

GALES AND GUINNESS

When a Force 9 gale slammed into their bay, Leon Schulz and his family wondered why they had turned left instead of right in southern Ireland. The answer was that the west coast was an adventure, a place of rugged scenery, birds and dolphins and a warm welcome in every tiny pub

We were anchored close to the old fort on the island of Inishbofin about seven miles off the Galway coast. The island is reputed to have been a base for Ireland's pirate queen, Grace O'Malley. But it wasn't pirates that worried us. We had put out our two biggest anchors in tandem, one in front of the other. We had let out a lot of chain and were positioned to cope with wind from any direction. On the backstay, we had set the small anchor-sail to keep *Regina's* bow into the wind. A snubber with a rubber spring had been hooked onto the chain to take the shock loads. Now we could only wait. And hope. The Atlantic gale arrived as predicted, gusting to 40 knots, even inside the bay.

The west coast of Ireland is a rugged, but charming place, just like the people. Many still speak Irish. All have grown used to the Atlantic waves that crash onto the lee shore of Europe's most westerly outpost. Even the Vikings steered clear of this coast. They came a couple of times, but preferred the safer and easier east coast and made what is now Dublin their main trading post.

Why had we chosen to go round the outside of Ireland? Waiting for a gale off Inishbofin, this was not easy to answer.

The low-pressure system of 990hPa must have passed extremely close to us, as our barometer dropped from 1010hPa to 992hPa in just a couple of hours.

Four yachts were anchored alongside *Regina*. Four is a crowd on this coast and two had started to drag. Their crews worked hard in the freezing wind and rain to reset their anchors in the weedy bottom. One succeeded quite quickly. The other was not so lucky and drifted closer and closer to us. Over the roaring wind, we could hear the crew yelling at each other. More people came up on deck to help raise the anchor. The boat continued to get closer. If she hit us the shock might dislodge our anchor and cause us both to drift back towards the rocks.

I pulled my hood down to shield my face, grabbed our biggest fender and went up to the foredeck. The other yacht was veering from side to side, but always moving back towards *Regina*. I stood ready with the fender. She got closer and closer until, at the last moment, the anchor snagged on something and she swung and missed us by no more than a boat's length.

"Stop!" was all I could think to shout. The boat carried on moving across the choppy water towards the rocks. In my head, I could already see her smashing into them, her hull punctured and crew jumping for their lives. It was not until the very last moment that they managed to lift their anchor and use their engine properly to drive them away from impending doom.



All photos Leon Schulz unless marked



Above: dark skies and ruins make a brooding backdrop for a forecast Force 9 at Inishbofin. Left to right: traditional lifestyles on the Aran Islands; a steadying sail on the backstay keeps *Regina* lying into the wind; storm swells surge into an anchorage; the author at the helm

IRELAND'S WEST COAST



Little Skellig appeared to be a knuckle of white rock when it appeared over the horizon. On arrival, we realised its colour came from the 40,000 gannets that are said to nest there

Weather forecasts

The Coastguard broadcasts weather forecasts over VHF and Navtex. GRIB files are also useful to obtain a longer computer-generated forecast; we use WindPlot by Xaxero and grib.us (www.grib.us) as Gribfile readers.

Our personal favourites are the weather faxes received via SSB and a laptop with built-in soundcard or directly from the internet. We use the Weatherfax2000 program by Xaxero in connection with our SSB-receiver.

Among forecasting websites German site www.wetterzentrale.de provides synoptic charts for the current situation (www.wetterzentrale.de/pics/bracka.html) and a 24-hour forecast (www.wetterzentrale.de/pics/bracko.html). By replacing the "o" with 1, 2, 3 or 4, up to 120 hours' outlook can be obtained or less detailed charts extend your forecast up to nine days in advance (www.wetterzentrale.de/pics/avnpanel.html).



Design Pics/Alamy



It may have just 35 inhabitants (or possibly now 36), but with two pubs and a restaurant the tiny village of Crookhaven (left) provides a welcome landfall in Ireland

"That was close!" I said to my wife, Karolina, as I slipped back down the companionway into the warmth of *Regina*.

The previous evening in the local pub seemed a long time ago. We had chatted with locals and answered questions about our voyage across the Atlantic and back with our two children, Jessica and Jonathan, and what we thought of Ireland. One of the regulars wanted to know how long it had taken us to sail all the way from Sweden to the west coast of Ireland.

Our answer of one year and one month prompted a raised eyebrow. More questions followed and soon we were entertaining the pub with our tales of maritime adventure.

Had we encountered any storms?

"Well," I responded, "the worst weather

we've encountered on the whole trip is forecast for here tomorrow night."

I took a long draught of Guinness. "I know you think this is just a summer gale and will soon be over. I have read about your winter weather and have nothing but respect for your ability to prosper out here. On the tradewind routes we sailed you don't get anything like this."

