

# Revisiting Northern Spain

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## Dublin to La Rochelle

In 2006, during the Irish Cruising Club's rally to northern Spain, which visited Hondabria, Zumia and Bilbao, circumstances dictated that I was unable to arrive in time to the first two stops on that excellent rally, but having really enjoyed the closing event in Bilbao, it seemed essential to revisit those missed ports.

A trip to northern Spain via south Brittany by *Kish*, my Tayana 37, commenced on June 14th 2009, leaving Dun Laoghaire in a fresh southeasterly. We then made stopovers in Wicklow and Kilmore Quay, where we waited two days for a favorable slant in the fresh winds. A projected stopover in the Scillies was abandoned, and after some 50 hours at sea, John Dunlop and I arrived in Concarneau, having passed to the west of the Chenal du Four and Raz de Sein in the night, the inshore passage being a difficult navigational challenge at night with a south going tide against a southerly wind.

A couple of days in Concarneau saw John depart for Dublin via Nantes, and Vincent Espana join me. We then commenced day-sailing south to call at islands off the coast, including Belle Ile (Sauzon), Ile de Noirmoutier (L'Herbaudiere), and then to the mainland, first calling at Les Sables-d'Olonne, then sailing east

of Ile de Re to pass under the bridge to arrive at La Rochelle (Minimes), mostly sailing some 60 miles each day in ideal weather. At La Rochelle in late June the temperature was 35 degrees, the highest experienced in our time away. After a two-day stopover, we headed south for Hondabria.

This journey generates several interesting navigational conundrums, the first being that there is no shelter from the prevailing northwesterlies, making for a very long, 150 mile lee-shore on the French coast, with only a couple of small harbours with harbour bars untenable in strong westerlies. Secondly there is a military artillery exercise area stretching from five miles to forty-five miles offshore for most of that



Zumia Harbour entrance

distance, with harbours only at Cap Ferat and Arcachon, neither of which is approachable in other than light winds, due to strong streams at their entrances.

To avoid a fifty-mile slog to windward, and having had a good forecast for the next two days, we reluctantly decided to stay on the inner passage, five miles or less from the coast; but circumstances changed. At dusk on July 2nd, some 20 miles south of La Rochelle, there were loud booming noises to the west, which, for about an hour, we thought were military artillery exercises. After a while rational opinion suggested that the French navy could not be so prolific with their shelling, and we debated if it was thunder, but there was no lightning to be seen. After a couple of hours of thunder with no lightning, a very black cloud-bank to the west was seen to be darker than the rest of the sky, but as it was dark, its significance was slow to dawn upon us. This was to change rapidly; simultaneous with our conclusion that thunderstorms were imminent, the wind speed went from six to thirty knots and veered to the northwest. No panic, some concern yes, putting in three reefs, but the



Passenger Pigeon.

presence of a lee shore forced us to sail west into the militarily restricted zone. By lunchtime next day we were some fifty miles off the coast nearly clear of the western edge of the exclusion zone, when a helicopter circled above us and a French navy patrol boat appeared. The helicopter called us up on VHF and told us to speak to the patrol boat on channel 12, who told us in perfect English to proceed to a designated position some 5 miles northwest of where we were. This we did, escorted by the patrol boat. We were hove-to for about an hour, before the navy told us that their exercises were complete and we could continue south. No diplomatic incident, no arrests!

A close call, don't upset the military! We were almost clear of the exclusion zone when contacted. I have since speculated as to what could have happened if we were unable to clear the zone promptly and had discommoded the military. The thunderstorm caused flooding in Bordeaux, some 50 miles from our position, and I was told that there was 50 mm of rain in Dublin that night.

### Previous Naval 'Battles'

This was my third naval encounter, having been warned-off previously by the British and Irish navies in 1997 and 2005 respectively. In June 1997, while on *Bandersnatch of Howth*, en-route to the Orkneys some twelve miles east of Stornaway, we were warned on VHF by the Royal Navy in a very firm Devonport accent, that, "this is a submarine exercise area – keep clear". It was northwest force 7 and I asked him what he advised, to be told to "go north". Explaining to him that we were going for shelter he asked us to stand-by. Some three minutes later we were told to "carry on" and so we did. This was a 'famous' naval victory for *Bandersnatch*. There was a downside, as a little while later there was extremely loud bulkhead vibrating sonar sounding on board, not a gentle ping, but a rattling grunt – obviously a submarine directly below us using our wake to hide from the exercising warship for some five minutes. Not very comforting, as we have all heard of trawlers being sunk by contact with submarines.

