, where Sarah photographed it, just in case we failed to get it on board, which was handy because as I went to gaff it, the tuna made a last desperate bid for freedom and broke free. Now I had a serious problem as I had woken Sarah from a deep, but rather too short a sleep (half an hour ...) and also whetted her appetite for fresh tuna on the BBQ, only to fail through my incompetence. There may be more to this fishing lark than we first thought...Hinchers where where you when I needed your help?

Sarah returned to bed and I thought that I ought to try again with my fishing, just to prove it wasn't luck but consummate skill that nearly gave us fresh fish for lunch, although we did both agree that what might have been handy another time was a large landing net.

Anyway, out went the lure again and I settled down to read my 'Fishing for Cruisers' book, with reference to the sections on playing the fish and landing the catch!

About 20 minutes later I was taking a look at a cruise ship that was just beginning to appear over the horizon, when I saw two sperm whales in the distance. Too far away to photograph, but then suddenly it didn't matter because the rod was bent right over again and the line was flying out. Older and wiser I jumped to the rod and started to control the line brake. However this was different in a whole lot of ways. This fish was clearly considerably bigger than the last and had no intention of joining us on board! Sarah came up on deck when she heard the engine note change and found me fighting this fish for real. It took over an hour to win the struggle and finally we got it close enough to the back of the boat to see what we had got.

Well what we saw (and photographed) was a very large tuna with up to 8 (little – 4 feet-ish?) sharks circling it as it still thrashed about, waiting their chance. We hatched a plan to gaff the tuna and haul it on board, but clearly we needed to be quick as the sharks now were getting very confident and brushing the stern of the boat. Sarah pulled on the line to get the fish close to the stern and I reached out and sank the gaff hook into the body behind the head (well bloody close) and with a big heave pulled the fish clear of the water up onto the back deck. At this point Sarah poured some cheap Spanish Brandy into its gills (I read somewhere that this induces a heart attack) and with a minimum of fuss (it was probably exhausted anyway) it stopped flapping and died. Looking back into the sea, there were the dissappointed sharks and an extraordinary creature which was like a huge octopus tentacle, at least 10 feet long and largely transparent, wriggling down into the depths.

We now had no idea what to do next, so in a perfect display of teamwork and ingenuity, I read the chapter on gutting etc. and together using a sharp knife, a bread knife, chicken shears and a very large plastic tub that has proved useful in so many ways over the past 8 weeks, we photographed it (hope to post this pic by sat phone as well)) weighed it on our nice shiny new fisherman's pocket spring balance (15 kgs / 33 lbs) and Sarah then cut loads of fillets for the fridge. Sadly there was just too much for us to keep and store on board so the residue was confined to the deep, much to the delight of the sharks. As we lobbed the final bits over the side there was a large splash alongside us and suddenly there were dozens of dolphins playing nearby. Sarah got a couple of pictures, but frankly we rather felt as if we might have had enough excitement for one day already and it is still only 11.00am.

A passage to Sicily, Part Two

38:27.0N 09:43.6E

Monday 28th July (continued)

So guess what we had for lunch today? (Did I mention the tuna we caught earlier?) I am no expert on fresh fish, but Sarah was raving about the delights of our truly fresh Tuna steaks, mind you peering into the fridge made me very aware of the fact that Tuna may well be making up the bulk of our meals for a few days yet!

Long hot day with barely 4 knots of true wind, so we motored onwards towards the Southern tip of Sardinia, with Sarah finally getting her long awaited sleep followed by a swim in the deep blue water under us, mind you she did not stay in too long and required me to keep a sharp eye out for any following sharks. The Chart plotter and autopilot started to play up a bit, by which I mean that they turned themselves off and on at random, which is apparently a 'known' fault and can be remedied by downloading some new software from the internet. Very strange issue, but we understand that it has something to do with the AIS receiver that we also have on board.

Wind started to rise about 8.00pm so we stopped the engine and unfurled the genoa and were soon bombing along at 7 – 8 knots. It was at this point that I accidentally nudged the GPS (satellite) aerial with disastrous consequences. We were unaware that this aerial, fitted on the back rail of the boat, had been fitted rather badly and the cable was twisted inside and had chafed through, so that when I moved it slightly, the wires inside shorted out and fused ALL of our instruments. This led to some feverish activity whilst I tried to find out what had happened and what could we do about it. The good news was that we were sailing nicely and Sarah had the boat very well balanced so we continued sailing whilst I sorted out a standby hand held GPS unit so that we could get position fixes, to plot on a chart. (Charts, remember them?) Darkness fell to complicate things and we made our plans for the night watches which now required us to sail the boat manually (no autopilot), keep a much sharper lookout (no radar and no AIS) and to plot our position on the chart every hour, to ensure we were sailing on the right course! All the non navigational electrics were fine so lights etc. all worked OK.

In truth, none of this is any real hardship and is really only sailing and passage making as it always used to be, indeed the old hands will tell you we had it easy with a hand held GPS for our positions. The important point now was to contact our wonderful friends and electrical gurus Robert and Joyce Forsdike in Ipswich to see what advice they could come up with. (Oh yes, the satellite telephone worked OK as well!!) Robert was out when we rang, but as soon as he got home he was on the case, which amongst other things, involved him driving to work where he had got a duplicate set of electrical drawing for Serafina, which we had made when the boat was built in Sweden, just for such an emergency.

The catch was that as well as wanting to solve the problem, we also had to keep sailing by hand, stay on watch and most importantly get the required rest periods otherwise with just two of you it can all become a little overwhelming. Robert F. has an excellent understanding of the systems and the nature of our problem, but needed time to pin down what to do about it, so we agreed to contact him again early the next morning which gave us time to work our proper watches and get some desperately needed sleep. Fortunately, the shipping traffic was light all night and although we were clearly on one of the 'routes' we did not need to take any avoiding action at all.

Tuesday 29th July

The wind died away finally around 3.00am and we restarted the engine and continued on our way, with the light pollution above Sardinia showing that we were drawing close to the halfway point on the passage. As dawn broke, we were off the Southern tip of Sardinia and as we were able to get an intermittent mobile phone signal, I texted Robert & Joyce to see if they had found a solution. Text proved to be unreliable so it was back to the Sat phone again and Robert F gave me a series of things to go looking for, but without much luck. He then jumped into his car and drove off to work where he did some more research and (bless him) he came up with the exact problem and its resolution! I was given a very exact description of what I had to find and what to do when I found it, and although I needed to go back with at least one more set of questions, finally at around 11.45am all the systems came back on. Well actually not quite, the culprit was the faulty GPS aerial, so we have removed it from the system as part of the remedy, so although we now have back our autopilot, wind, depth and speed instruments, we do not have our chart plotter, radar or AIS, but right now we could not care less! Thank you Robert and Joyce and we hope you catch up on some sleep yourselves tonight.

Meanwhile as we had been trundling along this morning we came across a Sperm Whale who seemingly was quite reluctant to move out of our way, but as we slowed down it slid below the waves. I had spotted one earlier through the binoculars, quite a distance from us, but it had dived thrashing its huge tail in the air imperiously, but the classic photo opportunity was missed as it was just too far away.

Another superb lunch based around beautifully prepared tuna steaks (did I mention.....oh yes.) Sarah has been at the top of her game planning an array of different presentations over the next few days.

Very hot again today and still no wind, so on and on we motor, but strangely there is no traffic at all around us and the flat blue sea is totally empty, even the wildlife have taken the afternoon off. We have changed our destination plans as our first choice was a small port with few services and the new plan takes us to Trapani where there is a boatyard and electrical services. The approach to Trapani is interesting and should keep us on our toes without the aid of a chart plotter etc. The hope is to arrive there early tomorrow evening but we could do with some better sailing weather to speed up our progress.

And the other good news I forgot to announce is that so far the generator has run just fine since leaving Palma, although in truth we have had little need of it as we have had to motor so much over the past few days.

Hope to get a decent internet cafe or connection in Trapani so that we can update the photo pages.

A Passage to Sicily, final part.

38:00.01N 12:31.30E

Tuesday 29th July (continued)

Rest of Tuesday passed without incident although we did find ourselves sharing the same bit of sea with both large cargo ship and another Sperm Whale all at the same time.

Wind remained light as darkness fell and although there was virtually no moon, the clear sky and bright stars helped a bit, but inevitably there was reduced visibility at sea level. It is remarkable how quickly we have become used to all the modern aids to navigation and take them for granted. Night watches are usually pretty straight forward as you can track all ships over 300 tons (they are required by international law to transmit an AIS signal) and we have radar to pick out smaller targets long before they become critical. That is not to say you can always fully trust all this and you have to maintain a full lookout at all times, but.....the fact remains that when all this is removed, you find yourself concentrating very much harder, as the time taken from first spotting a distant flickering light, to it becoming a 1000ft container vessel travelling at 22 knots directly towards you is very short, especially if you are heading towards it on a reciprocal bearing! Of course almost all the lights turn out to be no problem at all as they end up passing some distance away, but you don't know until you know.

Wednesday 30th July

Happy Birthday to me! Celebrated my 56th birthday by being woken to do the midnight to 4.00am watch.

So having seen virtually no traffic all afternoon and early evening, the sea around us as we approached the Skerki Bank (serious shoals between Sardinia and Sicily) became positively full of shipping of all sizes and heading in all directions!

Dawn broke as we approached the outlying islands off the West of Sicily and we were immediately reminded that the geography of this island is very different to the ones we left several days ago. Here we found proper mountains, sticking through the clouds, which sort of reminded me that Mount Etna is around here somewhere!

The approach to Trapani is made by threading through some large islands and rocks, added to which you have ferries and hydrofoils as hazards. The good news about the hydrofoils, and truly they have loads operating here, is that the time from first spotting them to the moment when they roar past is very short, so you do not have to waste much time agonising as to whether you are on a collision course or not!

We entered the large commercial port and we made our way to the boatyard where we had planned to stay, we spotted a fuel station. It really might have read 'Welcome to Sicily and the Sicilian way'. We came alongside the quay wall and the two chaps were extremely pleasant and helpful, notwithstanding our lack of a common language. Filling the boat with fuel was the easy part, but it was trying to pay that caused all the delays whilst they seemed to have to wait for a part for the telephone (credit card payment) to be delivered. They were very hospitable and we had some very interesting discussions about our travels added to which we started to learn some Italian! Anyway, we were happy to wait as long as they wanted as we were in their beautifully air conditioned office with an amazing teak floor, which beat the unrelenting baking sun outside. Finally all was sorted when a van screeched to halt and a chap jumped out clutching the missing part. We then headed into the boatyard and were shown our berth (lazy lines to a concrete quay) in what appears to be a rather run down yard. Nevertheless at just 16 euro a night, with power and water we are quite happy. (Hope the shipyard next door building a very large ship do not feel the need to start too early in the morning.)

We tidied up Serafina after three nights at sea and then Sarah worked her magic on making some fantastic fish cakes using freshyes of course you remember, Tuna. I am perhaps beginning to wish I had caught a rather smaller one as this is beginning to resemble

Christmas where you know you are getting turkey every day, it is just all the different incarnations and creations.

I now also got to open my birthday presents which Sarah had bought and wrapped back in the UK. Slightly spooky as the principle gift was "The River Cottage Fish Book" and the card was a Simon Drew cartoon of the "One that got away".

Trapani, Sicily. A real delight!

Wednesday 30th July

Spoke to the boatyard about getting a Raymarine electrician to look at our GPS problem and they immediately called the man and he promised to call in tomorrow. I have to admit that after Spain, I had my doubts about when tomorrow might turn out to be, but have subsequently been staggered by the helpfulness and reliability of the Sicilians.

Despite the fact that we were both tired after the long trip and the poor sleep patterns, we went for a stroll into the town in the evening. This was mainly because on a exploratory trip in the afternoon, Sarah had been delighted by what she found by way of architecture and the ambience of the place. We walked miles, but I had to agree that it is an extraordinary place. The bulk of the town is built on a strict grid pattern, with almost all of the old buildings still standing from a grander earlier life. Almost impossible to photograph this as they clearly kept building more and more grand buildings so that you cannot get a view of the ones behind or even alongside!

We finally selected a small bar to sit outside and have a celebratory birthday drink and then walked back to the boat barely in time to tumble into bed and fall into a very deep sleep.

Thursday 31st July

Shipyards alongside us started work around 7.30am which eventually persuaded us to get up and get on with things. Sarah pressed both our and the boatyard's washing machines into service before setting off on the bike to do some shopping. I found the local Yanmar agent which was also a small chandlery, to see if I could arrange a major service on our engine. The chap in the shop could not have been more helpful "would you like this today?" was not the question I had expected. He then made a call and 5 minutes later an engineer was standing next to me discussing what time he would be there. I also needed a new spare fuse for the Raymarine system and he again made a call and a fellow from another chandlery arrived with a selection, sadly none were any good, but the service was extraordinary.

The Raymarine man arrived in due course and viewed the problem and gave me a number to call to try to make a warranty claim and at the same time order a new cable which he could fit as soon as it arrived. This involved phone calls and a fax from us to show the warranty card etc. but in due course all was well and we now will have to wait here a day or so, whilst the cable is in transit.

Engineer turned up on time to do the service and he did a great job although I think that I now know how to swear in Italian. Sarah had a fairly abortive trip in town, but did find a fishing tackle shop for me to visit later. You might find this strange, but in truth, the trip across from Menorca became rather dull after we had caught the big fish as we did not want another one and we have no smaller lures or tackle. So now we have some smaller gear and hope to catch some more sensible sized fish on future trips.

But the real excitement is the traffic. They have developed the perfect traffic calming system which is to have no road markings at all. Absolutely none. Every single road junction, major or minor is a free for all with the survival of the fittest/bravest/luckiest. The only white markings on any road anywhere are the occasional zebra crossings painted in the road. Be

very aware that these are merely assembly points for potential collective suicide attempts. You only step out on these if there is nothing in sight, as you are otherwise considered fair game by the motorists. Cycling on our bike is obviously quite a dangerous undertaking but in time you begin to get into the swing of things, as long as you remember to avoid all eye contact with the car or motorbike that is trying to pull out in front, beside or across you. Also, as the parking (a general term applied to cars that are not actually moving) is often done diagonally to the pavement, these cars back out cheerfully and blindly into the main road and whilst the oncoming cars will swerve round them and or take some kind of avoiding action, (anything rather than stop and let them out) you are at considerable risk of them just backing into you. Sarah has adopted a very sensible approach to big road junctions, which is to dismount and take to the pavements, assuming there is one., which again is not always the case! I crossed a major 3 way 'Y' junction this evening by picking a car to ride alongside and together we negotiated the mass of cars all trying to cross each other's paths to head in different directions. This worked well this time, but I do wonder what the accident rate is here (Sarah a fairly impressive smash earlier).

Trapani, day three

Friday 1st August

Spent a frustrating morning not really achieving any of our plans. Rather fruitless shopping trip which resulted in a lot of walking and very little success. After hunting for two days for a computer shop, I finally tracked one down (they rarely have useful signs outside shops) and it was perfect, except that they could not sell me anything as they do open properly until 20th August. To get to the internet cafe, we had to pass the railway station and Sarah was pointing out the bundles of belongings that were wedged up in the trees surrounding the square. These belong to the North Africans who all congregate here, sleeping rough during siesta and in the evenings and then go off in the day to work in the fields where they can earn six times what they could back in Tunis. Trapani is very much in the front line of the immigration problem they have in Sicily, because it is the closest point to Tunisia, which makes it the first landing point for migrants fleeing poverty and persecution in Africa. Unseaworthy boats laden with would-be illegal immigrants regularly ply the brief stretch of water. Hundreds each year fail to make it, as their vessels sink or they are forced overboard by unscrupulous members of smuggling gangs. The navigation warnings that we received on our Navtex machine on the passage over to Sicily warned of several drifting and abandoned boats in the sea between here and Africa and it seems sadly that these are all that remain of some of these desperate flights to a better life.

Raymarine in Milan confirmed that they have sent the cable to Trapani by courier, but this is not a perfect service and despite all promises to keep me fully informed, it has ended up that the part may not arrive here until Saturday, or perhaps Monday! Then we have the issue of our man coming along to do the job, so we might not be moving on to Marsala for a few more days.

