



Sandra Clayton

DOLPHINS under my bed

*'There were stars above my head
and dolphins under the bed.
And somewhere in the
depths of the sea
something was singing.'*



DOLPHINS
under
my bed

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Contents

The Journey	viii
The Beaufort Wind Force Scale	x
Acknowledgements	xii
Prelude	xiii

ENGLAND

1	Emsworth	1
2	Getting started	2
3	Emsworth to the Isle of Wight	8
4	Finding a boat	12

THE CHANNEL ISLANDS

5	Isle of Wight to Alderney	17
6	Alderney	19
7	Alderney to Guernsey	24
8	St Peter Port	25
9	St Peter Port to Mouillier Bay	33

FRANCE

10	Guernsey to Tréguier	35
11	Tréguier	42
12	Tréguier to L'Abervrac'h	50
13	The Chenal du Four to Douarnenez	53
14	Douarnenez and through the Raz de Sein	57
15	Crossing Biscay	64





NORTH-WEST SPAIN

16	La Coruña	73
17	Booking a flight home	77
18	Fiesta and leaving La Coruña	81
19	Return to La Coruña	88

THE RÍAS OF NORTH-WEST SPAIN

20	La Coruña to Ares	91
21	Ares to Laxe	97
22	Laxe to Ría de Camariñas	103
23	Camariñas to Muros via Finisterre	105
24	Bayona	108

PORTUGAL

25	Bayona to Leixões	119
26	Leixões to Cascais	122
27	Cascais	124
28	Lisbon	127
29	Cascais to Lagos	131
30	Lagos	134
31	Lagos to Culatra	144

SOUTH-WEST SPAIN

32	Culatra to Cadiz	151
33	Cadiz to Gibraltar	160

GIBRALTAR

34	Marina Bay Marina	171
----	-------------------	-----

MEDITERRANEAN SPAIN

35	Gibraltar to Almería	179
36	Almería to Garrucha	188
37	Garrucha to Mazarron	190
38	Mazarron to Alicante via Torrevieja	198
39	Alicante	202
40	Alicante to Calpe	214



THE BALEARIC ISLANDS

41	Calpe to Ibiza	219
42	Ibiza to Mallorca	224

Mallorca

43	Palma to Porto San Petro	228
44	Porto San Petro	236
45	Porto San Petro to Porto Colom	238
46	Porto Colom to Porto Cristo	247
47	Porto Cristo	251
48	Porto Cristo to Ratjada	256
49	Mallorca to Menorca	258

