

# The ups and downs of sailing across Biscay

From coastal port-hopper to offshore novice, Kitiara Pascoe heads offshore for Spain at the start of her first ocean adventure

My first real sailing experience was in 2013, so all my prior knowledge of the sport was based entirely upon *A Perfect Storm* and my father telling me it was relatively easy to capsize a Wayfarer. So naturally, the idea of sailing directly from Falmouth to northern Spain did not fill me with joy, regardless of the rather durable nature of the Nicholson 32 that I would be doing it in.

The fear of crossing Biscay was compounded by repeated horror stories about the bay. Often spoken about as the most fearsome patch of water outside the Southern Ocean, I was even laughed out of a chandlery for suggesting it was on my to-do list. Biscay terrified me. No one except my partner and skipper, Alex, ever suggested that it might be all right.

So on 5 July 2014, it was with some trepidation that we sailed out of Falmouth for La Coruña in a pleasant westerly. By this point, I only had a Channel crossing under my belt as well as having sailed from Portsmouth to Falmouth. All I knew was that I wanted to explore the world in



Heaving to helped calm things down while doing jobs on deck

warmer waters and once we were south of Biscay, everything would be better. As night began to encroach, the uncertainty of my first night passage grew.

As I'm sure you know, sailing in the Channel is always cold. I'm the kind of person who gets numb opening the fridge; there's not much that can keep me warm. I spent the first night's two-hours-on, two-hours-off watch system very tense and pretty cold.

## Considering other options

The sea off Ushant was big and lumpy, bigger than we'd expected given the swell forecast. The result was an incessant and pervasive nausea that prevented me from eating or drinking anything more than an inch of water for fear of throwing it up. It became so exhausting that we started looking at our options in France.

From the beginning, we planned to skip France, but 36 hours into this trip and I would've sold a kidney to get onto dry land. Still, we were a full day's sail from the nearest suitable harbour and we could use that time and distance to get south into clearer waters. Reluctantly, I agreed that we should sail away from the coast and put the thought of stopping out of my mind.

By that evening the sea had indeed become less lumpy, although it was still larger than I would've liked. To go with these unsightly waves was a Force 5 or 6 but by now I only felt sick if I ate and when I was awoken for watches at night.

Oh, night watches. As I crept into the bunk to shovel in two hours of sleep, I could hear an orchestral creaking of every fibre of teak, every stowed item and, thanks to a keel-stepped mast, the sound of the halyards slapping it, ringing down its length. People say Nicholson 32s are 'real ocean goers' but when she's punching through Biscay waves, she sounds like she's held together by hope alone. It's a truly remarkable contrast to the peacefulness of the cockpit, where she feels like a dream and barely makes a sound.

Waking up for my watch, I had approximately one minute in which to put on my jacket, lifejacket and gloves and get outside before nausea ploughed into me. Once Alex was tucked up in the warmth I had left, I was alone in the eerie red glow of the switch panel and the soft light from the AIS receiver. Wishing away the next two hours, I studied the horizon for fishing



Hand steering in large swell was exhilarating, if a little scary at first

'36 hours into this trip I would've sold a kidney to get onto dry land'

boats and kept an eye on the sails, forcing myself to stay awake and not entertain the seasickness lingering just out of sight.

As the watches went on, I discovered two overbearing conundrums of overnight passages: Firstly, why is it that your eyes are determined to close when you're on watch but the second you lie down, the desperation to sleep eradicates any sign of it? Secondly, why, in an enormous sea with only one boat on the horizon, are you always on a collision course?

## Coming to terms with Biscay

On the third day, my body was adjusting. We were nearing the middle of the bay and the closest land was well over a hundred miles away. I had come to realise that this trip would not be *A Perfect Storm*, that the three-metre swell would not topple our seven-tonne home and that when the squalls came, and they did, we just needed to reef down. The simplicity of this realisation was wonderful. In big waves and big wind, we could just slow the boat down and she'd be fine – in fact, she

seemed to relish such conditions.

For dinner that evening we have to now that the waves were more polite and I made it through half a bowl of noodles before the nausea turned up. I felt subdued and weary, sitting in the cockpit trying to recover and gazing out across the water before me, grey and featureless. Except it wasn't featureless. Not this time.