Got chatting to the Australian owners of a Falcon 90 (very posh, brand new Italian built Gin Palace) moored near us. Sarah is very much hoping for a guided tour at some stage over the weekend and I have to admit I am pretty intrigued as to what they are really like inside. Mind you even the crew are dressed better than us to just clean the outside of the boat, (something they have been doing for nearly two days now) so we might need to smarten ourselves up a bit to get the invite! Stop press – Just been invited to go over at 9.30 on Saturday to watch the Tri-Nations All Blacks v. Australia rugby match on Satellite TV. I offered to bring beer etc. but the offer was waived away as they have loads!! (Might have to support Australia, which sticks in the throat a bit.) Must remember not to mention the World Cup too often..... but come to think of it, isn't this game just a replay of the 7 & 8th playoff....Opps!

Still in Trapani!

Monday 4th August

Deck marine (Raymarine Agents in Milan) have been their usual lethargic selves and so far on each of the 5 occasions that they have promised to call back they have failed to do so. The couriers appear to claim that they have delivered the cable this afternoon, but conveniently the local chap who is going to do the work (Vincenzo) has now got his phone switched off! They have pretty much mastered the siesta concept here, as they stop work around 1.00pm for lunch, return at 4.00pm (the answer to ALL questions is 4.00pm) and finish shortly afterwards, but possibly not till 6.00pm. Milan did apologise briefly at one point to say that not much happens in Southern Italy during August, which we knew, but had just hoped....ah well no point in getting stressed because they certainly aren't.

Most of the day then was spent fiddling about getting some of the silly maintenance jobs done while we wait, although there was a bit of excitement around 6.00pm as again I was on board awaiting a call back from Milan, when Sarah telephoned to say that the nice new combination lock that she had bought a week or so ago for the bike had jammed. The catch was that it was stuck in the locked position pinning the bike to probably the only set of traffic lights in the region! I was loathe to leave the boat right then as we could be almost certain that Vincenzo would choose that moment to put in an appearance, so in the end, Sarah walked back to the boat to replace me and I walked back to the bike armed with the cable cutters and a phrase book in case this was the moment I met my first policeman and need to explain why I was stealing this bike! All was well and the whole episode was watched by an amused butcher who was sitting outside his little shop enjoying our exploits.

All sorted.

Tuesday 5th August

Well another rather dull day, but at least we heard in the morning that the cable had arrived and that Vincenzo was going to fit it around 4.00pm (always 4.00pm...)

In fact his lad arrived on a scooter with the cable at 3.40pm which was remarkable and he immediately set about fitting it. This was hampered at first as he had come without any tools, so I lent him mine and together we threaded the new cable in along the route of the old one. There were the inevitable few setbacks and problems, as well as discovering some rather shoddy wiring done by Najad (I have kept the evidence...) but after nearly two hours we arrived at the course computer where it needed to be wired in. This was the lad's finest hour as he turned to me and asked if I knew where the wires went. Several heated phone calls later (Italians specialise in heated phone calls) he had his answer and all credit to him at this point for making sure that he made first class connections on all the junctions. We switched it all on and thank goodness, everything seems fine. The two of us then tried to complete the paperwork he had brought with him regarding the warranty claim, but even with my dictionary, we failed to get this all done. No problem, he said, as his boss would come and sort it out. Well of course his boss failed to appear as usual, but since he has our phone number and has failed to call us at any stage in all this, we are not too bothered and plan to move off tomorrow morning whatever happens.

Went out for a meal in the evening at a small restaurant that we had seen a few days earlier and had the most wonderful meal. We were clearly the floor show as we struggled with the language much to the amusement of the Sicilians around us, but we got there in the end. Anyone reading this who is headed this way, it is **Angelino Pasticcere** in Via Ammiraglio Stati (which is the waterfront road, pretty much opposite the ferry landing stages (Sarah was totally smitten by the charming 80 year old ? owner and the delicious ice creams). On our

way back to Serafina we were invited on board Norseman for a final goodbye drink as they too were off in the morning. In fact they have also been stuck here waiting for repairs. Norseman is a pretty much brand new 90 ft Motor Yacht, but the twin generators did not function properly (heard any of this before?) and the remedy seems to be the addition of booster fuel pumps. Three Italian engineers were flown out finally last night to install the equipment today so we both were able to toast our successful repairs!

Probably a good job we are leaving at last as I am certainly beginning to get a bit over confident walking around and crossing the roads. Frankly you take your life in your hands when you attempt crossing roads or streets as pedestrians are definitely at the bottom of the food chain. In addition I do not think that the introduction of the mobile phone has done anything to improve the situation! Drivers are happy to shout and argue with their passengers, other drivers, cyclists and now someone on the phone as well. The road outside the boatyard is quite unbelievable as it has cars parked down both sides, at least two lanes of cars and trucks passing in each direction and at least one more lane in either direction as drivers see fit! It would be easier to crawl across the M25.

In general though we have both enjoyed Trapani, which has a lot to commend it by way of really interesting and quite varied architecture and some very nice people. The shopping requires a bike as there really is nothing that can be described as a shopping area or centre. Plenty of shops, but they are spread over several miles and for good measure there is a railway that runs straight up the middle of the city and there is just one level crossing and that is a one way street. (unless of course you are on a motorbike or scooter and want to go the other way....)

The boatyard was very basic and Sarah has awarded the sole room that served as a combined shower, toilet and laundry, the lowest mark of the summer so far.

Roll on Wednesday morning.

Marsala

37:47.29N 12:26.48E

Wednesday 6th August

9.00am pulled away from the boatyard at Trapani and were very happy to be back on the sea again. Had a real problem trying to book a berth at Marsala as the phone numbers appeared to be wrong and the Sicilian on the other end was unable to comprehend a word of our excellent attempts at Italian! Decided that we would just have to wing it and turn up anyway as it was only a short trip and in the worst case we could simply press on to an anchorage 10 miles further on.

In the event we arrived just after midday and we were met anyway by the chap in charge of the local sailing club moorings and he was unbelievably helpful. We secured a good bows-to mooring using a lazy line and he and I went off to his office to do the paperwork. Our timing today was spot on as very quickly the few remaining moorings filled with yachts. We had lunch followed by a siesta and then at 5pm set about visiting the town and seeing if we could arrange a tour of one of the Marsala wine lodges.

Marsala is famed for its honey coloured dessert wine and the industry seems indebted to John Woodhouse who was the first to ship the fortified wine back to England. Nowadays there are large pipes on the main quay which pump the local wine into small tankers for export, apparently largely to France!

Marsala got its name from the Arabs (one of many invaders) who called it Marsal – Allah (Harbour of God). We were certainly expecting a rather more tourist orientated town than Trapani and were surprised to find that it is quite small and disparate. There is a nice cathedral which although largely built in the 17th century, it was not actually completed until 1956 when a returning emigrant produced the much needed cash. Again like Trapani, the town is spread over a wide area and so there is no real shopping area, although the bit around the cathedral was fairly busy. They do not have squares as such with cafes and restaurants so there is no real buzz about the place. We had a long hot walk, failing to find much of what we were looking for and discovering that here, most of the shops do not open in the afternoon during August. It was just as we got back to the yacht club that we chanced upon a Distillati which makes a very fine local Grappa. However the lad running the shop this afternoon was happy to let us taste the Marsala wines and eventually we found one that we very much liked. We bought a bottle with a view to perhaps returning in the morning to buy more, so he then invited us to try some finer wine which was fabulous and we could see where this was all heading! Being tired and hot, we opted to return to the boat so that we could consider what we would buy the next day. The real catch is that we simply do not have the room for all the nice wines that we keep coming across on board. We need to drink some before we can buy yet more.

Very hot evening and we have decided that really this is not the nicest place we have been to and the facilities are very basic, bearing in mind the 41 euro a night charge, so we will head off tomorrow, probably to Sciacca which the pilot book describes as a neglected fishing port, but one that will grow on you.

Sciacca is a great surprise.

37:30.23N 13:04.65E

Thursday 7th August

Left Marsala at 9.00am and probably not before time. Sicily does not seem to be unduly bothered about raw sewerage and the odour around 5.00am was very unpleasant down in the harbour.

Not a breath of wind for the entire 50+ mile trip and certainly no sign of the forecast's force 4 breeze. Kept quite close to the coast looking for a sight of an acropolis and complex of temples at Selinute. The first of these temples dates from 600BC and the subsequent ones continued to be built up until 400BC. The remains of the two harbours that made this site such a major and prosperous city are now completely silted up after being destroyed by Hannibal in 409BC and never recovered. We never caught sight of it, probably because of all the modern stuff that has sprung up along the coast.

Arrived in the outer harbour of Sciacca and tried to radio the yacht club as instructed, but got no response, so we continued our approach towards the pontoons and the few yacht moorings. At this point a very enthusiastic Custode (Agostini) waved us into a slot and helped take our lines. You really cannot fault almost all of the places we have been in the Med for their help when you are mooring up, but the Sicilians in the last two places have been really great characters and very welcoming. Mind you, we understand very little of what is actually being said but body language, hand gestures and beaming smiles suggest that we are not unwelcome!

The pilot book was not wrong when it suggested that this place had a bit of a 'run down' feel to it. We are probably the only visiting yacht here, which I find surprising given the lack of marinas and harbours along this coast. In fact I have been very surprised by the lack of yachts cruising along this coast generally, which might explain the pretty poor facilities

everywhere, or is it the other way round? Certainly the town around the harbour is almost derelict except by the fishing harbour, which is still an incredibly busy, bustling commercial area.

At 6.30pm we set off to climb up the steep hill to where we believed the centre of the town was, but before we could leave the club premises, we were introduced to the club's president, Giovanni, who insisted on giving us coffee and then a bottle of Sicilian wine to take back to the boat and finally he drove us up the long and almost sheer climb to the town centre and gave us directions (after a fashion) on how to complete the tour and return to the boat on foot. The drive predictably was un-nerving and it might have been better if he had paid any attention to the road, other users and pedestrians. The decision to put the steering wheel on the left now seems to have been quite arbitrary!. They do at least have a few white lines on a road near the harbour, but quite what purpose they serve is unclear as the users pay no regard to such things!

However, the 'centre' of the town was a revelation as it really was a huge improvement on the very spread out arrangements at Trapani and Marsala. In fact it is quite obviously a tourist centre with countless ceramics shops (some really imaginative) and no end of souvenirs. It is probably exactly how we had expected Marsala to be and it seemed strange here because the port is so dilapidated. It transpires that the town is built on an area of volcanic activity and the healing powers of the various spas, open air grottoes and baths still attracts Sicilians and tourists to 'take the waters' and has done since Daedalus discovered them when fleeing from King Minos. (well, according to legend that is!)

Any yachts following in our footsteps might like to note that there are two competing clubs with pontoons. We used ADS Circolo Nautico "Il Corallo" Phone 0925 21611 www.circolonauticoilcorallo.it (their email address is info@ the web address)

Moving on!

37:05.47N 13:56.71E

Friday 8th August

Slipped away at 07.45am, but not before Agostini, the friendly custode had been along to say good morning. He seemed a little aggrieved that we would not stay for a coffee!

Again a day of little or no wind and so we potted the 50 miles to Licata, passing a fairly constant stream of trawlers heading home to Porto Empedocle, which is about half way along our route today. Behind Porto Empedocle is the ancient site of Agrigento which is Sicily's oldest tourist site (Valley of the Temples) but has also achieved some notoriety as being home to some of Sicily's mafia families, reputedly the key players in Italy's narcotics trade. (Let's hope they do not read my blog!)

Arrived off Ligate and paused to swim off the stern to cool down before going in. At this point the cockpit chart plotter decided that it was just too hot to go on and it dimmed suddenly. I turned it off to let it cool down, but then found that it would not restart at all. Decided that we did not really need it at this stage so left it for 10 minutes and tried again and this time it restarted perfectly! Phew!

Entered the harbour, but immediately got quite confused by what we saw. We knew that this was not a place that seemed to welcome any yachts and mooring was limited to either a rundown and rickety walkway which was probably too shallow for us anyway, mooring alongside the harbour wall, or an anchorage with dubious holding! But we could see three yacht masts that appeared to be behind the outer harbour wall. In the event we discovered

that they have built two new inner sea defences (since our 2006 guide was written and the Navionics card was updated) which partially embrace an old wreck and now provide a large anchorage with quite reasonable protection from most wind directions and no wash from the busy fishing and commercial fleets running out of the other side of the port. (in fact, a perfect Chris Mortimer anchorage – no sight of open sea!) The view is not too exciting as we are surrounded by rough rock walls on three sides and a construction site situated between us and the town itself!

At 6.00pm the wind got up to welcome us to the anchorage and reached 25 knots for a while before dropping away around 7.00pm. By 9.00pm the sound of disco music drifted across the bay to us, making us all the happier not to have tried to head for the old quay.

All or Nothing.

37:03.49N 15:16.98E

Funny the impact a lone mosquito can have!

Today was a great day's sailing, which saw us cover 92 miles anchor up to anchor down in around 12 hours. It is extraordinary how we have gone 10 days without a breath of wind and today we experienced most of the effects of the Sirocco, starting with low cloud, poor visibility and a very heavy dew and preceded by stifling heat and culminating in 35 knots of wind blowing from the West, which given that we were heading East, was a good thing!

The plan today was to get away fairly sharply and head either for Pazzallo or Porto Palo. Neither of these sounded particularly attractive as they were both really only anchorages with dubious holding or existing ground tackle for us to snag our anchor on. However, they were about 40 to 50 miles away and that makes for a good day's sailing. We then planned on Sunday to press on to Siracusa where we intend to stay for several days before setting off to Greece.

Sarah's day started badly when she became aware of a mosquito buzzing around her head at 5.45am. She decided to move into the forepeak, but within two minutes had made an executive decision which involved us upping anchor and taking advantage of an early start to head straight to Siracusa! Sadly things deteriorated for her as she had spent the previous evening cleaning all the windows, inside and out, only now to find that the incredibly heavy dew was washing dirt out of the teak and onto all the windows. Shortly after that, the salt spray from the sea washing over the deck did for the rest! The anchor then came up covered in grey clay, which was smeared all over the last 5 metres or so of the chain as well, so we now also had clay and mud on the deck.

We motored out of the harbour mouth under very low cloud and were mindful of the UGrib weather map which last night promised us 25 to 30 knots of wind, so despite the light breeze blowing, we put up the main with a reef in. Before long the wind began to fill in behind us and the wind speed gradually increased up to 18 knots true. We put up the hard wind jib and began to run downwind at ever increasing speed as the wind speed rose further. The seas now began to develop into quite long rolling waves as the wind picked up to 30 knots and we were bombing along at 8+ knots. Next we began to surf down the waves, which is not particularly dramatic but does turn us into a 17 ton surf board and gave us up to 10 knots across the ground. The catch during all this was that we had a headland in the South Eastern corner of Sicily to get round and the course was hard to maintain dead downwind in these conditions, so eventually it could only be done by hand steering and some very hard concentration.

By 1.00pm the wind speed had reached 35 knots, but we had also got to the headland and were able to gybe across the wind and start to broad reach up the East coast, heading Northwards to Siracusa. For the next two hours we maintained speeds of 9 to 10 knots as the waves died down a bit and then suddenly the wind veered to the North and dropped to 5 knots! The seas became confused (good nautical term!) as the South flowing mass met the North flowing surf that we had been riding. The net result, sadly was that we ended up dropping the sails and motored the final 15 or so miles to our destination in a flat calm. However, the good news was that having not seen any wildlife since we arrived in Sicily, we were joined during this last stage by 8 dolphins who jumped and dived and pirouetted around us for a while.

Siracusa is an area steeped in history with the principle attraction being the old town of Ortigia dating back to 734BC and the colonists from Corinth. But more of that anon as we plan to be here a few days. Great anchorage in front of the town quay, which we are sharing with a number of pretty spectacular Super Yachts and loads of extraordinary fish that keep leaping several metres into the air and plunging back. Presumably they are being harassed by something bigger still!

Siracusa

Sunday 10th August

Lazy day with the morning spent exploring the old town (Ortigia) and viewing the delightful streets and buildings, quite a few of which have undergone a considerable amount of restoration. Quite a history here as it dates back to 743 BC when first founded by colonists from Corinth and quickly went on to become the city-state of Magna Graecia rivalling even Athens in power! It became the largest fortified city of the Greek world with half a million inhabitants and a large fleet and in 413 BC defeated the Athenian fleet and then went on to enjoy 200 years of prosperity controlling the Western Med until it fell out with Rome and was conquered. It suffered extensive damage during the second World War when it was bombed by both the Allies and the Germans, but despite all this there are a considerable number of remains from the old Greek city.