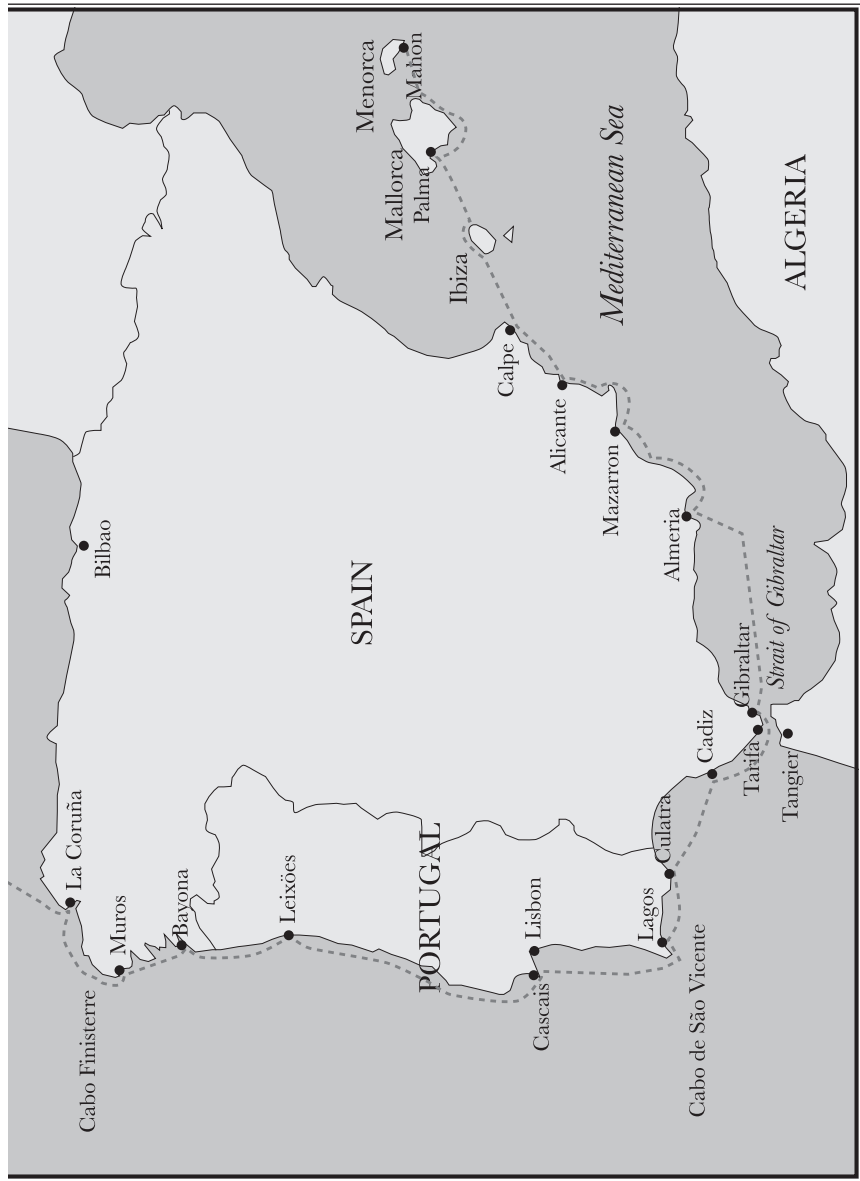
Menorca

50	Mahon	260
51	Winter sun	265

	Glossary for Non-Sailors	269
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The Journey





The Beaufort Wind Force Scale

In Britain and much of Europe, wind and vessel speeds are described in knots. One knot equals a nautical mile covered in one hour, and is roughly equivalent to 1.15mph.

Also used is the Beaufort Wind Force Scale. This was created in 1805 by Sir Francis Beaufort, a British naval officer and hydrographer, before instruments were available and has since been adapted for non-naval use. When accurate wind measuring instruments became available it was decided to retain the scale and this accounts for the idiosyncratic speeds, eg Force 5 is 17–21 knots, not 15–20 as one might expect. Under numbered headings representing wind force, this scale also provides the sea conditions typically associated with them, although these can be affected by the direction from which the wind is coming.

The scale is reproduced on the opposite page.



Force	Knots	mph	Sea Condition
1 Light Airs	1–3	1–3	Ripples.
2 Light Breeze	4–6	4–7	Small wavelets.
3 Gentle Breeze	7–10	8–12	Large wavelets with scattered white caps (also known as white horses).
4 Moderate Breeze	11–16	13–18	Small waves with frequent white caps.
5 Fresh Breeze	17–21	19–24	Moderate waves with many white caps.
6 Strong Breeze	22–27	25–31	Large waves with foam crests and some spray.
7 Near Gale	28–33	32–38	Sea heaps up and foam begins to streak.
8 Gale	34–40	39–46	Moderately high waves with breaking crests forming spindrift (spray blown along the sea's surface).
9 Strong Gale	41–47	47–54	High waves with dense foam. Waves start to roll over. Considerable spray.
10 Storm	48–55	55–63	Very high waves with long overhanging crests. The sea surface white with considerable tumbling. Visibility reduced.
11 Violent Storm	56–63	64–72	Exceptionally high waves.
12 Hurricane	64+	73+	Huge waves. Air filled with foam and spray.

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Prelude

I came late to sailing. Actually, I didn't consciously come to it at all. It crept up on me. David and I had a brief fling with a sailing dinghy in the second year of our marriage – a disaster over which it is best to draw a veil. There were some enjoyable boating holidays on British rivers and canals. And then, for our Silver Wedding Anniversary, David asked me if I would like to celebrate with a sailing holiday in the Adriatic. To charter a yacht he needed a Day Skipper certificate. I joined him on the second of his two one-week courses and qualified as Competent Crew. The holiday in the Adriatic was wonderful. Endless sunshine, light winds and no tides to worry about.