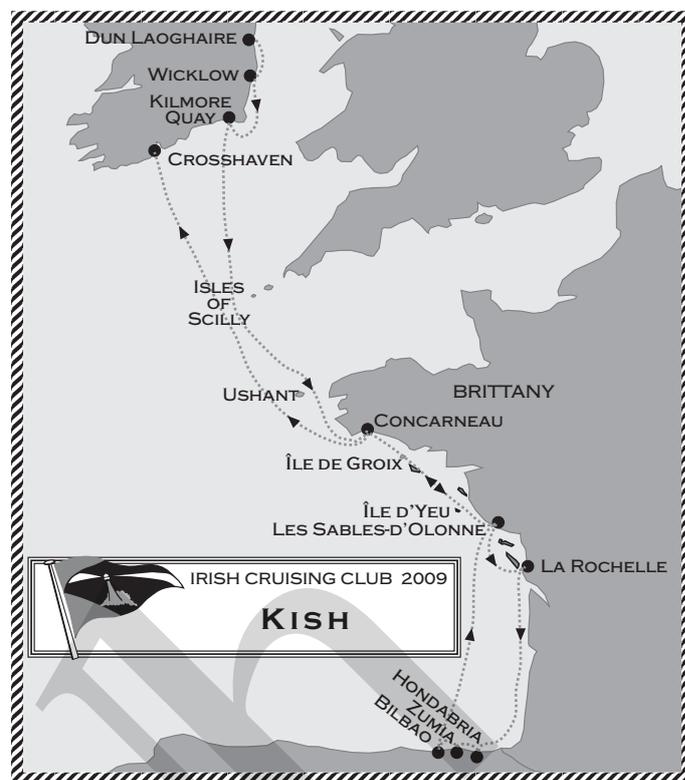
Subsequently another naval encounter, in July 2006, while some fifty miles south of Old Head of Kinsale; a message from *LE Aoife* announced that they would be holding live gunnery exercises from 15.00, for one hour. Their position was less than ten miles from us and they were visible on the horizon. On calling them up, I was told to change channels and standby. But there was no response from *LE Aoife* despite being called back several times. After some time without any response they declared that the exercise was finished.

### La Rochelle to Spain and onward to Crosshaven

On resuming our journey south, on the next night we were some 10 miles off of Hondabria, and waiting hove-to for daylight before entering. A blue beacon was seen approaching, and a couple of minutes later a French customs boat circled us, trained floodlights on us, and within a few minutes a RIB was launched and five customs officers boarded and checked us out politely for some thirty minutes.

Arrival in Hondabria was welcome having come from La Rochelle, and two days were spent there, visiting Hendaye also. Subsequently we sailed to Zumia where we were made most welcome. Leaving to go to Bilbao in a westerly force 5, the horrible sea on the nose persuaded us to return and await a calmer sea.

Arrival in Bilbao completed the circuit of Atlantic Spain, as in 2006 *Kish* had sailed from Bilbao to Vigo following the ICC Rally that year. In Bilbao we stayed in the marina of the Real Club Maritimo Del Abra, where the 2006 rally had concluded. Here my French friends departed, and I waited for my son Eoin



to arrive, to sail with me back to Ireland. Another navigational conundrum presented itself here, as with prevailing winds being northwesterly, the correct approach would be to sail west along the coast to Finisterre, and then head north. That would have been the prudent approach, avoiding the lee shore that is Biscay, and allowing us to sail north with a favourable slant on the prevailing wind. This would require more time than my son's two-week leave would allow, and he wanted to see French ports, not making too many long offshore passages. Accordingly we sailed from Bilbao direct to Les Sables-d'Olonne, a passage of some 40 hours, staying outside the military exclusion zone, having set waypoints on its western extremities and regularly checking that we were clear of it. This was Eoin's first offshore passage, and I explained that if we were to make a long passage, it was important not to commence with short port hops. From there it was very pleasant day-sailing in south Brittany, back to Concarneau, with just one day of force 7 when we did not sail. A gripe I had was arriving on a mooring at Sauzon at 20.45 to be asked for €20 by the harbour-master's RIB, for the mooring for the night, when I had no intention of going ashore. A receipt was given and the code for the showers, so all was correct. It was galling to see an Amel 54 arrive a few minutes later, after the harbour-master's RIB had stopped working, and take a free mooring for the night, as he left at 07.00 next morning. He was probably as pleased as I was displeased; c'est la vie.

On arriving at Concarneau we prepared for a departure for Ireland, and had intended to arrive in Kinsale, but a wind that headed us somewhat made Crosshaven an easier option, taking forty hours for the direct passage; I find that sailing via the Scillies takes three days longer. At Crosshaven, Eoin took the train from Cork to Dublin, and with Shane Dillon, who joined me in Crosshaven, we sailed directly to Dublin. Some of the worst following-seas of the trip were encountered between Youghal and Dunmore East in winds of force 6. We arrived back in Dun Laoghaire on July 30, after being away for six weeks.

In summary *Kish* covered some 1600 miles, with a crew of either two or three, in mostly pleasant weather when in France and Spain.