We spotted a very nice looking roof terrace restaurant overlooking the natural harbour and anchorage and so booked a table for the evening. Pretty much everything was closed however, so we returned to Serafina for lunch and a bit of a siesta, however the siesta bit never quite happened as we pressed the generator into service and ran several loads of washing and got various jobs done.

In the evening we took the dinghy over to the port to have a drink in the square outside the cathedral, before going for our meal at 8.00pm. All went very well until we arrived (mostly dry from the choppy trip across the bay) and I discovered that I had overlooked bringing any shoes. So Sarah pressed on to enjoy a drink and watch the passeggiata, which is the evening parading along the streets of most towns by pretty much everyone looking to impress, whilst I motored back across the bay to get some footwear!

Met Sarah for a swift catch-up drink and then we went and had a fantastic meal sat at the front of the terrace (good job we booked as the place became packed) Afterwards we took a look at the large motor cruisers backed up to the main town quay (the really big boats were anchored out in the bay with us) and had to photo a couple in particular as they really were so tacky! We will post these pictures and quite a few others taken over the past 6 days just as soon as we can get wi-fi or a connection in a cafe at www.rhbell.com. Sarah has reminded me that one of these on the quay was big enough to have three complete decks each with its own 'themed' patio area and don't they just love to be looked at!! Finally, we retired to Serafina for what was a stiflingly hot night, sleep not being helped by some

dreadful live singing from one of the bars over in the town. (In total contrast to the very good group who were playing there last night.)

Monday 11th August.

Both went ashore this morning to undertake different shopping expeditions. Sarah took the bike and eventually was able to get a big food shop done in preparation for tomorrow's 2 night trip to Greece. I went in search of an Internet cafe that would let me plug my laptop into their system and some electrical bits and pieces to either solve the problem of the non-working remote anchor winch control or to replace the control unit with a three way switch as a temporary repair. This turned out to be a long hot walk around a very large town that has to all intents and purposes gone away on holiday for 4 weeks. Found helpful shops that gave directions to other shops that were bound to have the part in question, but they always turned out to be shut or unable to help. Neither of the two (empty) internet cafes were prepared to allow me to use my laptop and it was only at the last moment that I got lucky with the three way, waterproof switch. We met up back at the dinghy (Doris) and Sarah related having witnessed the rather unusual site of an Italian traffic policewoman at work, from the lofty heights of a wheelchair! Needless to say the traffic was gridlocked due to extensive road works whilst the poor policewoman had to negotiate triple parked cars and pavements without ramps.

Back to Serafina to rewire the anchor remote gear (once again huge thanks to Robert Forsdike for guidance over the phone for the new wiring scheme) whilst Sarah planned the journey for tomorrow. Not looking forward to dealing with the Greek bureaucrats again. All the pilot books etc. tell of typical red tape and dubious charging schemes as well as the need to arrive at a registered 'Port of Entry' before going anywhere else in the country. Not sure they have fully embraced the ethos of the EU just yet, but bet they have worked out how to get all the grants etc.

Going ashore again this evening to enjoy the view and a quiet drink followed by some of the fantastic ice cream that Sicily specialises in.

Tomorrow's log might be a bit hit or miss as we intend to leave Sicily around 2.00pm and will not arrive in Argostoli (Cephalonia) until Thursday.

Sicily to Greece

37:37.85N 17:55.36E

Tuesday 12th August

Left the anchorage briefly at 9.00am to get fuel from the town quay and then dropped the hook again back in the bay as we were not planning on leaving for Greece until 2.00pm.

Did some shopping and found a fabulous market so we are well stocked up on veg etc.! Went into the old town for a coffee and an ice cream and eventually returned to Doris the dinghy to motor back out to Serafina around 11.30am to find that 20 knots of wind had sprung up and that there was a fairly large chop (lots of waves) in the bay. This meant us getting rather wet in the return trip in the dinghy and it was not easy getting back on board Serafina either.

As planned however, we were ready to leave at 2.00pm and we lifted the anchor and set the sails and a course for Argostoli, on the island of Cephalonia, Greece. Had a cracking sail for the first 6 hours and were well ahead of the planned timings, however as darkness fell, so did the wind and before long we were back to gently motor sailing and finally just motoring.

Joined by some dolphins for an hour or so around 1.00am but once the moon dropped below the horizon, visibility dropped right away.

Quite a few large ships crossing our route so far which keeps us on our toes, but since daylight on Wednesday 13th August, we have seen no ships at all and have just met a British yacht sailing on the exact reciprocal course as us, heading for Sicily! 150 miles from the nearest land and we passed within 20 metres of each other.

Oh and no fish so far!!

The Eagle has landed.

38:10.71 20:29.37E

Wednesday 13th August

The day started hot and pretty much breathless, so we motored for most of the day, but as we had planned to arrive at Argostoli in daylight on Thursday morning and we were ahead of schedule thanks to the first 6 hours sailing last night, we kept the revs down and slid along at around 6.50 knots. Very little to see or report throughout the day as we came across just the one yacht and virtually no shipping at all. The good news (so to speak) was that we had acquired a copy of the Sunday Times on Tuesday morning, so we had plenty of reading.

At 5.00pm the wind started to pick up and before long we were able to cut the engine and were slipping along at 5 knots in just 8 to 9 knots of breeze.

At around 5.30pm, in preparation for the night watch system, we sat down to enjoy some drinks and nibbles (non-alcoholic sadly) and to toast the nearing of the end of the first stage of our travels, namely arriving in Greek waters. As we finished these and Sarah was about to gear herself up into cooking supper (having already prepared supper as it gets dark fairly suddenly at 8.30 and we need to maintain our night vision)the fishing rod tip bent over and the reel started whining, heralding our second catch! Slightly trickier landing a fish when the boat is sailing along and of course as luck would have it, the wind was freshening all the time and so our speed kept increasing as well!

Fortunately this time we had managed to catch the perfect sized tuna (3kgs) as Sarah was able to cut this up into 12 lovely steaks (see photos at www.rhbell.com) without any wastage.

I think it is only right at this stage to perhaps point out that catching and landing the fish is definitely the easy bit. Gutting, bleeding and cutting it up are a far harder task, without the added excitement of trying to do this on a moving deck under sail. Lovely to be able to catch and eat fresh fish as you go along and it is perhaps more than a little ungrateful to wish that we could perhaps catch a different species on our next attempt, but all the same..... And yes, previous supper had to be abandoned in favour of very fresh produce!

The next irony of the day came as darkness fell and we cleared away the excellent meal that had only been swimming behind us just 1.5 hours ago: the wind speed increased up to a perfect 15 + knots on the beam and we were whizzing along in near perfect conditions. We were getting ahead of the schedule, which is less important if you are heading for a friendly port that you know well, but our destination was unknown to us and generally trying to enter Mediterranean harbours after dark is a very risky business. The two alternatives were to race on and then try to find an anchorage in the dark on the slightly inhospitable and unlit coast of Cephalonia, or slow down! We opted at midnight to slow the boat down, which involved furling the genoa up (a lot) and putting a reef in the main.

Thursday 14th August

This philosophy helped a bit, but the wind was still increasing and the distance to Argostoli was shortening too rapidly, so bizarrely by the end of the night as the wind finally eased, we were sailing in 15 knots of breeze with just a scrap of head sail and the equivalent of 3 reefs in the main, and still making 4 – 5 knots!

The day dawned with Cephalonia looming large in front of us and naturally there was a dramatic increase in the amount of ships crossing our path. We sailed into the mouth of the bay that leads to Argostoli and dropped the sails and motored slowly into the small harbour looking for the customs quay where we had to first tie up and report into Greece. Fortunately there was a large space which had just been vacated by two Italian motor cruisers so we were able to carry out our first stern-to mooring using the bow anchor. Normally this is not the hardest thing to do, but when there are only two of you and at least three separate jobs, as well as the inevitable crosswind, it has the potential to be exciting. (The divorce courts are full of these cases I am sure!) The good news is that our newly modified anchor remote switch on the steering pedestal worked a treat and one of the English crew from a huge super yacht came along the quay to save Sarah from having to make a rather dodgy leap of faith onto the land. Sadly he had absolutely no idea at all as to what to do with the rope once he had caught it, so Sarah diplomatically watched him wrap it round and round a bollard and thanked him for at least trying.

Now we had the bit that I had perhaps been looking forward to the least since we left the UK. To sail into Greece is to enter a nightmare of red tape and bureaucracy according to the pilot books and legend. I have vivid and unhappy memories of dealings with the dreaded Port Police from our days in the flotilla business back in 1980 and the corruption...

Well if any of this is still true, it certainly is not true of the officials in Argostoli. We were dealt with immediately, made to feel welcome and finally rather guilty when the officer dealing with our case apologised at the end of a long session of filling in forms (most of which he appeared never to have seen before and had to keep asking his boss for help) for speaking such poor English.

Nothing was too much trouble and they carefully explained all the (complex) rules that apply in Greece and what we needed to do. It seems that not too many boats choose to start their cruises through Greece down here so we were made to feel a little special.

As a side issue, the question of paperwork has been a lot less onerous as we have travelled down from England than we were perhaps given to expect. The Portuguese and Spanish marinas handle all the paperwork for you and although there are usually forms to be filled in at every overnight stop, frequently the officials at the port will do this for you as they have to enter it onto a computer anyway. Sicily was a little different and we have been told since that the Italians will go to quite long lengths to avoid filling in or dealing with any of the required paperwork! The 90 ft motor cruiser Norseman, that were moored next to us in Trapani, had to demand various forms were signed and stamped on their arrival from Tunisia as they needed evidence of their arrival for tax purposes. The officials were very unhappy at having to do this. Our experience in Sicily was that the marinas or boatyards just photocopied key documents and chucked them in a large and untidy pile on the off chance that one day they would have to show them to somebody.

So, having done the formal paperwork, we now had to move Serafina off the customs quay and find a space on the busy town wall. Again this required us to moor stern-to using the anchor and apart from a nervous moment or two when I confused 'up' with 'down' on my unmarked shiny new switch, we reversed rather stylishly (!) into a large space where our lines were taken by the English owner of the yacht alongside us. We tidied up and went for a coffee and exploratory stroll around the town.

Argostoli is the main town on the island of Cephalonia and we quickly came to realise that we were back in the land of British tourists. That is not a slur, but just an observation that suddenly signs are in English and everyone speaks English. Sarah has been trying to buy some cotton to repair some items since we left Spain and here she finds just the shop she has hunted for so far and wide. She tried in vain to demonstrate what she wanted (Sicilians in particular have no use for learning English so signs works well!) until the elderly lady running the shop said, " ah, cotton." The internet cafe is happy to allow us to use our laptop on their system for as long as we want and finally during this very short stroll, I found the two shops that I have spent hours in Trapani, Marsala, Sciacca and Siracusa looking for, side by side just 150 metres from the boat!

So here we are finally in Greece as we planned all those years ago. Serafina has cruised just under 5,000 miles since we picked her up in Sweden in July 2007 and now we have time to go and visit all our old haunts and look up a few old friends in the Ionian Islands. Act Two starts here.....

Fiskardo revisited

Sunday & Monday 17th & 18th August

Spent the days alternating between working on things on the boat and watching the excellent floor show which is the masses of yachts and motor boats trying to moor up in the harbour. This spectacle was added to on Monday by the presence of a fierce cross wind, which made it hard enough if you knew what you were doing.

At one stage on Monday around 1.00pm there were 12 yachts simultaneously circling the inner harbour plus several motor boats and catamarans. It is frightening how little so many of them know about what they are supposed to be doing and I thank my lucky stars that I am no longer a flotilla skipper trying to make all this happen safely! Nevertheless we do have an involvement as we are sitting on our lovely boat, ready to jump into action when, inevitably one of these boats attempts to moor in the gap between us and the boats either side. It tends to concentrate the mind when it is your own boat as opposed to a charter yacht you are sitting on!

At one stage a small charter yacht full of Italians attempted to moor between us and our friends on Targa Star. They started badly by laying the anchor at the wrong angle and far too late, so it resulted in their boat 'sitting' on ours (we were the downwind boat) whilst they tried to sort out lines and things. They had not thought about fenders or much else, so they benefited from some well chosen words of advice from Sarah! It was when the lady on board tried to push their boat away using a boat hook that Sarah's diplomatic skills deserted her and her loud and determined shout would have been instantly understood in any language! In the end they came to understand that they needed to go out and try again at which point they left and selected another spot to moor in altogether.

Sarah spent a fair part of Sunday splicing an anchor warp onto our anchor chain so that we have a lot more scope to play with. She has been avoiding this little task for the best part of two years mainly by being in denial of its need, but finally she has reluctantly accepted the need and did a fantastic job, although I suppose the proof will be when the wind blows VERY hard one day.

We were planning to go to Nidri on Tuesday, but unfortunately Sarah has cracked one her temporary crowns and so we are going to head for Lefkas Town and see if we can find a dentist. We have an old friend who runs a marine business there and so he should be able to point us in the right direction.

Lefkas Town

38:50.192N 20:42.705E

Tuesday 19th August

Up at 7.00am to get away before all the rush!

Quietly went about the quite lengthy process of recovering the three lines we had ashore, before getting the dinghy back to the boat and raising the anchor. No wind to speak of, so this was all very calm and easy! Eventually we got all sorted out and tied the dinghy down on the foredeck and set off for Lefkas Town to search for a dentist.

The route to Lefkas, took us north past the island of Arkoudhi on our right and then up the Meganisi Channel with Meganisi Island to our right and Lefkas Island to our left. Next we passed between the town of Nidri (Lefkas Island) where Sarah spent a large part of 1980 teaching sailing and the Onassis' private island of Skorpis. Finally the trip today ended as we motored up the Lefkas canal to the town quay where we found a perfect spot empty. We dropped our anchor and reversed carefully into the gap, tying up around Midday.

We locked up Serafina and went immediately to find our friend Joe Charlton to get a recommendation for a dentist. Joe was out on a job when we got to his office, but his wife Robin, helpfully made a call and sent Sarah off to a nearby dental practice. Sadly it turned out that this dentist was on holiday, so Sarah returned to see Robin again and got the details of a second one. There was a bit of luck this time as the dentist (who was supposed to be on holiday too) had pooped in to do an emergency job, so she was able to make an appointment for Sarah to return in two days time, which was the best she could offer.

During the afternoon we sorted out a few outstanding jobs on Serafina and then around 5.00pm, Sarah set off again into the town to see if she could find a dentist prepared to do something today. The very good news is that this time she got lucky and although the dentist had no English, he got on with fixing both the broken tooth and the broken crown immediately! Fingers crossed that this time it all holds together until November.

Spot of nostalgia when a flotilla of Jaguars (Sailing Holidays) came in, which reminded me how stressful it had been trying to moor up such a fleet every night. Also there was one of the old Seascape Sadler 32's, now in private hands of course, moored on the quay.

We plan to stay here for another day and then head south to Meganisi and spend a day or two anchored in one of the bays there, before heading North to the island of Paxos via Peveza, which is on the mainland.

Preveza, well Aktion really!

38:56.911N 20:45.758E

Wednesday 20th Aug.

Day started quite early....well 2.30am to be exact, when from a flat calm the wind suddenly got up from the East and started blowing at 20 knots, pretty much straight onto the quay. In no time this increased to 30 knots and there was a lot of activity as boats started dragging anchors and backing into the quay etc. We held firm (we had a lot of scope out) and sat and watched as boats were milling round in the area in front of us, looking for a spot to drop their anchors again. By 3.30am the wind had died completely and so it was back to bed,

unfortunately this was the cue for the bar behind us to start playing very loud music, which did not stop until 5.00am.

Lefkas is only an island because of the canal which separates it from the Greek mainland. There is a floating bridge that opens (swings across to one side) on the hour every hour to let boats pass. The current canal was actually only built around 1900 by the Greek government, but earlier canals have been dug here by the Corinthians around 7th century BC and by Augustus during the Roman occupation, and there are remains of a Turkish/Venetian bridge. Both ends of the canal have the remains of Venetian forts guarding them. The town itself was extensively damaged in the 1953 earthquake, but unlike some of the other large towns on the other islands, Lefkas was not rebuilt to any conscious plan and is still a strange jumble of corrugated iron and brick houses leaning over narrow streets. Sarah was inspired to go off with the camera to capture some of this, but as you will see at www.rhbell.com came back with a comprehensive collection of bell towers! She also managed to arrange to get her hair cut which was a relief to her as she has been struggling to find anywhere suitable.