Why, then, had we chosen the wild west coast of Ireland? If we had known about the weather to come at Inishbofin, we would have gone east. But that would have been a pity. This is a beautiful cruising ground. The scenery is fantastic, the people are friendly and the Guinness is poured perfectly.

We had approached Ireland via the Fastnet Rock, making landfall in a tiny village called

Crookhaven. It has 35 inhabitants, possibly 36 – the lady we asked was not sure since a baby was due. Despite being so small, the town had two pubs and a restaurant – an ideal landfall!

It was in Crookhaven that we discussed the west or east issue. Going west would mean we would circumnavigate Ireland – the only island of which that would be true. But going east would be quicker and safer.

Time was getting short and I didn't want an accident so close to home to spoil what had been such a trouble-free trip. We had sailed some 16,000 miles, but had no illusions about being invulnerable. We were still the ordinary family on a longer cruise than usual. We were not adventure heroes.

What swung the decision was our desire to keep exploring. We had come to love finding

new places and meeting new people. To retrace our steps any sooner than necessary just felt wrong. It would feel like our adventure was ending already. We were also impressed by things we heard from people who had sailed Ireland's west coast. They were all emphatic in their belief that west was best.

The west coast of Ireland was like nowhere else we had been. From Crookhaven on, it was one extraordinary place after another. One of the first was Great Skellig, or as it's also known, Skellig Michael. This barren rock eight miles offshore was, for many hundreds of years, home to religious hermits. You can still see their beehive-shaped stone huts dating back 1,400 years. Those who found even that too sociable, could retire to a cell right at the top of the island. Here, their devotions would be interrupted only by the wind and wildlife.

If Great Skellig was quiet, Little Skellig was the opposite. When it first appeared over the horizon, it looked as though it had white cliffs. But as we neared we realised the white was not rock but some of the 40,000 gannets our guidebook claimed nested on the island.

As we got nearer still, the sky began to fill with birds. Jessica questioned why they all chose to nest on this one island. I didn't know

the answer, but wondered whether it might be for many of the same reasons that we humans gather in cities.

From Crookhaven, we sailed to Ballycastle. This small harbour described itself as 'a sleepy drinking village with a fishing problem'. And, indeed, as well as an impressive fleet of fishing vessels there was a no less numerous selection of pubs.

Our next port, Dingle, had so many pubs we couldn't have got round them all in a week. Its main attraction, however, was not the pubs, but a dolphin called Funji, who has lived in the bay for more than 20 years. Funji is free to swim to the Atlantic to rejoin his species, but chooses to stay here in Dingle. We took the dinghy out to find him and it wasn't long before he bobbed up to say hello.

On the Aran Islands, we visited the prehistoric Dun Aonghasa, an enormous D-shaped fortification built on a 100m high cliff during the Bronze Age. As usual, we took the dinghy in and started tying up alongside the town pier. Politely, we were asked not to moor there today – the local school was to have its swimming lesson there later that afternoon. The water temperature was around 15°C. These children must be tough.

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BL Images/Alamy

Passage planning

There are only four marinas along the entire west coast of Ireland and all are in the south at Cahersiveen, Dingle (above), Fenit and Killrush. Going north of the latter (close to Loop Head), the next marina is on the north coast at Lough Swilly.

Yet good harbours and sheltered anchorages exist on the west coast. Most are spaced close together, with only the west coast of Clare being a blank, but this crossing can be made in a day – the 75-mile passage between the Blaskets and the Aran islands, for example.

A tip when planning a cruise is to factor in time to be weatherbound. This is not a coast to hurry in heavy weather, but is exceptionally pleasant if you take it slowly. The Irish Cruising Club's pilot book *Sailing Directions for the South & West Coasts of Ireland* is excellent.

IRELAND'S WEST COAST

Later, at anchor, as we sat under the sprayhood extension waiting for one of the frequent rain showers to pass, we heard voices. We thought a dinghy had come alongside without our noticing. I climbed out of the tent and found no dinghy, but two women swimming. "Do you need help?" I asked, wondering if they wanted to come aboard. We were, after all, several hundred metres from the shore. "Oh, no thank you. We're just out for a little swim." And off they swam, giggling and talking to each other.

We didn't leave Inishbofin until the storm had gone through completely. The next leg started calmly enough. The wind was forecast to rise, but to no more than Force 6. The forecast did not include squalls, however. We could see the cold front approaching and, on the radar, pick out the squalls embedded within it. By this stage, it was already blowing a steady Force 7 with gusts well over 30 knots.

Karolina, sensible as ever, suggested reefing. The mainsail was already down and we were running with about half the genoa. Now we rolled up all but about 6ft. I cleated off and ducked back under the sprayhood. Then it hit us. The rain cut the visibility to little more than the length of the boat and beat down the waves to leave an almost flat sea. The anemometer measured 45 knots, more than we had ever seen at sea before.

