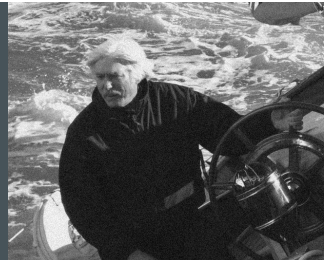


Tom Cunliffe



Tom recalls going south of the ‘Bisky Bay’, as he and his friends ship out for Morocco



Chris Stewart joined the boat in Dartmouth to sail back to his home in Spain

*‘...the Attery Squash and the Bisky Bat
all came and built on the lovely hat of the Quangle Wangle Quee.*

So this is the Bisky Bay, then,’ mused Chris quoting Edward Lear as we cruised into Biscay early in June. ‘Golden sunshine. Fair wind. Where’s the horrors?’

There weren’t any. At least, not for a while.

When this cruise took place, it was almost twenty years since Chris Stewart signed off my old cutter *Hirta* after a raunchy crossing to America via Iceland and the cold coast of Greenland. You can listen to the story of this trip if you go to the audio book section of the website and sign up for ‘Topsail and Battleaxe’. Chris had spent a fat half of the intervening period creating a working farm from a semi-derelict property in southern Spain and had scored a major hit with his book about it. Two decades was time enough even for the author of ‘Driving over Lemons’ to forget the miseries of seafaring, and he’d finally committed to a second trip.



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Tom Cunliffe - Yachts and Yarns

Chris's first voyage with us had been memorable for many things. Finding him studying Mandarin Chinese huddled over the bogey stove west of Iceland captured the imagination of his less literary shipmates. The way he played classical guitar as the ship plunged through ice-ridden fog delighted the girls, but it was his log-book entries that tickled me. Amongst dark parallels between us and Edward Lear's 'Jumblies', who 'went to sea in a sieve', were merrier quotes from less sinister poems. The all-round favourite was the 'Quangle Wangle's Hat', and it is the parade of creatures who lived in that singular headgear, in particular the 'Bisky Bat', that inspired the title of this article.

For the Biscay crossing we were three on board, but Roz the cook had been served a mottled shrimp on the quay at Camaret and succumbed to the gripes like a true Brit. She spent the passage in the aft cabin trying to keep down a thin gruel while Chris and I competed to create the ultimate breakfast before the black pudding ran out

On the second morning, Chris was on deck and I was on breakfast duty when an upheaval ahead churned the peaceful ocean into something more like Portland Race on a bad day.

'Cor, lookerthat!' he exclaimed, quite forgetting his job as ship's wordsmith.

I shot up the hatch, banged my head, and when the cursing had stopped found we were in amongst a feeding frenzy that made our Cumberland sausage orgies look dainty. The sea was frothing as birds dived out of the sun, small fry leapt clear of the water with tuna hitting them from behind like silver battle tanks, while mashing into the action from an offside position surged the dolphins, leaping, snorting and thrashing.

We sailed speechless through the extravaganza until the sea close abeam turned oily, then swelled upwards in a great mound.

'Pwoooosh!'

The whale's blow reached our spreaders and from the smell of the big fellow's breath he'd had a large night out on the sardines. His fellow-diners backed off out of sheer respect so, although we weren't grabbing any of his morning snack, we hardened our sheets to give him space and I didn't return to the skillet until the show had fallen well astern. The bacon was burned to a frazzle.



Chris in his colourful clothing off Greenland



Dolphins always cheer you up

'I said you should have left the rind on...'

Thirty-six hours later, we limped into Camariñas after being stuffed to leeward into a final day and night hacking along the north coast of Spain. A typical beat with too much wind, seas steeper than sense and morale sagging.

Roz appeared at the companionway as the hook rattled down into the sudden quiet of one of my favourite stopovers.

'How far's Santiago?' she enquired, having just finished her book about pilgrims travelling to honour St James, the 'Moor-slayer'.

'It's fifty miles up the road,' replied Chris, an expert with fifteen years as a de facto Spaniard. 'We'll hire mules tomorrow and complete the pilgrimage. My publisher'll buy the dinner.'

I am not free to divulge whether we really did ride to Santiago, but we got there by hook or crook and the following day found us at ease in a shady pavement restaurant surrounded by the baroque stonework of ancient Spain.



Tom and Chris share a joke over a dodgy-looking chilli

That night, we left Chris in a tacky boarding house with a ticket for home and cabbied it back to the boat to sail on towards Tangier.