Joe and Robin Charlton, joined us for drinks in the evening. Joe arrived slightly late as he had to go out to sea to rescue a yacht with a failed engine, (he runs a couple of marine businesses, Contract Yacht Services and Yacht Assist) which he towed in and parked in the space next to us! We spent the next few hours catching up on all the news of old friends from our flotilla days etc.

Thursday 21st Aug.

Left Lefkas Town in time to catch the 10.00am bridge opening and passed through the narrow and shallow Northern entrance to the canal and headed for Preveza, which lies in the entrance to the Gulf of Amvrakia. This area is has a multitude of ancient sites, but is probably best known for being the site of the Battle of Actium, when Octavian defeated Anthony, the result of which determined the course of the Roman empire.

The main reason for coming here today was to visit the three boatyards on the Aktion side of the entrance to the gulf, with a view to arranging wintering Serafina here. The one which was recommended to us was already fully booked, so time is perhaps running out. The biggest yard, suitably named Cleopatra seems fine and is not too far from Corfu for getting a flight home. We moored up for the night in the brand new marina also run by the Cleopatra boatyard and went out for a meal in the only taverna for several miles. Here we met an English couple who are just laying their boat up this week and they were able to give us loads of advice, both about laying up in Greece and some ideas for places to visit over the next few days in the gulf.

This afternoon, we watched as a huge fire took hold on the far side of the entrance, behind the town of Preveza. The size of the fire was quite staggering and fanned by the onshore wind, it seemed to be spreading very quickly. Eventually it began to die down, but we were then treated to a display by a fire fighting plane, which was a elderly seaplane which scoops up a large volume of sea water and then 'bombs' the fire by flying low and dumping the water in one hit. (Picture at www.rhbell.com)

Sorry, but due to an absence of wi-fi around here, the new photos will not be posted for a few days.

Anyone wishing to call us or text us might like to note that we now have a Greek mobile phone number which is 0030 695 606 5601.

Gulf of Amvrakia

38:55.543N 20:54.177E

Friday 22nd Aug

Collected paperwork for arranging to leave Serafina in Aktion (Preveza) for the winter and left the marina to explore the Gulf of Amvrakia.

This is a remarkably large natural harbour that surely rivals Poole in so many ways. For a start it is deep and very large! You can sail pretty much anywhere you want and it is full of beautiful empty bays and protected inlets which are all ideal for anchoring in for a secluded stay, sometimes without any other boats to be seen. Very few opportunities to moor up a boat of our draught in any of the villages, but anchoring off is fine. There are countless fish farms and we understand that turtles, pelicans and dolphins are all to be found here.

We firstly motored over to Preveza town just to look at the mooring opportunities for a visit another day. We then unfurled the genoa and sailed gently out into the gulf heading first to Vouvalos which is a collection of islets which are rich in bird life (pelicans and kingfishers included) and provide shelter from the prevailing wind. Of course in our case the wind was blowing 15 – 20 knots from the wrong direction which meant that they did not give us any protection from the sea which was running, so we headed South and sailed down to a beautiful bay just the other side of an island (and connecting pedestrian causeway) from the town of Vonitsa. Above the town is a very large Venetian fort, itself built on the site of a former Byzantine fort. It must have a fabulous view out over the gulf and we may pop over in the dinghy tomorrow and go up and visit it, or perhaps leave that for another day.

Just a couple of other boats in the bay with us, which was very peaceful. Made use of the gas BBQ on the stern rail for the first time this evening and enjoyed some great sausages that we bought in Lefkas. Probably time to get the rod out again and see what we can catch and cook tomorrow!

Concerned that we must be beginning to fit in rather better these days, as instead of shopkeepers always assuming we are English (!) we are getting stopped in the street by drivers asking for directions! In my case there is the extra complication of remembering which language we are supposed to be using. Every time I begin to get the hang of greetings, thanks etc. we move onto another country and then I get all confused again. Greek is one language that we were able to use pretty well in this context, but having arrived, I cannot stop using my limited Italian. Then there are the boats that you moor alongside in the evenings. Always nice to exchange pleasantries in their language, but just to make things a little bit harder we have recently encountered a French family on a German flagged yacht, Italians on a British flagged yacht and of course Brits in Greek flagged yachts. Certainly revising my opinion of the Italians, since during the past two weeks, no less than three lots have come up to us to say how beautiful our boat is.

Saturday Night fever in Preveza Town.

38:57.494N 20:45.310E

Saturday 23rd Aug

Reluctantly left our very pleasant anchorage near Vonitsa and headed off to explore more of the gulf under sail.

However, today turned out to be very hot indeed and there was not a breath of wind either, apart from the initial 12 knots which encouraged us to set out in the first place, so we eventually chose to cruise back to Preveza at the mouth of the gulf and moored up, stern-to the town quay around mid afternoon.

A little disappointed not to have come across all the turtles we were told about. The thing though about turtles is that they are a whole lot harder to spot than say Dolphins. For a start they don't tend to swim over to you and perform tricks! Clearly we need to spend some time in the shallower bays where they are feeding on the jelly fish which abound here in the gulf.

We plan to return here anyway at the end of the season to winter Serafina at the Cleopatra Marina Boatyard, so we can perhaps have a few days proper sailing around the gulf and explore more of the bays, villages and ancient sites.

We began to get a bit concerned about coming here as the quay quickly filled up during the rest of the afternoon with yachts, most of which seemed to be collecting/transferring charter guests. This probably has something to do with the airport nearby, although the term 'airport' used to be a bit grand for what was actually still a military airfield when we worked out here. In addition, being Saturday night, various preparations were going on along the pedestrianised waterfront for what looked like live entertainment! Another clue might have been the extraordinary amount of bars along the waterfront, for what appears to be such a small town. In the end, the live event seemed to be some sort of awards night for an art competition, although in truth we were not quite sure! The world and his family descended on the town for the evening and we were certainly part of the entertainment as they all promenaded along the quay viewing all the boats. Preveza has certainly upgraded itself from a small market town and fishing harbour to something resembling a serious Greek holiday resort.

Our plan is to leave quite early tomorrow for the trip up to Paxos Island, but we might be a bit short on sleep.

Read up a bit on the battle of Actium (various spellings) in 31 BC, which came after a long period of civil war following the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BC). Anthony had gathered a fleet to invade Italy which he assembled at Actium, on the opposite side of the entrance to the gulf from Preveza. Octavian based his fleet slightly to the North and they both sat out most of the summer waiting for the other to make a move. Finally Anthony initiated some action by moving his fleet to the mouth of the estuary. Octavian waited until the regular NW afternoon wind got up and attacked with his faster and more manoeuvrable galleys. The rout was completed when Cleopatra fled the battle taking her Egyptian fleet with her, followed closely by Anthony who left his fleet to their fate. (But then you all have seen the film before...)

Anyway the point of reminding you all about this is that Octavian celebrated his victory by building Nikopolis (Victory City) on the site from which he had commanded his fleet, just 3 miles North of Preveza. This became the capital of the region and spread to include theatres, temples, baths and no less than three harbours. (two inside the gulf) The Apostle Paul stayed there in its heyday, but then sadly it was destroyed by Alaric the Goth (remember him?) and never properly recovered.

Paxos

39:12.158N 20:11.213E

Sunday 24th August

The Preveza night life calmed down around 4.00am and so we slept soundly right through to 7.00am, which is when the bin men arrived with their lorry! Had planned to get away early anyway, so we upped anchor and set sail for Paxos.

Southerly wind was certainly the right direction, but again it failed to raise itself above 4 knots all morning. Made good progress with a knot of tide under us all the way and found ourselves passing the entrance to Mongonissi on the Southern end of Paxos around midday. Could not resist a quick look round the bay, just to map out where we might moor when we returned later in the week.

Pressed on to the Northern entrance to Gaios harbour and took a good look round trying to pick a good (quiet) mooring point. Usual practice here with dropping the bow anchor and reversing to the quay, but these islands are notorious for having rocks and rubble just under the water close to the edge, which can do some serious damage to your rudder if you are not careful. Getting the hang of going in bow first with the forward looking sonar on. This gives us an underwater profile of the sea bed, so we can check for any obstructions. We then back out, turn round, drop the anchor and slowly reverse back in.

Strolled into town and our first stop was Gaios Travel, which is still run by our friend Yanis, who seems as youthful and ageless as ever. In fact at 50 he has just got married and has a baby son. Lots of questions for him, but they could wait for another day, as we were hoping to get some lunch at Theo and Pan's restaurant.

Theo was running the restaurant when we arrived and he was in great form, possibly as cheerful and chatty as we have known him! He filled us in with some of the news, which sadly included the fact that we had just missed seeing his Dad again as he had died just two months ago, aged perhaps 99 – no one knew his age. Also his brother Pan was recovering from lung cancer treatment, but the good news was that he was back from Athens and was around, so we would get to see him later. Met up with some of the family and they kindly treated us to lunch, whilst Theo as ever, rushed around running the busy restaurant. Then treated ourselves to an iced coffee with ice cream in the town square and sat and watched the world go by.

Returned to Serafina in the afternoon, to tackle a few of the 'jobs to do' list and discovered that our mooring was perhaps not the quiet spot we had hoped for....not sure quite when flying boats started running between Corfu and Paxos, but they park themselves on the quay right next to us! (See the photos at www.rhbell.com) Unaware of the rules of the road with regard to an seaplane, but I never expected to see one in the narrow entrance here. Even more extraordinary was that they take off from inside the entrance as well, with just a small speed boat, trying to make sure yachts and motor boats do not come whizzing through the gaps in the islands just as they are taking off!

In the evening we went for a stroll into town, but firstly went to see if Pan was at his restaurant. Predictably he was there, but actually preparing his fishing lines for the next day. In the end we spent the next 4 hours sat chatting about just about everyone and everything. He talked about aspects of his family history about which we were totally unaware and obviously he talked about his illness. He has only been back from hospital in Athens for about a month and so he does not work in the restaurant, but he is happy to spend hours fishing and likes to keep a eye on the restaurant at all times even though it is actually being run by his hardworking wife Katy and one of daughters, Maria. Somehow we seem to have agreed that I am going to go out fishing with him using his nets and the long lines (1000 metres) with up to 150 hooks on! Sarah seems to think that I might find this fun.

Pan also explained where best for us to moor Serafina when we go to Mongonissi. Mongonissi is actually an island at the that the family own and they have run a restaurant

and bar there since 1978. It was all very basic when we worked out here, but it was (and still is) one of the flotilla's favourite stops. Nowadays Theo runs it with help from his children (eldest 20), but because of Pan's illness, poor Theo also manages the restaurant in town at lunchtimes!

Strolled back to Serafina around midnight, the wrong side of countless glasses of Pan's house wine having not actually eaten yet. (We said we would not eat at their restaurant unless they let us pay.....may need to revise this plan.)

Monday 25th Aug

So now we know that the Seaplane service starts at 7.30am.

Bit of a nothing day today, with various strolls round the town, trying to work out what might open when! Took the dinghy off for a trip out to one of the islands for a swim which was great as it has been very hot indeed today. Italians have put on quite a show this evening with some dreadful attempts at parking their boats. Must all be getting jaded at the end of the summer, but the quay in the centre of Gaios was a remarkable jumble of boats with their anchors going off in all directions and some very heated and animated discussions about who was going to do what.

Have discovered the Wi-Fi at last, but of course having lugged the laptop around all day, I chose not to take into town this evening!. Hope to upload pictures and various bits and pieces in the morning before we set off North to Lakka.

Lakka

39:14.302N 20:07.979E

Tuesday 26th August

Spent a frustrating hour or so trying to do some work on the wi-fi in Gaios. Very flaky connection, so only managed a few bits and pieces!

Set off for Lakka around midday and arrived to find the anchorage seemingly pretty full. Picked a spot and anchored, but then when a couple of boats moved off, we dithered a bit about moving. Decided that where we were was fine given the lack of wind and settled down to lunch. This of course was the cue for two things....firstly the anchorage began to fill and of course the wind started to rise. Three flotillas arrived as well as any number of yachts and several catamarans and it was hard to believe they could all fit in. In fact we wondered how anyone thought the Corfu ferry would get in and out, but it turns out that the ferry doesn't call here anymore!! The rising wind caused a very large swell outside the anchorage, which started to curl round into the bay. This caused the boats nearest the entrance to swing in the opposite direction to the wind and very soon chaos ensued. Protocol dictates that the boats that arrive first have priority and the others have to work round them, but it was all rather confused. In the end we had a poor night's sleep due to the proximity of other boats swinging erratically plus the long swell that continued all night that came in on our beam, causing us to roll considerably. And to round off a poor day, Sarah's temporary crown broke off again.

Corfu Town

39:37.081N 19:55.557E

Wednesday 27th August

The original plan was to stay in Lakka for a couple of days, but the situation with Sarah's tooth dictated a change.

We decided to head for Corfu Town as she was bound to get treatment there, the only question was where to stay. Gouvia Marina is the principle place and we know it well as we were based there for two years, however it has been developed out of all recognition and the fees have gone through the roof. We had planned to be there the night Tom & Ewan arrive as it is an easy place for the taxi etc. although, again quite expensive as it is a good 15 min taxi ride, as it is some distance North of the town.

The pilot book mentioned an anchorage just south of Corfu Town, next to a small sailing/yacht club, and given that it is both free and just a stone's throw from the town centre, we opted to take a look. It turned out to be almost ideal. There were two small yachts, plus three huge super yachts at anchor when we arrived. We picked a clear spot and anchored. Sarah then went ashore to see what she could find out about a dentist, whilst I stayed on board as there were one or two unlikely characters swimming in the bay!

The good news was that she had a very successful trip and as well as arranging to see a dentist tomorrow, she also found that we were very welcome to moor in the yacht club's little harbour for the next two nights. This is perfect for us as it is barely 5 minutes from the airport and close to the town centre. Clearly use of their facilities is a well kept secret, although by the evening there were two more very large super yachts backed up to the outside wall of the yacht club's harbour, so we will be in very exclusive company!

The trip up was fairly uneventful apart from seeing flying fish and a flock (?) of possibly 50 pink flamingos which flew overhead.

Naok Yacht Club, Corfu

39:37.20N 19:55.55E

Thursday 28th August

Restless day spent shopping and minor alterations etc. aboard Serafina.

We sailed the full 300 yards to take up a berth in the Naok Sailing Club which was a great spot and really handy for the town centre. However, Corfu is a tourist centre so useful things like bakeries and supermarkets do not appear anywhere near the town centre! Sarah saw her dentist who tidied up the damage and suggested that she simply left it all until she returns to UK, as there is no infection and the signs are that it will be OK. There was no charge for this service which was refreshing. She also then had a spot of luck getting a taxi to carry her and a whole load of food shopping back to the marina. It turns out that there were two cruise ships in the harbour so over 4.000 passengers had made big demands on the taxi service. This driver had picked up the first people in the queue Sarah was in and then asked everyone else where they were going to. Sarah was at the very back of the queue and going the opposite way to the first customer, but the driver insisted she got in and he delivered her to the marina first!

Quite a few more boats joined us during the day and several huge super yachts moored up to the quay as well. Andreas, who runs the moorings for the club is quite a character and one who responds well to people who take an interest in what goes on and try to help. He certainly has been very helpful and positive towards us, in marked contrast to his attitude to some of the other boats which have just turned up.

Went into town for a drink in the evening and took some photos and retired for an early night as we felt sure that Friday might be a long night with the boys not arriving until 3.00am on Saturday morning!

Friday 29th August

Sarah very excited by the imminent arrival of her babies! She spent the morning cleaning the boat and had a minor disaster whilst washing the deck when it turned out that I had not closed one of the saloon port-lights completely the night before! Four upholstered seats got wet and had to be brought on deck to dry, which fortunately they did very quickly with no staining at all.

I only really remember two Greeks from Corfu from my days working here. One was the company's agent and the other was the agent's office manager. During today, I kept coming across an elderly Greek around the club's site who reminded me of the office manager and by the end of the day I was certain that even after 30 years, he was the man! So I broached the subject and to my and his delight, I was right. Sadly the agent died 4 years ago, but it is remarkable that we should meet here after all this time. We agreed to go for a drink next Friday when we return to drop Tom & Ewan off for their flight.