I think I must have gone just a bit crazy because I enjoyed it. It was beautiful. *Regina* was just flying along, sailing at a steady nine knots. And everything was fine. The boat did not feel overpressed.

The autopilot carried on steering. My wet-weather gear kept me warm and dry. What did I have to complain about? Jessica and Jonathan below didn't even notice the squall. Long after the front had passed and the sun was shining again, they stuck their heads out to ask why everything was so wet.

Entering the harbour at Broadhaven, we saw two familiar boats already anchored. We had seen no more than half a dozen yachts in the whole of our west coast voyage and it was a pleasant change to do a bit of socialising.



Bottlenose dolphins played around the hull in Lough Swilly – the closest we got to these endearing animals on our entire trans-Atlantic trip



Photos: I. Gibbon/Alamy, Imagebroker/Alamy



Above: we were pleased to learn Bloody Foreland was named after the colour of its rocks not its effect on ships. Left: pubs aplenty on Dingle high street

in work clothes dinghying out to the moored lifeboat. Quicker than you could say 'Full speed ahead' the boat was roaring out of the anchorage. Like angels of the sea, they flew over the breaking waves. I think British and Irish yachtsmen don't always realise how lucky they are to have the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. From more than 200 lifeboat stations around Britain, it has saved more than 135,000 people. There are over 1,000 trained volunteers in Ireland alone. It's a service unmatched anywhere in the world.

The following morning, after an uncomfortable night, the swell had dropped enough to continue. We were due to round Bloody Foreland. I was glad to read that its name came from the colour of the rocks, not its propensity to sink ships.

The swell was still big enough for nearby fishing boats to disappear in the troughs, but the seas were long and we were able to make progress. Then the radio went off again.

"PanPan – PanPan – PanPan, this is Malin Head Coastguard. A windsurfer is in difficulties off Melmore Head. Any vessel in vicinity, please report to Malin Head Coastguard. Over."

Silence. More silence. No rescue boat this time? Time seemed to stand still. I grabbed the microphone: "Malin Head Coastguard,

this is the Swedish sailing yacht *Regina*, position one mile north-east of Melmore Head on easterly course."

I mentioned our easterly course, to announce we had already passed Melmore Head. I also wanted to stress we were a yacht and possibly not the best suited to save windsurfers in difficulties close to land.

"Yacht *Regina*, this is Malin Head Coastguard, thank you. What is your ETA to Claddaghanillian Bay?"

We got the sails down, turned around and started motoring back into the swell and wind towards Melmore Head. The water temperature was 13°C. If I had been in water that cold I would hope someone was coming to get me as fast as possible.

"Eight minutes," I replied and pushed the throttle up to the maximum.

I looked for Claddaghanillian Bay on the chart. There were rocks all around it. As we motored we talked quickly about launching the dinghy and trying to use that to rescue the man. To my considerable relief, there came another voice on the radio: "Malin Head Coastguard, this is Melmore Rescue Boat, we are on our way. ETA four minutes."

They were going to get there before us.

We circled and watched and listened as the Coastguard co-ordinated the rescue. It

“ The swell was big enough for fishing boats to disappear in the troughs when the radio went off: “PanPan – PanPan – PanPan”



Above: under stormy skies, a 5m swell thuds outside Aranmore – not a place to go overboard, even when the local lifeboat crew (below) will speed to your rescue within two minutes of a PanPan call



Anchoring in a gale

Along the west coast of Ireland, the weather can be harsh and the protection limited, so you need good ground tackle. Use a larger than usual main anchor of a proven type – Bruce, Delta, CQR or Rocna – and ample chain.

To increase your holding power in a gale, you need a second anchor, either laid in a V-shape or in tandem. The former strategy, with each anchor on its own cable, reduces the swinging area, so is useful in confined spaces. The disadvantage is that boats usually only hang one anchor, with the second not used until the first loses its grip and you begin to drag.

When you expect a significant wind shift (as when we weathered our gale and have ample room to swing, it is often better to hook two anchors in tandem; ie using the same chain with one anchor in front of the other. For our 40ft 12-tonne HR40, we hook a 15kg Bruce in front of our main 20 Delta anchor, with around 5m chain between them.

In a gale, it is crucial to take the load off the windlass with a snubber; a piece of mooring line attached at the chain just above the water surface and tied to the bow mooring cleat. Slip hose around the rope where it goes over the anchor roller to prevent chafe.

Another tip is a small anchor sail on the backstay to keep the bow dead into the wind. This prevents the boat sawing to and fro to reduce the pull on the anchor, hence improving its holding.



Leon Schutz, his wife Karolina and their two children took a gap year and sailed the Atlantic circuit to the Caribbean in their Hallberg-Rassy 40, returning via Ireland. Schultz has also written a book of their voyage, *The Missing Centimetre*.