The northerly breeze lifted our skirts as we dived into various holes in the Portuguese shoreline to make sure the land drifting by was not some sunshine fantasy. At Leixoes, we loaded port, and CDs with the half-Moorish songs of ancient Portugal known as 'Fado'. Further south, we surfed into Figuera de Foz on the sort of Atlantic swell that makes this coast a potential danger even in fair weather, then we pressed on to dine in ethnic splendour at Marina do Mar's joint at the back of town in secret Nazaré. Soon *Westernman* was rounding Henry the Navigator's original sea school at Sagres, to shape up for Lagos and a fresh crew. Our daughter Hannah joined us here, as did Pol Bergius, both well-tested foul-weather stalwarts, but on this trip we sailed with a fair wind and a full moon to knock off the last 200 miles to Morocco in a single peaceful idyll.





Westernman is the boat I owned for twelve years before Constance. New-built for me in wood epoxy with a powerful hull and a seriously big rig, she weighed in at 22 tons and was 41ft on deck with an overall length of 55ft. She sailed like a witch and was so stiff that sometimes it seemed that the more sail you piled on, the faster she went. Persuading her to dip her lee rail with no sea running was a major challenge. Her accommodation had lovely pitch-pine panelling and, in my day, we had an engine that was far too small. She was also a load of fun and made friends wherever she went. Her name, by the way, was the name given to the paid hands on the old pilot cutters of Bristol before WW1, from whence came her inspiration.

The stream of yachts heading into the Mediterranean faded away with the north wind as we bore off towards the African coast. Tangier lies immediately west of the Strait of Gibraltar and, like many transients passing to and from the Med, I had never before been aware of the scale of the Riff mountains on the African shore. The southern Pillars of Hercules floated impossibly sheer above the clear blue sea as we approached the long breakwater with mixed emotions. In those days, few yachts called here, and perhaps there was every reason. Maybe we would be resented as infidels in the lands of the Prophet, or mugged, or arrested for some unpredictable infringement.

My chart gave no indication of visitors' berths, and when an Armada of scruffy fishing vessels careered up alongside us with crews kitted out like cut-throats from High Barbary, I began to wonder whether we shouldn't have gone to the safe Spanish enclave of Ceuta just inside the straits instead.

The fishermen were leaping up and down on their decks and waving their arms about, but as they closed in we realised that what had appeared to be a shaking of fists was in fact an enthusiastic welcome. Temporarily relieved, we rounded the pier into the inner harbour, only to be confronted with fishing craft speeding in all directions and no room for a long-keeled yacht with a bowsprit to manoeuvre. Hannah grabbed the binoculars as I stooed around.

'There's a character in yellow slippers and a long white robe over there beckoning us in,' she announced.

This colourful individual was joined by three or four colleagues and, following instructions hollered out in clear French, we came stern-to with our best bower enmeshed in fishing boat grapnels on the end of thirty fathoms of chain cable draped along whatever detritus lurked on the bottom, and our Wind-pilot self-steering gear inches from a memorably nasty wall. We were in Africa.





Westernman's berth in Tangier,
outside the Yacht Club

Perhaps inevitably, the man in the kaftan introduced himself as Mustapha. We struck a deal with him to look after us at five pounds per day, and I never spent money more wisely. With the wheels greased by Mustapha, the formalities were rapidly over and all hands set course for the souk and the kasbah.

The 24-hour clock of normality now took a positive departure from our lives as the hours melded together. We shopped at market stalls piled high with spices, and squeezed past women carrying water from the neighbourhood well along labyrinthine alleys too narrow for two donkeys to pass, while one-armed beggars tugged our sleeves for alms. The high buildings shaded us from the heat and the air outside the mosques rang with tinny, recorded readings from the Koran. We ate with workers in cafés where fat cockroaches patrolled the tables, and dined in settee-lined chambers whose luxury reminded me so much of a scene from a 'Carry-on' film that I expected Charles Hawtry to come skipping in at any moment, pursued by belly-dancers and a villain with a curved dagger.

With Mustapha acting as referee, I bargained for a serious carpet with a character called Jamal. I made him an honourable offer, but he gathered up his knee-length flannel shirt and led me aside by the arm. Staring me in the eye, our faces inches apart, he breathed, 'No, No! Give me your verree best price....'

I tried once more, and the carpet is now on my study floor. I still don't know whether I was done or not.



Dining in style



Carpet quandry. Jamal in the background

Back on board, sleep was hard to come by. Just as we had finally banished the yowling cat-fights and mysterious dockside rustlings from our consciousness, a stentorian call to prayer from the local muezzin split the night. The spine-tingling song was taken up from minarets all round the bay.

‘Allahu Akbar!’ It echoed. Thrilling, and monstrously alien. Reminding the late reveller and the early riser alike not of a jihad, but rather the undeniable truth that, regardless of one’s personal faith or convictions, ‘There is no god but God...’

Despite our mentor’s earlier reassurances, we didn’t feel so secure in the stuffy darkness of our cabins any more. In cosmopolitan Morocco any religion goes, he had advised, but this unworlly sound in the dead of night confirmed starkly that we were a very long way from the Solent.