Change of super yachts again today and the biggest to arrive today has a Gas turbine jet engine as well as 4 conventional engines. You never get to see the owners or guests on these things as they rarely leave the boat. Frankly it makes no difference to them what port or which country they are in at any time.

Boys texted to say they were at the airport, which was the first hurdle cleared!

Back to Paxos

39:12.15N 20:11.21E

Saturday 30th August

3.00am the boys are at Corfu airport! Within 20 minutes they are with us at the yacht club and it is an hour before we all settle down to get some sleep.

8.00am Sarah and I slip the lines and we head south for Gaios on the island of Paxos.

Tom & Ewan emerge around 10.00am and before long have settled down to enjoy the sun on a windless morning as we motored down the coast of Corfu. The only excitement on this trip was as we approached Paxos when the fishing rod bent over and the line rushed out, but sadly we did not hook the fish. To cap it all, this happened twice but such is life!

Moored up stern-to the quay in almost the same spot that we had earlier in the week and wandered into town to get some lunch. Met Yanis first who was pleased to meet the boys again, but thought it odd that Sarah called them her babies! We then went to Pan and Theo's restaurant where they were both working today. Great excitement as they greeted the boys and we stayed and ate there. The afternoon involved taking the dinghy round to an island for a swim and then a quiet siesta.

In the evening we ate again at Pan's whilst he sat with us and regaled us with stories. Finally Sarah and I went back to Serafina leaving the boys to check out the night life! They were back on board about an hour later having discovered that there was not much happening tonight, but that Monday should be a good night and they had done some serious research of bars and the disco for later in the week!

Mongonissi

39:10.96N 20:12.26E

Sunday 31st August

Well, now we know that 5.30am is when the skips get emptied along the quay in Gaios. Seaplane was on time at 7.30am and our boys surfaced around 10.00am oblivious to all this!

Visited the free internet cafe and chatted to the owners of the Oyster 49 alongside us, before finally heading off to Mongonissi around midday. Another epic voyage of around 1 mile brought us to the bay and after a careful look at the underwater section of the quay, we dropped the anchor and reversed up as close as we could and tied up.

Wandered up to the restaurant & bar and were met by Theo who introduced us to his son and one of his daughters. Theo's brother Spiros was also there and he came and greeted us and introduced us to his new wife Tania.

Had lunch on board and the afternoon slipped by with lots of swimming and general relaxing. Quite a few yachts came in during the afternoon, but no flotillas, so it was all very peaceful.

Had dinner in the restaurant where we were very well looked after by various members of the family! Theo wanted to know if we would be staying another night, so I had to tell him that the current plan had us returning to Gaios tomorrow as the boys had been told that it should be a good night there and they were hoping to go to the disco. He then instructed his eldest daughter to arrange to meet Tom & Ewan there when she finished work and to bring along two of her girl friends! (phone numbers to be exchanged tomorrow morning!) I can see this all ending badly.

Theo had plenty to say during the lunchtime coffee including his desire to learn to sail a yacht. We have agreed to take him out sailing one day in September when he is less busy which he seemed very excited about. (He already can windsurf and sail a laser dinghy, but wants to try something larger with a view to buying an ex-flotilla boat for his own relaxation.) He also is keen for me to think about building him a website.

Although no promises were made, Theo also hopes that he and his son Yanis, will take Tom out and teach him to use their jetski.

Further excitement tomorrow as a very good friend of ours, Patti Weston, who worked out here in Paxos at the same time as us, is coming out here on holiday for two weeks with her family who are about the same ages as Tom & Ewan. Since they come every year, we are hopeful that they will know a bit more about the night life!

We all returned to Serafina around 11.00pm but I suspect it will be quite a bit later tomorrow night!

Lazy days in Gaios, Paxos.

39:12.15N 20:11.21E

Monday 1st September

Slow start to the day with plenty of swimming and of course a cooked breakfast in the bar for Tom!

Planned to move off around midday and return to Gaios, but this was brought forward a bit when the Austrian boat next to us left and then dragged their anchor over ours and got themselves in a tangle.

Moored up in exactly the same spot that we had vacated the day before, with the same neighbours (Steve & Bunty) on their Oyster 49. Invited them over for tea and they then reciprocated with drinks at 7.30 pm. In the meantime Patty and her family had arrived for their two week holiday and we agreed to meet them for drinks in the square before going for a meal. So.....we had rather too many drinks on the Oyster, before meandering into the square to meet up with Patty and family. We then all headed off to Theo & Pan's restaurant where there was much greeting and tears etc as all of their family came out to meet up with Patty. We finished eating around 1.00am and the 'children' all headed off looking for the disco/club whilst we headed to Alex's bar where Alex plied us with free drinks to celebrate Patty and co's arrival. Sarah and I got back to the boat to find Tom & Ewan already back in bed (it was 3.00am)

Tuesday 2nd September

Not much action before 10.00 am!

When quizzed by our neighbours, Ewan explained that he felt embarrassed that he had come home before his parents. It turns out that the disco is closed this week, so they are going to have to source alternative entertainment.

Lazy day spent mostly sunbathing and swimming at a pool that Patty has been invited to use.

In the evening we invited Steve & Bunty over for drinks and then later we walked into town and met up with Patty and co. All 11 of us then ate at Mambo's and afterwards retired to the square for a few nightcaps!

Day trip to Anti Paxos

39:11.80N 20:11.18E

Wednesday 3rd September

Arranged to take Patty and her family to Anti Paxos for the day. Anti Paxos is a small island due south of Paxos, with a couple of outstanding bays to anchor in. They are almost Caribbean with stunning clear blue water and bleached white sand. There are a few houses on the island, but they are not occupied throughout the year.

Left Gaios as planned at 11.00am but for added excitement the seaplane choose the same moment to leave and to our complete surprise, it simply opened up its throttles and took off right beside us in the entrance! We made the short crossing to find the bays pretty packed with yachts, but as the wind was light and there was no swell we just dropped the hook on the edge of the bay and the boys all went by dinghy to the beach to play various games whilst we stayed on board and relaxed in the sun.

Sarah had prepared a wonderful lunch and finally around 4.30pm after more swimming etc. we returned to Gaios. Steve and Bunty had tried to keep our mooring slot, but failed to prevent a large Greek charter yacht from taking it. We choose to continue on into the town itself and found a mooring (very tight) directly outside Pan & Theo's restaurant. Backed in as usual and when we thanked the German family on the boat that we were alongside for their help, they said it was an absolute pleasure to have such a beautiful boat beside them! In fact

we ended up having a long chat with them all and they very much put us to shame with their excellent English.

All felt a little jaded after the last couple of nights so after a few beers in the square, we had a meal out and retired for an early night.

It certainly has been a stroke of good fortune that Patty has chosen this week to come out to Paxos. Her son Will (23), daughter Jess (21) and their friend George (23) have teamed up brilliantly with Tom & Ewan so whilst we have not done any sailing to speak of, the boys have had a great time! Certainly we have eaten and partied rather more than we had planned, but it is only a week.....

Photos posted on www.rhbell.com

Paxos Beach Hotel

39:11.80N 20:11.18E

Thursday 4th September

Last day on Paxos for Tom & Ewan so we chose to join Patty and family for the day at Paxos Beach Hotel, where they have a pool, tennis court, table tennis etc. (Patty used to work there in the late '70s so the owner is happy to let her use the facilities even though she does not stay there.)

We all met up at Pan & Theo's for breakfast, but this turned out to be a bad move when Pan decided that we should at least taste a bottle of the wine he makes from his grapes grown on Anti Paxos. Needless to say it was delicious, which was handy as he presented each family with three bottles apiece!

Suitably bolstered by several glasses of wine each, we set off on the 20 minute walk along the coast to the hotel. We had a great day there enjoying swimming in the sea and the pool and using most of the other facilities before returning to Gaios around 6.30pm.

We decided to end the stay by inviting Patty's family plus Steve and Bunty off 'Ellen Mae' for Pimms later.

They all turned up around 9.00pm (!) and so we had quite a late start to the evening, not managing to get to the restaurant (15 yards away) until 10.30pm. The evening ended around 2.30pm with a slow walk back to Serafina from the square.

The boys fly home

39:37.20N 19:55.55E

Friday 5th September

Sadly this was to be a long and very dull day for us all. Not exactly a rapid and lively start to the day, but we got away from the quay in Gaios around 11.00am with all the gang on the dockside to wave goodbye to Tom & Ewan.

Not a breath of wind for the trip up to Corfu Town, in fact it I have never seen it quite so glassy calm before. Tried fishing without any luck and with a brief stop just off the southern tip of Corfu island for a swim, we reached Naok Yacht Club in Corfu Town at 3.30pm.

The boys and I went off for a walk around the old town whilst poor Sarah started the process of catching up with the washing, taking advantage of the availability of water and electricity on the quay.

We all went out for a final and rather subdued dinner and on our return we all went to bed having set the alarm for 1.15am so we would be ready for the taxi booked to take the boys to the airport at 1.30am.

Taxi was bang on time and after some emotional goodbyes, we waved them off on their long haul home. (Flight was not until 3.50pm and it was to Manchester, so they still had the drive home to endure as well.)

Gaios (again!)

39:12.15N 20:11.21E

Monday 8th September

Yet another slow start (it very hot!) to the day. Spot of fishing in the bay before we set off to cover the 14 miles to Paxos Island.

Managed to secure a mooring in pretty much the same place as we had been before and before long we were joined by English crewed boats on both sides of us.

We have started planning the countdown to craning Serafina out for the winter and the list of jobs is very long indeed. Some of course can be done before she is lifted and so we are beginning to get these done. Fortunately an old friend of Sarah's is joining us around the 24th Sept for 5 days and so we are not mentally running down the trip just yet. In fact as we now have around 2 weeks before she arrives, we are going to head down South again tomorrow and visit some of the islands and anchorages we missed out on our headlong rush North! Plenty of old Greek and English friends yet to be met up with, so lots still to look forward to.

Met up with Patty and her family in the square (did they ever leave it?) and went for a meal together.

Tuesday 9th September

Had a real problem getting internet access this morning which was frustrating as I knew I had some work coming in. Finally downloaded around midday, but then found it hard to get started as there were boats arriving and mooring up around us and they all needed help with their lines. It turns out that we have chosen to stay here so that I can get this work done, on the first day with any real wind! Boat arriving around 2.00pm were reporting force 6 which is just typical. Finger crossed it blows again tomorrow and we can have a decent 30 -35 mile run down to Lefkas Island.

Generally it is much quieter here on Paxos now that the peak of the season has passed by, but it is interesting to note that there are no end of private and charter yachts still coming in every evening. The other slight change has been that we are no longer one of the smaller boats, but very much one of the bigger, grander yachts in town! We are getting endless admiring looks and complimentary comments from all and sundry which is very rewarding.

38:50.11N 20:42.70E

Lefkas bound

Wednesday 10th September

Delayed our start to the trip down to Lefkas so that we could pick up the stronger afternoon breeze, which meant that we did not get away too early which might also have been because our farewell drinks with Patty, Jerry, Jess, Will and George did not end until 2.00am.

This is the Northern Ionian, so the wind having blown strongly yesterday chose to take things easy today and never got above 11 knots all day, which when it is directly behind you is good for very little indeed.

Lefkas Town main quay was pretty empty apart from around 8 charter yachts, so we had no problem finding a space although the wind did choose this brief moment to blow strongly across us making the process of reversing into a space quite exciting.

Went for a stroll around the town and in the evening went to a restaurant (The Lighthouse Garden) which we used to recommend to all our customers back in 1980. The owner was still there serving as before and he was very welcoming although in truth he could not recall either of us, but did remember the company. He reckons that 90% of his business comes from people arriving by boat (mostly flotillas) which you might not think was unusual given the name of the restaurant, but when you understand that it was hidden away down a backstreet, a good half mile from any water, let alone the actual sea, you realise how important our business was to him in the early days. The meal was really excellent, quite possibly the best since arriving in Greece and in addition to various extras brought along at the end of the meal, the owner insisted on giving us a bottle of Ouzo to take away with us.

Meganissi

38:40.58N 20:46.96E

Thursday 11th September

Determined to sail today regardless of anything as we were only heading for a bay on the island of Meganisi and so we spent the morning rushing around shopping and visiting the Port Police (have to get the paperwork stamped and forms filled in every so often) etc. and didn't set off down the Lefkas canal until 12.55am.

Put the sails up as we exited the canal and started sailing gently in the very faint headwind. A high speed rib (inflatable speed boat with a rigid hull) heading the other way swept around us and it turned out to be Joe Charlton heading back from a job somewhere. He invited us to come over to Nikiana which is a small harbour on Lefkas Island as his house is only 5 minutes from there, so we could come for drinks. We agreed that we would do that perhaps on our way North in a week or so, or failing that certainly when we are getting ready to lay up at the end of the season.

The wind picked up for a while and we made good progress before it fell away and became very variable, however by then we were close to Meganisi so we furled up the sails and motored into our first choice bay. This was where we used to bring the flotilla every fortnight for a beach barbeque and party. Delighted to find it all utterly unchanged and whilst there were quite a few yachts moored when we arrived, most of them were only there for the day and when they left we found ourselves almost alone in the sheltered bay with crystal clear water. Protocol encourages most yachts to drop an anchor and reverse up to the land and take long lines ashore. This arrangement does allow more boats to come and stay in a bay

such as this and in many ways is more secure than swinging to an anchor in the middle. The possible downside is that over the years not all the visitors have been as responsible as those that carefully ensure that they take away all their rubbish, leading to an explosion in some places of the rat population. Mindful of such tales, (opps sorry, no pun intended) we have recently bought two large water funnels that we thread down our lines going ashore in a copy of the age old defence against unwanted visiting rodents. (photos at www.rhbell.com when we next get wi-fi)

A wonderful evening in almost total seclusion has persuaded us to stay another day although we realise that during the daytime this could become a pretty busy spot.

Vlikho Bay

38:41.29N 20:42.50E

Friday 12th September

Had a very pleasant day remaining in the same bay as yesterday. Sarah could not help herself from spending a fair amount of the day polishing the chrome in preparation for the winter, whilst I spent an age writing very few emails. A combination of an atrophying brain and a computer that spells better than me, but frequently guesses wrong about what I was trying to say, results in it taking an age to write some emails as I have to go back and re-write some sentences! Very tedious.

As predicted, the bay became very popular by day and we were able to sit back and enjoy some interesting anchoring techniques very few of which you will find in the books! The most popular one being to select the spot where they want to stop and then simply letting the anchor and most of the chain go in one big pile directly under them. This can work for a short while, but is not too clever when the wind rises and the boat sets off downwind towards rocks/other boats/out to sea.

Around 4pm the bulk of these boats left and once more were pretty much alone and although there was a surprising amount of swell coming into the bay, we were unaffected as we were tucked round the corner.

Another quiet and peaceful night although lively imaginations had both of us thinking that we were hearing rats falling off our carefully protected ropes!!

Saturday 13th September

Early start (well 9.00am) to get to the town of Nidri whilst the shops were still open in the morning. Absolutely no room on the limited quay, so I dropped Sarah off in the dinghy and then took Serafina off to the island of Skorprios where I could drift in clean water and run the water maker to top up the tanks. (This converts sea water into drinking water.) Skorprios is a private island owned by the Onassis family and back in 1980 we used to see their yacht (ship) 'Christina' anchored in the little harbour. Not quite as private these days it seems as I watched trip boats running up the beach and lots of yachts were anchored right up to the beaches. When Aristotle Onassis lived here, there was no approaching the island!

Picked up Sarah after two hours (the last half an hour spent sailing slowly in the gentle breeze) and we motored past Nidri and Tranquil Bay and on into Ormos Vlikho which is a very large landlocked bay. This was a curious experience for me as again back in 1980 no yachts ventured into this bay which was deemed too shallow for anything larger than a dinghy. Either they have dredged the bar across the entrance or we were too timid (no depth gauges then) to try. Either way this is a huge anchorage and so we picked a suitable spot to

park and despite the arrival during the rest of the day of any number of boats including a complete 12 boat flotilla from 'Sailing Holidays', we had no near neighbours to spoil the solitude. Well I say that, but as soon as we decided to have our showers off the back deck, things changed briefly. Sarah was fine and cheerfully bared all for her shower, but when it came to my turn the wind changed slightly and swung the stern of the boat round to present me to the couple on the nearest boat! Modesty ensured that I kept my trunks on until the boat drifted away again, which was just as well as I had failed to notice another yacht full of Italians who were looking for a spot to moor, chug up behind us and they then cheerfully started a conversation with me all about where we had come from. They then motored on and left me to rinse off!