After seeing nothing but greyness for days, black certainly stands out. I sat there, uncomprehending, as a horde of black triangles hurtled through the waves towards us. All I could do was cry out as I stood up and leant over the rails.

'What, what?' Alex raced out of the saloon to see what was wrong.

'Dolphins!'

The pod was around us in seconds, hurling themselves through waves and shooting under the boat. They swam and dived in pairs or trios, perfectly synchronised, eyeing us up as they leapt. Seeing dolphins for the first time, or the tenth time, is like being enveloped by a cloud of sheer joy. If there's any cure for seasickness, it's seeing a dolphin.

As we continued to sail four dolphins from the pod stayed with us, playing



CHART: MAXINE HEATH



Once seasickness subsided, reading off-watch became an enjoyable option to pass the time



Reefed well down, the boat was more than able to deal with strong winds and big seas



Kit practices her navigation on watch at night as she gets to grips with ocean sailing



*Kitiara reckons that seeing dolphins will cure anyone's seasickness*

*'We arrived, as I'm sure many do, wild eyed and salt skinned'*

under the bow. It was with loathing that I went down for my off watch, but I could hear them squeaking through the hull. When I was woken at midnight for my watch, it was the first time I didn't mind.

The steely grey water had turned to a deep black and our path was lit purely by starlight. The four dolphins were swimming alongside in their own starlight, phosphorescence. The luminous green sparks danced along their bodies and

they played in the streams of it flowing out from our wind-vane fin. Glowing green dolphins racing along just a metre away was too outrageous to be real.

When the dolphins left, I was bereft in their absence but their welcome return was becoming predictable as soon as we hit 6 knots.

I now got it, y'know? I finally got sailing. There is nothing else where you are so utterly at the whims of nature, whether it's the armies of squalls marching across the horizon, the stars operating at 100 per cent, or the pods of dolphins that greet you like long lost friends. I was no longer uneasy; I was exhilarated.

I was attempting to fall asleep on the fourth night, the ocean back to its violent and confused manner with a variable Force 4-5 wind, when we had another visitor. This one, less happy.

A deeply sad racing pigeon had appeared on the boom, fallen off, and landed in the cockpit. He was in no state to go anywhere and besides, we were hundreds of miles from land. We gave him a shoebox where he spent a cosy night before indiscriminately emptying his bowels and flying off for a newer looking yacht the next morning.

0900 on 10 July brought mountains looming up in the distance. The sight of land was strange after a tiring five days and I struggled to imagine it as being Spain. No time to think about it though, the waves were growing and we had begun to surge down their faces.

Knowing that we should be in port by evening made the next fifty miles



agonising. It didn't matter much when we were at sea but now we were close, I couldn't wait to stop and rest properly. Not to mention eat without feeling sick.

As we made our way downwind under just genoa, the waves grew and grew and so did the wind. Regardless of sickness and exhaustion, I had never been scared during our Biscay crossing. Until now. An hour to La Coruña and we were trailing warps with just a scrap of genoa, a Force 8 screaming at us from behind. The waves had reached four metres and as we were picked up by each one I fought to steer her straight

down the face. I plugged myself into my MP3 player at full volume and hand-steered from a mask of musical normality.

Coming into La Coruña felt like waking up from a long sleep. The water was flat and the relief giddy. We slid gently into a berth and once secure, I just stood there, staring at this 40-year-old beauty that had carried us so far, and so safely, without complaint.

We arrived, as I'm sure many do, wild eyed and salt skinned. For someone who previously believed that all boats inherently want to be upside down and that the ocean is hell-bent on killing you, sailing across Biscay taught me a more acceptable reality, that the boat is designed for it and with a bit of preparation, you can manage the conditions. ▲



**An exhausted racing pigeon was a temporary guest**

## Kitiara Pascoe

Kitiara is a 26 year old freelance writer who only learnt to sail after her partner bought and refitted the Nicholson 32, *Berwick Maid* in 2013. With the home port of Southampton, learning to sail in the Solent quickly gave her the ambition to sail to places with a temperature in excess of 20 degrees.