By the time Mustapha had cast off our lines and Pol had heroically wrestled our unspeakable cable from the fishing-boat ground tackle, we felt like a fixture in Tangier. Actually we’d been there three days, but that is the effect of Africa.

The sail north to Barbate in Spain was a close-reaching thrash in a stiffening westerly wind, working the shifting currents and tides of the Gibraltar Strait. We laid it, just, and, considering the reputation for ‘substance export’ of where we had come from, cleared back into the EU with no more difficulty than if we’d pitched up from the next port along the coast.

From here, in ever-increasing heat, we slugged westward via the industrial fall-out of Huelva and the bullring of El Puerto de Santa Maria across the bay from Cadiz. There, in the town of El Puerto, the distraction of the Saturday-night girls riding side-saddle on the back of motor-scooters was offset by brandies hefty enough to stun a horse and sold at the price of a small beer in my local. While Pol and I did battle with these, the girls were assailed by a shady fellow who assure them that his brother had only recently been assassinated and that he feared his own length of days might now be readily measured. We gave him the slip and made it back to the ship, to sail in the blessed morning light for ‘Holiday Time’.

The Rio Guadiana is navigable for almost fifty miles. For centuries, it has formed the border between Spain and Portugal. Far inland, at the little-visited community of Pomerão, an old pal lived aboard his boat and painted pictures. To be so close and not raft up would have been rude, and we’d have missed a rare opportunity to see life far away behind the Algarve.

What’s more, like most honest folks we don’t enjoy waves and it was still blowing hard so I needed no persuading to swing in over the bar.

We showed up an hour or two after low tide, with adequate depth of water and the best of the flood to carry us north. The temperature hovered around 100 degrees as we swept past the towns of Ayamonte on the Spanish side and Vila Real de Santo António in Portugal guarding the entrance.

*Blowing hard.
Sometimes the boat can
take it better than the crew!*





*Left: The bridge over the Guadiana
Right: Upstream is to the right of the photo, so
you can see we are going through stern-first*



A mile or two inland, *Westernman* ducked under a bridge where my most optimistic calculation, allowing for tide height, gave us maybe eight feet clearance. We defused any potential for disaster by turning downstream to stem the tide and allowing the current to carry us up over the ground. Thus, had our burgee touched the ironwork, we had only to power up our engine to extricate ourselves without further damage aloft.

Safely through, we motored for the mountains with the wind smack on the nose like the breath of an oven.

As the inexhaustible flood pressed us forward, the fields gave way to a steepening ravine through olive groves and uncultivated scrub until, playing the tidal difference game into the sumptuous evening light, we ran between the fortresses of Sanlucar (Spain) and Alcoutim (Portugal). At sunset we secured ahead of Richard's ferrocement ketch on a clean pontoon thirty or so miles from the sea. Around us, the timeless world of the central Peninsula was going quietly about its business and up in the *Sociédade*, the Pomerão village club, José was pouring life-restoring cool beers at ridiculously low prices.



Moored in Pomerão





Tom boarding Richard's boat in the hope of a cool one

For ten days, we swam to keep cool and swarmed up dry river beds to discover abandoned watermills where families had eked out an existence centuries earlier. Passing storks checked us out and Richard horrified us with tales of floods many metres high roaring down the river in winter, carrying literally all before them. To prove it, he showed us a eucalyptus with a scar thirty feet up among the branches where he had secured his stern line.

Above Pomerão, we followed Richard our pilot, almost to the walls of Mértola, little changed from medieval times, with Moorish ruins everywhere built on the foundations of Roman villas. Through our association with him, we were accepted into this most rural of communities. Muddling through with our twenty-year-old Brazilian Portuguese we discovered what made the neighbourhood tick as we ate on José's terrace, shopped in the farmers' co-operative and drank stiff coffees with local entrepreneurs in sun so hot it scalded the seats.

Sailing back into the Atlantic after two weeks in this magical place was a hard return to reality, especially as the hands paid off leaving Roz and I peering up the barrel of the Portuguese northerlies like condemned victims squinting into the muskets of their personal firing squad. We did make it home, the two of us, with 1400 square feet of gaff-rigged canvas and no winches, but that's another story and you can read about it in 'Westernman comes North'.

I still warm my toes in Jamal's carpet, admire Richard's dramatic painting of *Westernman* anchored in the Guadiana, and toss my salads in a hand-painted bowl I bought from a friend of his, plying her trade as a potter in the hills far above Mértola. I chuckle to this day remembering Chris, the whale and the Bisky Bay, and I can't stop myself from wondering what became of the Edward Lear's Attery Squash.



Anchored in the upper reaches towards Mértola

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Tom Cunliffe - Yachts and Yarns