Sarah dusted off her drawing chinks and easel to do a self portrait. However, the only suitable mirror is in the forward heads (toilet), so she crammed herself in there for two and a half hours, emerging with a very creditable picture.

Nearly a full moon, not a breath of wind and almost total silence apart from a brief fireworks display.

Stormy Weather

Sunday 14th September

Be and my big mouth..... Sarah and her predictions.....

No sooner had I pressed 'send' last night to waft the day's blog off into the ether waxing lyrical about the peace and solitude here in Vlikho bay, than one of the tavernas along the far shoreline cranked up its sound system to deliver 5 hours of uninterrupted Greek 'rock' interspersed with age old Greek dancing numbers. Should have guessed really that they would want to impress the visiting flotilla.

Then to cap it all the day dawned cloudy, by which I mean real clouds. Dark things that looked for all the world as if they might actually hold rain and stuff! Never developed into anything but we had a pleasant breeze all day and the temperature stayed reasonable.

We stuck to the plan of staying here for another day with fingers crossed for a quieter night tonight. During the morning we watched a large number of the boats move off leaving the big bay quite empty and by and large it has stayed that way with very few boats arriving. Sarah though, was more than a little put out by an American yacht that with several square miles of open water to choose from, dropped their anchor barely 20 metres from us.

Ewan made the day for me when he texted news of the Worcester Warriors win over Wasps. 10 - 11 sounds to me like a damn good thrashing, (and 3 points!)

Went ashore for a meal in the evening, eating at a very nice old style taverna (Elena) on the Eastern side of Vlikho.

Monday 15th September

Well we had to have our first storm of the summer sometime. It seems that we are not going to get any quiet nights here in Vlikho because at 2.30am the wind started to rise dramatically and so we got up and took down the bimini as it adds a lot of drag, putting additional strain on the anchor and its grip on the sea bed. The sky to the North, beyond the mountains was lit by the constant flash of lightening, but not the normal intermittent strikes, but a steady disco effect, reminiscent of the newsreel films of artillery barrages, which was ominous.

Got this done just in the nick of time as it then started to rain, not your average heavy rain but the harbinger of a full scale Greek electrical storm, which is exactly what we got! The wind came in great handfuls with sudden blasts taking the wind speed indicator from 2 knots to 30 knots in just seconds. Almost immediately there were boats in trouble in the anchorage and we could see them moving around in the pitch dark trying to recover their dragging anchors and looking for a new safe spot to moor. In their headlong rush to get underway most forgot to turn on navigation lights, so there was certainly a bit confusion as they wheeled around.

Fortunately our anchor held rock solid as did the American's that had moored so close to us last night, so although we kept a careful anchor watch, it was more about watching that no one hit us rather than vice versa. After just over an hour and a half, things started to settle down, but not before the usual 180 degree wind shifts that we had expected, having experienced this sort of storm back in 1981. We eventually went back to bed, but sleep was fairly elusive and then around 6.00am it all started again with very heavy rain, blinding bolts of lightning, crashing rumbles of thunder and massive blasts of wind in squalls that came from a different direction every time. This helped to exaggerate the way the boats were all 'sailing' around on their moorings and so the scene all around us was quite bizarre with boats facing in all directions, swinging around and changing their headings constantly. The good news was that Sarah made every effort to doze right through this second round with great success!

By mid-morning the wind was generally easier and the rain had stopped, but whenever you thought that it was all over the gusts would return and heads would pop up from below on all the boats as we each checked that we were still OK. Quite a few boats had moved on by now, presumably because of schedules to meet or possibly seeking better shelter from the Southerly wind. We decided to stay put as we clearly had a good holding and were in no rush to head for our next stop which is Sivota Bay, only around 10 miles South of here and particularly as we knew that there was at least one flotilla turning round there yesterday and it was unlikely that they would be moving off today with the new customers fresh from the UK only arriving late last night!

By the evening things certainly had improved, although we did have more rain and blustery squalls in the afternoon, so fingers crossed that perhaps tonight....we will get some sleep!

Sivota

38:37.46N 20:47E

Tuesday 16th September

Good night's sleep and woke up to find a much better day had dawned.

Prized the anchor out of the bed of the bay when it had buried itself during the heavy weather and set off to Sivota, which was another of our watering holes and hope to meet up with Barry Neilson who is the owner of 'Sailing Holidays', a flotilla holiday company with 12 fleets of yachts (each fleet has 10-12 boats in it).

Barry has come out for the Ionian Regatta which appears to be an annual event involving over 100 yachts and takes place on Thursday and is something of a major social occasion at which we are likely to meet up with a lot of Id friends.

Arrived in Sivota and got a really good berth on a pontoon which offered us excellent protection from the strong winds which were forecast for Wednesday.

Soon found Barry who was busy stripping out a UFO 27 yacht in preparation for the race. This little cruiser has had a very hard life ever since it was first dropped by a crane onto a concrete platform! I set about helping Barry and his mate Alan who had come out from UK with him just for the regatta. (Alan is a rigger and has done a lot of racing as well!) By the end of the day the only thing left in this boat was the toilet. Not a toilet compartment, just a toilet sitting in the middle of the boat! No anchor, no engine, nothing but the sails. However he did discover some vital beams had got rot, so tomorrow will be spent replacing them.

In the evening we all went out for a meal where Barry spent most of the time either introducing us to his staff ("This is what old flotilla crew look like" is one favourite line of his) or reintroducing us to the taverna owners etc. As it happens one of them is a very old friend anyway and he was delighted that we all chose to eat at his restaurant that night.

Wednesday 17th September

Spent the day helping Barry with his boat and meeting people and generally getting involved in things as more and more boats began to arrive for the big race. In addition there were several flotillas in so the place was packed. A stage was built at one end of the village for all the fun and presentations on Thursday night and by the evening the place was heaving. Whilst drinking in the early evening with Barry and Alan, we met up with the two couples who owned a small motor boat that was moored near us. They come from Ludlow and indeed one of them seems to own a substantial part of Shropshire!

Thursday 18th September

Race day. Our plan was to stay on our mooring today as it might prove very hard to get back in later with all the regatta boats coming in. As it happened, Barry came over to us around 10 to ask if we would like to join him and Alan on the UFO 'Pocket Rocket' for the race. We both agreed and had little idea what was in store for us.

The flotilla lead crews were also entering the race with their boats which they were now busy stripping of all equipment and there was a lot of banter between them all and their boss Barry as to who was going to beat whom. We had to set out several hours before everyone else because we had no engine and had to sail out to the start line which was several miles away, but just as we were about to leave, Barry decided to invite the Shropshire landowner (Tovie) to join us for the trip out to the start line where he could then be picked up by his friends and wife on the motor boat. It seems that Tovie is a Lord and Barry had never been sailing with a Lord and he thought that he should! So we cast off and sailed off up the Meganissi channel to the start line. Once Tovie had left us it was just the four of us to crew the 'Pocket Rocket' and it was at this point, looking around us that Sarah and I got the first real inkling of the size of this event. 120 yachts of all sizes, ranging from 60ft down to us at 27ft where milling around waiting for the start signal. Barry and Alan had hatched a cunning plan for the start, but with minutes only to the gun the Genoa furling gear got jammed and so we slid along the line with Alan hanging upside down at the bow with a knife and screwdriver trying to free the line. In the event he succeeded just 10 seconds from the start gun and so we unfurled the genoa and turned to make what was the best start of all 100 boats! We quickly opened up a 30 metre lead over everyone in what was still very light airs and although at one stage several boats caught up with us, Barry and Alan's longstanding knowledge of the area and conditions allowed us to pick up and read the conditions better than most and in no time we were half a mile clear of the entire field excepting three others who were very fast boats that had now got away ahead of us.

The wind started to rise and we shot along, but could see the bigger faster boats behind us gaining gradually. It was at this point that our starboard spreader broke partially away leaving us with the very real risk of the mast snapping in half. Barry opted to carry on and so

Alan rigged a jury repair to try to relieve some of the strain, but in truth it was all a matter of time only before it would fail.

The race route including around the island of Arcudi and whilst in the lee of the island the first of the big yachts (54ft) caught and passed us, but we hung and as we came out of the lee of the island the wind had risen to a good force 6 with a quite heavy sea. Well it seemed heavy to us as we were sitting along the side of the UFO using our body weight to help to keep it upright and getting thoroughly soaked as the wave broke over us and the boat! The big decision now was when to make the tack that would take us past the end of the island and then the 6 miles close hauled to the finish line, knowing that almost certainly it would be our very last tack before the spreader would finally break away. Alan made the call and was spot on as just a few minutes later the spreader crashed to the deck which was sort of OK for now as the rest of the race should be on a port tack which means there is no strain on the missing rigging. We ploughed on but had already reefed earlier to reduce the strain on the mast, so we were not going as fast as might. Slowly but surely a few faster boats caught up with us and by the time we crossed the line there were 7 boats ahead of us and just 92 behind. However this was the next tricky bit as we could not let any strain at all come onto the mast from the starboard side, so as we crossed the line we dropped the main and the genoa onto the deck and stuffed them into the cabin. We then flagged a rescue boat to drag us off the finishing line as without an engine we were stuck in the path of all the yachts flying up behind us. Finally, one of Barry's lead boats (they all finished behind us) towed us into Sivota where the celebrating started.

Pretty wild night, but us 'oldies' took things steady and retired to bed around midnight and got to sleep despite the live rock band that was still belting out the music until the early hours on a large outdoor stage.

Day Tripper

38:41.45N 20:42.42E

Friday 19th September

Now that we have been out here for a while and met various old friends and made new friends, an event like the regatta is all the more enjoyable as we now know so many of the folks. We got to hear that one particular old friend Andy Barker and his wife, were at the party and had been in the race and countless people told me that they had seen him looking for me, whilst others were telling him that I was looking for him, but somehow we failed to meet up. We knew the name of his yacht which he had bought a year ago off someone else we knew, so we were confident that we would see him in the morning at some stage!

What we had forgotten was that Barry and Alan had persuaded us to take them to Fiskardo (Cephalonia) to see Tassos, (owner of the Captain's Cabin Bar & restaurant) have lunch and return to Sivota in the afternoon. We picked them both up as well as one of the girls that works in Barry's London office and her sister who were out on a holiday on one of his Sailing Holiday flotillas. Once we had the anchor up we motored across the bay to Andy's yacht (Seven Tenths) but failed to raise him or his wife Jackie, so we set off to Fiskardo in the hope that they would still be in Sivota when we returned.

Very little wind this morning so we motored all the way arriving around 12.30am to find the little harbour pretty much empty and a big space right by Tassos' bar. We reversed in as usual, but because it is very shallow there we had to stand a little way off and use a plank to get ashore! Tassos was delighted to see us all and made a big fuss and treated us to a great lunch and too many beers, whilst various strangers approached, admiring and asking about Serafina. (She looked very grand alone at the quay.)

At 2.40pm we said all our goodbyes and set off back to Sivota. By now the wind had risen again so we quickly raised all the sails and were soon romping back across the Ionian towards Lefkas Island, managing an effortless 8.5 knots.

Around halfway we came across a lone yacht heading the other way and as we drew near the occupants began waving frantically. On closer inspection it turned out to be Andy Barker on 'Seven Tenths' who having eventually woken up, had been told we had gone to Fiskardo, so he and his wife resolved to follow on and see us there!

They made a snap decision and turned to follow us back to Sivota and on arrival tied up next to us on the pontoon.

Andy had been a flotilla skipper in the same firm as us and at the same time, but we had not seen him for at least 24 years. Lots of catching up to do and along with his wife Jackie, turned out to be a mine of information about a whole stack of our friends, not all of whom are still alive sadly. We all ended up going out for dinner and quite a long night ensued, ending for us only when I started to fall asleep which after 4 days of eating, drinking and the regatta etc. was perhaps not altogether surprising.

Saturday 20th September

The big question today was what was the wind going to do? Various forecasts during the week had warned of a major storm sweeping across the islands where we are, but as the weekend approached some of the warnings were scaled down. We had planned to batten ourselves down somewhere safe, but we had also to balance the fact that on Wednesday we have to be in Corfu again to meet a very old friend of Sarah's who is joining us for 5 days. Not a great problem except that they were also promising 50 knot serious storm winds for Tuesday and Wednesday across Corfu! These warnings have also been reduced in the last 24 hours so we have decided to stay tonight in Vlikho Bay and then sail up to Paxos tomorrow if possible and perhaps on up to Gouvia Marina in Corfu on Monday or Tuesday. All depends on what we get thrown at us in terms of bad weather.

Spent part of the morning saying all our goodbyes to various folks and then slipped away for the short trip round to Nidri and Vlikho. The wind was gusting quite a bit but certainly nothing like the forecasts. Dropped the hook in the bay and settled down to spend the afternoon sorting some warmer clothing and packing away some of the light summer stuff as it has now turned decidedly cooler. Hopefully this spell of unsettled weather and the 'Meltemi' winds will eventually pass and we will get some better weather for Sarah's friend Jo.

Perfect Day

39:11.82N 20:11.17E

Sunday 21st September

Well not quite a perfect day but certainly a really good sail.

Up with the cockerel (must buy a gun) at 6.30am, raised the anchor and set off for Paxos around 6.50am. Bloody cold! Sarah was wearing 4 layers of clothes and I put on a waterproof jacket for the first time since 3rd June in Biscay! Quite a threatening sky but the forecasts were saying that the big winds that we had been promised were now going to pass by, down the Italian coast leaving us with a breeze and a big swell.

Motored up to Lefkas and passed through the canal (photos on www.rhbell.com) and out into the open sea for the 30 mile slog up to Paxos. This was where things improved though, as

the breeze was rising slightly and was, very unusually, from the East North East which meant we had a perfect beam reach. We hoisted the full main and genoa and were instantly brushing the small waves aside and making a respectable 7 - 8 knots. The sun came out and Sarah was soon peeling off layers of clothes to end up back in a bikini sunbathing again!

Made very good time up to Paxos although the wind did die away as we approached the island. Moored up in the town and dived into Pan & Theo's for a quick but late lunch.

Met up with Yannis from Gaios Travel who was telling us all about his problems the previous Monday when Patty and her family were flying home. The big storm that we had further South had evidently been even worse up here and no ferries ran at all, to or from Paxos all day. This is a big turn round day for the island and there was complete chaos. Patty and co. managed to get places on the Seaplane which flies in almost any weather, but in all the excitement she ended up minus a suitcase. To complete poor Yannis' misery was the Excel collapse, so in addition to some of his clients missing flights, there were no other seats to be had as the airport was teeming with holidaymakers desperate for flights home as well.

Spent some time sorting out a load of photos for the website which are all posted up now (www.rhbell.com) which is getting harder now that Sarah has started taking more pictures as well!

Quiet evening in Paxos which seems almost empty now, although the Germans on the boat next door to us seemed to be in a party mode till quite late.

Waterspout

39:14.23N 20:07.95E

Monday 22nd September

Awoke to the pitter patter of rain on the deck which was definitely not in the brochure! Very strange weather patterns at the moment which have certainly confused the forecasters and most of us as well. Big black clouds swirled over Paxos and the mainland, but then in the gaps, the sun would burst through making it hot as well. We took advantage of what appeared to be a break in this pattern to head off to Lakka, but of course today had to be the day we got our anchor crossed with another. This is a fact of life out here as the Greeks do not yet have many lazy lines etc. so for the most part all boats have to lay an anchor to hold them off the quay. This invites a degree of chaos and argument as the less adept skippers tend to lay their anchors over the ones already down, which is not a huge disaster as long as they leave first, but if they don't.... Well this was the case today as the boat next to us arrived yesterday after us and laid his anchor at an angle ensuring that it passed over ours. So when we raised ours this morning, we had his chain and anchor all hooked up with ours. Dived into the cockpit locker to unearth the gizmo we bought in the UK to help with just such a situation and it worked a treat so in due course we were free to continue our journey.

Arrived to find Lakka bay pretty much empty so we were able to select a decent spot to anchor, although with the wind swirling today, it was hard to be sure where was the best place.

Settled down to lunch and had been watching a mini tornado under a huge black cumulonimbus cloud high in the sky when the wind suddenly started to increase around us along with an unusual rushing sound which suddenly developed into a waterspout flying across the bay towards us. It flashed past us upending our dinghy complete with outboard engine before heading towards a neighbouring boat. By now it was less dramatic as a spout and was just a mini tornado, but it caused panic in the yacht as they heeled over under its

force before it passed on out of the bay. (Photos will be posted in next day or so at www.rhbell.com)

After this bit of excitement things settled down and the afternoon proved very pleasant with the sun replacing the thunder clouds encouraging us both to go swimming and the evening went on to be clear with all the stars shining brightly!

Little Britain

39:38.96N 19:51.25E

Tuesday 23rd September

A quiet night at anchor was followed by an almost windless day for our trip up to Gouvia (Corfu Island).

We left at sunrise and motored gently up the East coast of Corfu, past Corfu Town and approached the entrance to Gouvia Bay which we last saw 29 years ago when we running a flotilla from here! At this point a seaplane dropped out of the sky in front of us and taxied into the marina ahead of us.

Pretty staggered by what we saw as we entered the bay. Of all the changes we have seen this had to be the most dramatic with a huge fully fledged marina filling the bay. We fuelled up at the fuel bay and were then met by a marinero in a speedboat who welcomed us to Gouvia and led us to our berth, which was very close to the seaplane dock. (Just cannot get away from the things!)

Went to the marina office to do the paperwork and discovered that Ellen Mae (Steve & Bunty) was here and due to be craned out for the winter tomorrow, so we hunted them down in the marina and agreed to meet later for a drink and a meal out.

Went for a walk into the village to see what we could recognise and firstly found the thriving tourist town of Gouvia where before there had been absolutely nothing. The village of Kondokali had obviously also expanded but we were able to identify bits and pieces, although in fairness, Sarah recognised a lot more than I did.

Met up with Steve and Bunty in the evening and walked into Gouvia town and ate at a very good Italian restaurant and then afterwards they suggested a quick drink at a bar that they had been to the night before. BIG mistake.

Great bar, packed with people and just as we arrived the Elvis impersonator was starting his live act. Actually he was great fun and really quite good although there was more than a hint of a Greek accent throughout. He got more attention from the audience once he worked out that the men were all watching the evening UK football scores on Sky Sports News on a big screen to one side of him and turned it off! The catch was that this bar specialised in cocktails with a very talented and extroverted barman who I am told was also excellent 'eye candy'. So in addition to the standard drinks that we ordered, Bunty kept ordering shots for the four of us plus the two barmen. Strangely we ended up as the only people left in the bar around midnight but still managed a sprightly walk back to the marina.

Wednesday 24th September

Well the forecasters were right on the money when they warned of rain from midday today. Mostly drizzle but it kept it up for most of the afternoon and by all accounts there were some

strong winds on the West side of the island so we were very happy to sit it out and get work done in the boat.

Gouvia is really a little bit of England with the majority of the boaters being Brits, lots of the cars parked around the place having UK number plates, a croquet club and a full cricket pitch behind the marina office. Even most of the papers on sale are English although we have so far avoided reading any for quite a while now.

Have seen only a very few Najad yachts since we set off from the UK in June, but today we discovered that one of our neighbours here is a Dutch owned Najad 460 (same make and model as ours) and even more remarkable is the fact that it is number 48 and we are 47. Ours are the last two 460's to be built as the company has now introduced new designs, to mixed reviews. He is having quite serious problems with some of his equipment, but because he has to deal via the Dutch agent he is not getting the same level of service as we enjoyed. It is something of a fact of life that the basic yachts are rarely a problem, but we complicate things by adding so many bits of electronic and similar equipment that inevitably things will go wrong and problems occur. For the most part they are minor irritations and you deal with them as you go along. We have made quite a thing about some of our setbacks in this blog, but that mainly is because I need something to write about from time to time, which I know has caused some people to wonder if we got a duff boat, but nothing could be further from the truth and we are still thrilled with her.

Sarah tells me that I forgot to mention the dolphins that swam along with us briefly on the trip up from Lefkas the other day. We have seen more dolphins in the past couple of weeks than we saw in the whole of the two years we worked here. Nothing like as lively and fun as the Atlantic ones but it still excites us whenever they surface around us.

At 11.15pm we got a call from Sarah's friend Jo to say she was in the taxi on her way to the marina from the airport and would be with us in 10 minutes, which was the cue for the heavens to open and we had the heaviest rain of the day to welcome her in. The good news is that the forecast is for this to improve tomorrow midday, so we still hope to sail down to Mourtos on the mainland, South of Corfu.

Fishy question

39:24.33N 20:19.96E

Thursday 25th September

Horrible morning, with drizzle, low clouds and a cool breeze. Jo seemed quite happy though as she said it made her feel at home!

Took the morning slowly as we had a few things to do and were not interested in going out in the rain, but by midday, very little had changed so we elected to set off anyway and see what the weather did.

Little to no wind which is not at all what was promised, so we motored past Corfu Town and on down the mainland coast of Greece to the small town of Mourtos (also known as Sivota, which is not to be confused with the Sivota on Lefkas Island!) where we headed for the little bay where we anchored a few weeks ago.

Put out the fishing line as we motored down just in case we got lucky, as we have been told that the Dorado start running at this time of year. After about an hour we had a huge bite and the rod bent double (far more than when we caught the 15kg tuna) and then twang....the line was cut through just above the lure and hook, so we were left with nothing but the feeling

that something very large had been on the end! Put out a different lure straight away and just for fun also put out a 'spoon' which is a spinner and within minutes had caught a fish. We hauled it in (on a hand line) and landed it, but had absolutely no idea what it was, so Jo removed the hook and we put it back in the sea, but fear we might have taken a bit too long as it did not look well. As soon as I get to wi fi again (tonight possibly) I will post the photo on www.rhbell.com and anyone who knows what it was can drop us an email. (Click on the 'contact' button beside the photos)

The sun came out at this point and all the clouds rolled away leaving us with a perfect evening. Arrived at Moutos and found a few boats already there and very unhelpfully, one was free swinging on his anchor which made it impossible for us (and others) to go in and drop our anchors and then take lines ashore. So we just followed suit and anchored nearby.

Sarah and Jo set off to the town in the dinghy to have a look around whilst I tried to put together a new rubber squid lure to replace our lost one.

Lovely quiet evening on board and fingers crossed the this weather will hold for the rest of Jo's stay.

Sunshine again

39:11.82N 20:11.17E

Friday 26th September

Woke up to find a lovely day and so we had a lazy morning at anchor, ran the generator and did several loads of washing. Sarah and Jo went for a long swim and then after lunch we set off for Paxos island. As we raised the anchor a Sailing Holidays boat motored past us and Sarah spotted that it was being driven by Ken, a former member of the Viking Afloat staff. We caught them up and had a chat before we continued on our way.

Wind got up during the trip and before long we were romping along at 9 knots in a steady 15 to 20 knots of wind. Cracking sail across to Paxos and we were quite sorry to arrive and have to drop the sails. Tried a spot of fishing but we were sailing too fast for the lures we have, so had to abandon the idea.

Motored into Gaios harbour to find it largely empty which was quite eerie. Sarah took Jo on a tour of the town, which was largely closed for some reason.

Had a few pre dinner drinks on board and then went to Pan & Theo's restaurant where we had a great meal and more wine which pretty much did for both of the girls!

More sailing!

39:14.14N 20.08.02

Saturday 27th September

Another lovely day, but the girls needed to go 'shopping' don't you know, so we did not get off until 12.30 am!

Not a whole lot of wind, but we had decided to head for Lakka on the North of the island and also to use the Hydrovane wind self-steering system as it has not had much use so far. Quite a lot of work done trying to balance the sails and steering so that the Hydrovane could take over. They say that it teaches you to balance the boat and trim the sails better and it is

very true and worthwhile as the boat quickly performs even better when well balanced. Before long we were 'in the groove' and really amazed at how well the vane held the course.

We beat up against the prevailing wind and had to put in around 5 tacks, all of which was useful practice in resetting the vane steering, and eventually arrived at Lakka at 3.00pm.

Very few boats here as well and so we were able to pick a nice spot to anchor that meant we did not have too far to row to get ashore in the evening. Sarah and Jo went off for another long swim over to one of the beaches and we all showered off the back of the boat at 4.00pm which was around the time the sun dropped behind the hills surrounding the bay and it suddenly got decidedly cooler. Nice enough to then sit out and enjoy the view and relax, but certainly it is obviously getting towards the end of the season in so many ways.

Rowed ashore and had a wander round Lakka before having supper in one of the tavernas.

Slight swell running all night, but not enough to spoil anyone's sleep patterns!

West around Paxos to Mongonissi.

39:10.96N 20:12.26E

Sunday 28th September

Woke to find a reasonable breeze blowing from the South, so we decided to sail down to Mongonissi Island which is at the Southern end of Paxos, by way of the West coast. This is an enjoyable trip to do in fair weather, especially if you can get close to the coast to see the cliffs and caves. In a flat calm, you can launch a dinghy and row/motor into some of the caves which are truly spectacular, but sadly today was not still enough, so we continued to sail down the coast and then through the gap between Paxos and the small island of Anti Paxos.

Finally we headed a little way up the east coast to the entrance to Mongonissi Bay and dropped the sails and motored in around 2.00pm.

Went ashore for some of Theo's bean soup which was almost as good as we remembered from all those years ago and were joined for a few drinks by the man himself who was keen to talk to us at length about all manner of issues that were playing on his mind! He told us all about their plans for developing things further onsite. He told us about his problems with the flotillas not being as friendly and co-operative as before and he told us more about his family and his and Pan's childhood. In fact we have never ever seen him so voluble!

In the evening we left it until 8.00pm to go ashore and eat at Theo's taverna on the beach and were slightly surprised to find that we were the only people there. There were only a handful of yachts in the bay and they were presumably eating on board, so we had the staff's undivided attention. The slight problem with us being the only customers was that they felt the need to serve us huge portions and so Jo, who ordered the roast lamb got a joint of lamb suitable for a Sunday lunch for a full family! Theo sat with us and continued his conversation from earlier and we also chatted about building them a website during the winter. We became aware as the time slipped by that the entire staff were sitting at the next table patiently waiting for us to leave, but with Theo in full flight, this was not going to be easy. Every time we suggested that we should go and let them all have an early night, Theo brushed the suggestion aside saying that we should stay and they were all fine! (oh yes, and more drinks was also his idea...) Finally we managed to say goodnight to them all, with Theo and his brother Spiros refusing all attempts by us to pay anything.

Wind got up for a while during the night and it rained for around 10 minutes, but we were in a very secure spot and had a good night's sleep.

Jo's last day

39:11.85N 20:11.17E

Monday 29th September

Another morning in paradise.....

Sailed down to one of the beautiful bays in Anti Paxos where we anchored, swam and had lunch. Only three other boats anchored with us which made it very peaceful and whilst I was swimming I got to chat with a couple from New Zealand on one of them who got my full attention after they said how beautiful Serafina looked.

Eventually, had to leave and return to Gaios where we got a brilliant spot opposite the square with the best (of a very poor) Wi-Fi signal.

Sadly it was finally time for Jo to leave and so we all set off on the long walk round to the ferry terminal. The walk was interrupted after only 100 yards when we stopped to make way for a small builder's van, who having seen Jo's heavy bag, stopped and offered us all a lift. Jo sat up front whilst Sarah and I crouched in the back with some rocks and masonry tools!

Jo left safely on the hydrofoil headed for Corfu and we returned to the boat where we had quiet evening but were thrilled to get the news that Pan (who had flown to Athens for some tests on his recovery from lung cancer) had been given a clean bill of health.

Both of us were very sorry to see Jo go as it had been great fun having her on board and there was the added bonus that it had distracted Sarah (and me) from getting worked up about the lay up too early!

Last act of sun worshiping?

38:50.04N 20:42.72E

Tuesday 30th Oct

Bit of swell during the night, but no wind to speak of.

Woke up to clear blue skies although there was a lot of cloud about. Ran the weather files on the computer and saw that Wednesday is looking like rain and Southerly winds, which will not make for a pleasant passage down to Lefkas, so we resolved to go down South today.

Met up with Theo for a full briefing about his proposed website and then said all our goodbyes for the winter and set off for Lefkas Town at 11.50am.

To start with the wind was blowing 10 knots max from the South which was exactly where we were going so we motored, hopeful that the wind would veer round to the West and allow us to sail. Of course this did not occur and the slight swell that we started with, quietly dropped away to become a glassy calm by 2.00pm. Beautifully sunny and so we took full advantage, secure in the knowledge that with all the work we now have to do to get Serafina ready for the layup and the forecast of rain and strong winds, this will be our last chance to relax in the sun!

Caught the 4.00pm bridge at the entrance to the Lefkas canal and found the town quay fairly empty, so we took our time in getting a secure spot and laying a full 60 metres of chain to ensure we were well placed if the storm that has been forecast finally arrives on Saturday.

Had a stroll through the town which was looking very end of season and returned to eat on board and start preparations for the layup.

All over, bar the shouting!

Wednesday 1st October

Well it seems apt that we have decided to end this year's log at this point as today has been very wintery with strong winds and heavy rain pretty much all day long, although still warm enough for shorts and t-shirts. Forecast is for some very stormy weather over the weekend, but this should hopefully clear on Monday as we need to be able to wash and dry loads of clothes & equipment etc.

We are staying here in Lefkas town until Monday, when hopefully we will motor over to Cleopatra Marine (Preveza) where Serafina is being craned out on Friday (10th Oct). We are flying home on 15/16th Oct, via Corfu and Gatwick!

Photos will continue to be posted on www.rhbell.com until the layup is complete.

International Cuisine: As the season has drawn to an end, Sarah has been unearthing food items purchased along the way and frequently these turn out to be brilliant, but the joy is tempered slightly when we discover that it was bought in Portugal, or Spain or someplace where we cannot nip out and get some more!

We will be returning to Serafina in March/April and the blog will recommence as we undertake the second season of travels which provisionally will take in the rest of Greece and Turkey. We will post our plans as they become clear on the website www.rhbell.com and if you want us to send you a reminder next season when the blog restarts, please just send us an email and we will put you on the list.

Many thanks to all those of you that have emailed us at various stages along the way as it is very heartening to know that so many are reading and enjoying the blog! There is no wi-fi at Cleopatra Marine, but we will be able to still pick up emails (you can use the 'contact us' link on the www.rhbell.com website if you do not have our address) or you can always give us a call/text on our Greek phone 00306956065601, but remember that we are two hours ahead of the UK at the moment!!

The unidentified fish....

Just a quick note about the fish we caught recently that we could not identify.

The Greeks call it 'La Bolda' but we know it as a Dorado. It will change colour after death, so it looks different on the slab!

Laying up preparations begin.

38:49.90N 20:42.55E

Thursday 2nd October

Windy night, but nothing serious other than some lost sleep.

Got a huge surprise after a car pulled into the parking space behind Serafina this morning and out stepped Mark and Chris, owners of Blue Magic (Discovery 55). We last saw them on the pontoon at Beaulieu whilst we were on our way to Plymouth for the start of the Rally Portugal last May. They were just as surprised as us, as they had no idea we were in Lefkas and were only out for a day in a hire car during their land based holiday on the mainland nearby! They came on board for a coffee and a chat about the Blue Water rally which they are definitely joining in 2009, but we are less sure about our participation.

Joe Charlton (Contract Yacht Services) has been trying to persuade us to move to a less vulnerable mooring because of the forecast wind and today he very kindly offered us a place on their very well protected mole until we leave on Monday which we gratefully accepted!

Moved round in the afternoon and Ian (Berthing Master) sorted us a great spot with a laid mooring line so no need for the anchor. We then discovered that Ian also used to work out here in the early 1980's and we had a number of common friends and shared experiences.

We took down the bimini and replaced it with the cockpit cover that we took down back at the beginning of June. Good decision as it turned out as in the early evening we were treated to an extraordinary thunder storm and unbelievably heavy rain. The street alongside the quay was two feet deep in water at one stage and the sky was lit up for hours as the electrical storm circled round and round the town.

Friday 3rd October

Despite the forecast promising rain all day today, we actually enjoyed a great sunny day and so we spent the whole day working on deck (Sarah in a bikini) and got lots done. Sarah is washing all the ropes in the dinghy which we filled with water, although it overflowed rather a lot during the storm last night.

Another surprise today when friends (Lesley & John) from Hamble walked down the quay to take a look at the Najad they had seen from a distance, only to discover it was us. We met Lesley last year when we were all working on the Najad stand at the Southampton Boat Show and they had no idea we were here, but were just passing through in their yacht (a Hans Christian) and had come ashore for supplies! They stopped for a drink and are now coming for dinner on Saturday.

At 7.30pm Richard & Phillipa ('Matelot', Beneteau 41) from New Zealand came for drinks. We met them a few days ago when at anchor in a bay in Anti Paxos and again in Gaios. They went on the 'East Med Yacht Rally' this year which is an event we have become very interested in for 2010 as it cruises through Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt over two months. It turns out they had crewed for the rally organiser, so although the rally is full for 2009 we are hoping that they might find us a place anyway.

Things that go bump in the night.

38:56.91N 20:45.76E

Saturday 4th October

A blustery day, with lots of clouds and sunshine, but the storm promised was late in arriving.

Got lots done which gave us a good feeling inside and set us up nicely for the evening when we entertained John and Lesley from Hamble (Hans Christian 34) to dinner. Their boat was anchored (free swinging) about 50 yards away so they rowed over, bang on time as it

happens as the weather was just beginning to turn and they did not fancy arriving soaked to the skin! However, we had got a little confused earlier about what time we had invited them for. Decided that it was 8pm and so were coasting along when suddenly I recalled that 8pm was the time we agreed to meet Joe and his wife Robyn tomorrow night. John and Lesley were due around 6.30pm.....and it was 6.29pm. Ah well, no problem with sailing friends and we had a great evening which was about to draw to a close when there was an outbreak of domestic violence on the quay and the boat next door. Lesley, who is a slip of a lass dashed on deck to see if she could offer assistance, but she may have overlooked how much she had drunk at this point. We all bravely remained below to see what was actually going down as it does not always pay to get too involved with drunks. Things settled briefly and then there was shouting, screaming and the unmistakable sounds of slapping etc. Lesley again bounded on deck and refused to accept the man next door's declaration that all was well and jumped onto their boat and put her head down their hatch. This achieved very little as they then closed their hatch and Lesley had to withdraw, but made it very clear that we were listening out and would not be fobbed off again if it continued!

All went quiet from here on and eventually as the wind started to rise quite seriously, John and Lesley set off back (downwind) to their boat around 1.30am.

Sunday 5th Oct

Very windy night and still pretty exciting this morning, but generally the worst seems to be over. Our next door neighbours were flying home this morning and we watched them sheepishly take their bags up the quay to a waiting taxi. Lots of gossip and chat along the quay this morning!!

Had another good day getting jobs done which is all a little depressing but ultimately worthwhile. New crew arrived on the boat next door and they were so eager to get off sailing that they left with the dinghy still hanging vertically in front of the mast and I for one will long remember the faintly Monty Pythonesque image of this yacht heading off down the Lefkas Canal with the helmsman unable to see a damn thing in front of him and having to lean over and peer round the bows!

At 8.00pm (pew) Joe and Robyn Charlton arrived and following some drinks on board we went off into town to a wonderful little restaurant which did us proud. This was our 'thank you' to them for their help and the free mooring on their quay.

Much quieter evening as the wind died right away, so we should be fine for the crossing to Preveza in the morning.

Had an email back from Turkey about the East Med Rally to say that we would not be able to join it in 2009 as it is a special 20th anniversary and only boats/crews that have been before can join. So perhaps 2010?

Monday 6th October

Beautiful day - normal service resumed just in time.

Did some quick shopping and I rued not having the camera with me as the scenes in the road into town beside us were just so typical of the Greeks here. Not something one can easily describe and do any justice to, but a camera would have been great. Next season perhaps.

Got away in time to catch the 11.00am bridge along with around 10 other yachts, all of which it turned out were heading for Preveza. The catch then was that most of us were clearly on

our way to the boatyards to be craned out and so we were all keen to flush out and rinse our toilet holding tanks, so there was quite a bit of odd manoeuvring going on as we none of us wanted to be directly behind anyone else!

Arrived at Cleopatra Marina and filled the fuel tank to the very top and then moored up into the slot we will stay in until Friday morning when we are due to be lifted.

Got stuck back into the jobs again which stepped up a gear now that we have arrived at our final destination and will no longer be going out to sea.

Very sunny all day, but quite a cold wind. Had a quick look at the boat park and saw how most people choose to take their anchors off the boat along with all the chain, which hangs down from the boat's bows. Obviously there is a potential problem with rats, so a good many have split plastic water bottles and fitted them over the chain to stop rats climbing up. I suspect that these people have absolutely no idea how agile a rat is, as the presence of a litre water bottle presents no deterrent at all, but the very best of all was some poor sole who had not quite worked out what they were trying to achieve and they had fitted their bottle the wrong way up!! Photo will be posted when we get home.

Bits and pieces.

Tuesday 7th October

Up at 6.30am to take advantage of the nil wind first thing in the mornings to drop and bag all the sails. Never dropped an 'Inmast' Furling Main before, so there was something of a steep learning curve, but all went well albeit rather slowly as we worked it all out!

Sarah took the free minibus service through the tunnel to Preveza town primarily to book bus tickets for us and another boat owner, Steve (which involved a 3km walk to the bus station) who we met the other day in Lefkas and who is flying back to the UK on the same flight as us next week. He is also laying up at Cleopatra Marina but is not here just yet as he is getting a few days more sailing.

The weather today has been outstanding, with clear blue skies and a light NW breeze which has been perfect for laying up jobs.

Wasted quite a bit of time trying to find a way of stopping the furling gear inside the mast from banging against the mast. We had been given various amounts of helpful advice but the Selden system on Serafina is a new system and does not lend itself to the usual tricks! As ever Mike Jennings from Najad at Hamble had the germ of a good idea that got the problem solved. (I have to say that it is always a joy to talk to Mike as his unfailing good humour shines through regardless.)

Though there might be something of an international incident when some workmen asked if they could move our sail bags which were on the quay behind us so that they could pressure wash the concrete nearby. Poor Sarah has been washing and then polishing the hull and the thought that they were about to use a grinder on the concrete (they had on another quay earlier) so was braced to mention this, when we realised that they were simply being very careful and were only moving the bags to ensure that none of the spray went on them (but did manage to moisten the polisher and no doubt one half of the hull will need another wash before being polished....!) .

Wednesday 8th October

Another fantastic day, almost seems a shame to be busy laying up when we could be out sailing. The visibility is quite incredible and we can see mountain ranges that are a huge distance away and seem almost artificial.

There is an outside chance that we are doing a lot more by way of putting Serafina to bed than many, but having spoken to a good many people about all this, it is clear that proper preparation is well worth it in the long run. However, looking round the boat park, it seems some folks just haul their boat out of the water and walk away! The strangest thing is the absence of activity here. We expected to see loads of people all doing the same as us, but either we have missed the rush, or it hasn't happened yet! The site as you approach Preveza is remarkable with over 1000 masts all ashore, but for all that, there is still loads of space and we know of plenty of people who will keep sailing until the end of the month. We pretty much have the place to ourselves, so no queues for showers etc. and no distracting conversations, (well not many anyway) quite eerie.

The Sail Maker arrived this morning to collect our sails and take them away to wash and store them until we return in March. He was bemoaning the fact that whilst he was busy now, every year come March/April loads of boat owners/charterers will come down to their boats and discover that their sails were damaged or mildewed and require his urgent services, putting him under huge strain, when they could have sorted it all now. His other problem is getting staff. He cannot get any local Greeks to even consider working for a living, as they all seem to want lots of money for very little in return. Then when he does get someone to train up, they stay until they learn the trade and then just 'go away'. He wouldn't mind if they set up in opposition, then at least the work load would go down, but they simply vanish. He used to have 6 staff a few years ago, but now despite the huge increase in boats in the area and very little opposition to him, he has just 3 staff to cope with it all...or not.

Bit of a panic first thing this morning when Sarah discovered the water had been turned off. (It is rather crucial for washing ropes etc.!) She went off to discuss this with the marina staff and found out that there was a broken pipe which they had every intention of mending soon. Not much sense of urgency about getting things done around here, but to our relief it was indeed fixed after only an hour or so.

Shifting quite a bit of Ibuprofen and other assorted pain relief medicines as we are both suffering from painful bits (back, neck, elbows - in fact you name one of us has it inflamed!) with all the bending, crawling, polishing and squeezing into unlikely positions to carry out greasing and maintenance.

Up, Up and away.

38:56.84N 20:45.91E

Thursday 9th October

The weather is holding nicely and we have managed to get all the pre haul out work completed today, which was handy as we are being craned out first thing tomorrow morning!

Water was running today but at a rate that invited only pity! Sarah went to have a polite discussion about this with the office and I went along later to add my halfpenny worth but to no avail as they have no idea why the pressure has suddenly dropped. They did of course send the poor beleaguered marinero along to explain this to us and he poor soul, will probably be happy to see the back of us now.

Exchange of emails between us and Hempel Paints continues as we try to find the best antifouling paint to use next spring (best to get it ordered now) which surprised us as Hempel

own Blake's paints, whose products we used this year. However, they get full marks as they have kept up a daily correspondence although we started out emailing the UK and then got routed to Greece via Spain and finally have got a full and very helpful reply even giving us the names of the key contacts here at Cleopatra.

We have both been fascinated by the fishermen gathered all day on an old ferry landing hard just 50 metres from us. The water is teeming with some very sizable fish, which they seem to catch from time to time. But there is a chap with a spear gun that wanders from time to time around the marina and always gets himself a pretty big specimen and these are not Grey Mullet. Then we get people in small motor boats dropping an anchor just feet from the marina jetty and then start fishing, in between spectacular shouting matches with the fishermen on the hard! All makes for a very entertaining distraction.

Friday 10th October

Up with the lark this morning, (well it was still dark) but the fishermen were all already set up across the way on the hard. We were due to be lifted at 8.00am so we motored over to the hoisting dock at 7.50am and moored up in the entrance with a bit of excitement as there is a very strong cross current just as you approach the entrance. The crane team arrived shortly afterwards and immediately requested that we go out and turn the boat round and come in backwards! This was truly a test of boat handling as reversing yachts is never very straightforward and with this curious tide that eddies around the entrance anything could happen! Needless to say we got it right although the lads were a little shocked at the speed we came in at, but I doubt they really understood the dynamics of what we were trying to do. Ego got a big boost when a 50ft Halberg Rassey tried next and made a complete pig's ear of it all several times before effecting a sideways crash landing on the pier head. Lads were not at all fazed as this is clearly what most people do!

We have been positioned on a cradle in a brand new area of the hard standing, which unfortunately they are still working on! Doubtless the position on Google Earth puts us in a field. We had to get a little tetchy to get the water and electric laid on for us as the proper units are not yet installed and we are still waiting for the portable scaffold to allow us to complete some of the work around the hull. Hard standing is probably a bit of a misnomer as they have reclaimed the land by filling it with rock and then ever finer stones and earth which is being endlessly rolled by a huge vibrating roller which makes everything including our boat, shake.

Sarah used a bottle of 'strong pickle' that I bought at the chandlers for cleaning off barnacles to brilliant effect. Our propeller is the shiniest in the whole boat park and with a lot less effort than usual. However there are still lots of other bits and pieces to do still, but it is very gratifying to see that all Sarah's efforts on polishing the hull have paid off, despite the pressure washer at the lift out spraying crud all over her shiny hull.

Ground to a halt around 5.30pm but we still have 4 days to get it all finished which assuming the weather continues to hold should be fairly straightforward. It is just that so many of these jobs are ones that we have not done before so they take time to work out.

Dramatic sky this evening and a clear threat of rain, but the forecast is for the fine weather to continue, so fingers crossed.

Did the earth move for you?

Saturday 11th, Sunday 12th & Monday 13th October

Bit of a surprise to discover that the boatyard stays open all day Saturday and that includes all the earth moving equipment! The heavy vibration roller has spent days doing laps around us, or so it seems. It really is nice whenever he stops to go for a break.

Spent all three days working our way through the long list of jobs which seems endless. Quite a few boats are being given the same treatment around us although with the notable exception of the couple from Malvern (!) they are mostly German.

Sarah is quite agitated by the size of the local insect life, one or two of which more closely resemble birds. Certainly the mosquitoes have returned in force and you really do have to take serious precautions if (like me) you are considered a live target by them. They too can be bloody enormous! Sarah has succumbed to third bite of the season.....

I suppose if you are propped up in the air like we are on some fairly ordinary props, which in turn are placed on reclaimed marsh land, the one thing you do not want when you are on board is an earthquake.....so you can imagine our delight and excitement (!) when we had not one, but two tremors during Sunday night. This region has always suffered from earthquakes and most of the buildings are designed specifically with this in mind, so we have to hope that they do not get anything too serious this winter.

Andy Barker called in to see us on Sunday on his way to the airport. He has just finished laying up his boat (Seven Tenths) at Nidri and joined us for a cup of tea and the use of the marina's showers. We also got a visit from Steve Miller on the Sunday as he was in the marina waiting to be lifted out on Monday. In the end we joined him on his boat for a drink before all going out to the taverna nearby for a meal. Super taverna here, which is a surprise in a way as it is so isolated. The food is wonderful and really cheap and the way the kitchens are run is a real throwback to the Seventies and Eighties, which is actually better than it sounds!

Cars, buses, Boats, Trains and Planes

Tuesday 14th October

Sarah's master plan was to get finished by midday and then to take advantage of yet another glorious day to catch a few rays.

Of course it did not work out like that for a whole raft of reasons, one of which was the failure of the marina's power supply so the hoover could not be used until after lunch. Everything just took longer than hoped and then a minor disaster when we discovered that the angle that boat was tipped back caused the lazarette drains not to function properly and the water that we had hosed onto the window to test the seals, had now made some of the carefully washed and dried ropes, wet again!

Finally got everything done and the boat closed up by 6.30pm and we went back to the apartment in the marina office that we had rented for the night, to relax and have a well earned drink.

Wednesday 15th October

Up at 7.00am to do the final packing and for me to go back on board Serafina to return a couple of items we had used in the room last night and to get a couple of things for Sarah.

At 10.00am we boarded the marina's minibus for a free ride into Preveza along with Steve (Miller) who was flying home on the same flight as us. Had a coffee in Preveza and then took

a taxi to the bus station. The bus then took us all the way to Igoumenitsa where following a brief lunch we caught a ferry to Corfu Town.

Had a few hours to kill in Corfu so we went up to the Old Town so Sarah could do some proper shopping whilst Steve and I guarded the bags (sat in a bar!). Sarah returned empty handed and more than a little miffed that the shop she had really wanted to go to was firstly shut and then when it briefly opened, she was told to go away. (Some people might think I had something to do with this, but honestly.....). Then had a very nice meal in a restaurant on the (expensive) 'Listern', which is the posh end of town.

Finally caught a taxi up to the airport around 9.30pm and all went well and we boarded the aircraft early. There were some very interesting folk on this EasyJet flight to Gatwick including a family who had patently never flown before and were asking some very unlikely questions of anyone and everyone. Also I was slightly wrong footed so to speak, by an American lady who having checked in at the desk, turned round and saw all of us patiently queuing behind her and said to her husband, " Gee, look at all these people, I wonder where they are all flying to?" Managed to avoid advising her that EasyJet was not an exclusive executive airline!

Great excitement when we arrived early at Gatwick, touching down at 12.20pm, some 15 minutes early. This of course is not always good news, and sure enough having taxied slowly for ages we came to a halt in the middle of nowhere and the captain explained that there was a plane still boarding at our stand, so we would have to wait. Finally got off the plane at 1.00am and then went in search of bags and the car we had arranged to hire. Being 1.30am the Europcar check in desk in our terminal was closed (Something you did not get to find out until you had walked miles to get there) and were directed to go to the South terminal. This involved a ride on the shuttle train and another long walk before finally being handed the keys to a Peugeot 207. Trouble free drive home and we crawled into bed around 4.30am (which was 6.30am Greek time).

The blog will restart next spring when we return to Serafina around 1st April for the next leg of our travels which will include the Aegean Islands of Greece and Turkey.

All information and photos are at www.rhbell.com (photos will be updated on Saturday 18th October.)