After that, my only connection with sailing for several years was David reading yachting magazines. Then, at the age of forty-eight, I found myself joint owner of a 26ft Bermuda-rigged sloop. We kept her at Holyhead in North Wales. Between full-time employment, elderly parents a 90-mile drive away, and one of the worst summers in living memory we got to sail her only very occasionally. It was not remotely like sailing in the Adriatic. North Wales is noted for cold, wet weather and a current so strong that your destination depends on which way the tide happens to be going at the time.

Unfortunately, the deterioration in sailing conditions was matched by a similar falling off in my own performance. Even into our second season I seemed incapable of anticipating what needed to be done. I couldn't judge distances and, short of a gale, never knew where the wind was coming from. I hated heeling and a night on board turned my latent claustrophobia into full, horrific flower. The claustrophobic's ultimate nightmare is being buried alive, and the cabin of a small boat is horribly like a coffin.

I also hated putting up and taking down sails on a small rolling deck, and I didn't get on with a tiller. I always pushed when I should



have pulled, so I was terrified of gybing accidentally and hurling David overboard, brained by a flying boom. Even if I managed to find him again, would my puny strength be sufficient to lift the dead weight of an unconscious man out of the water? In short, from the moment I stepped aboard our boat I was miserable. David loved her.

After my parents died we began going to the boat every weekend. I would listen to Friday evening's shipping forecast hoping for unfavourable conditions so that we wouldn't go next day. French aristocrats during The Terror probably mounted a tumbrel with only slightly less enthusiasm than I climbed into our car on a Saturday morning. I prayed the sailing phase would pass. At least it didn't cast a pall over my entire year; the British weather put an end to the season by early autumn until late the following spring.

Then, one cold, damp, winter evening as we sat before the fire – David wheezing and me aching – my worst nightmare happened. He said, 'Why don't we get a bigger boat, retire early and sail away to a warm climate? It would mean a reduced pension. But living on a boat is cheaper than a house and the benefit to our health would be enormous.' As he talked about it he changed before my eyes. The years seemed to fall away.

At 3 o'clock next morning I woke to the sound of screaming. It was me, of course. David was very understanding. Our boat went up for sale but there were no plans to buy a larger one. David went into a slow decline and I sank into self-induced guilt.

It was sad. There was so much that I liked about the idea of life afloat: the simplicity; living in the open air; travelling from place to place by water instead of congested roads; anchoring in beautiful, deserted coves; and I longed for a warmer, drier climate. In fact, I didn't mind anything about boats per se, not even the winter maintenance and antifouling. It was just the actual sailing I couldn't stand.



We kept our sloop on a mooring buoy at Holyhead. It was in the days before local entreaties prevailed, and the Irish ferries – especially the high-speed Sea Cat – roared in and out like the Starship Enterprise. An incoming ferry would send a veritable tidal wave down through the moorings. After it hit the harbour wall at the bottom it would hurtle back up through the moorings again. Then the water still travelling down would meet the water travelling back up and everything crashed about for quite some time.

The effect on a small, light boat such as ours was to send it thrashing from side to side, leaving you with no option but to drop everything and hold on to one of the boat's fixtures. If you were below, you hung onto the companionway handrails until the worst subsided. If you were in the cockpit, you crouched down low and clung to a winch.

On a rare weekend visit to our boat, to check that it was still all right, the Sea Cat roared in and the tidal wave hit. Dropping a half-prepared lunch into the sink I lunged for the handrails, followed by the breadboard and various bits of flying cutlery. With nothing else to do for the next few minutes I stared moodily out through the companionway, past David hunched over a winch, at all the other boats thrashing from side to side like ours. All except one. At the end of the moorings a catamaran rode the swell *like a plank*. In a swaying aluminium forest, its mast alone serenely rose and fell above the heaving water.

Eventually the wash subsided enough for David to let go of the winch and turn in the direction of my quivering finger. 'I'll do it,' I said, 'if we can have one of those.'

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ENGLAND

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I

Emsworth

Major voyages are supposed to begin with a dramatic send-off. Ours doesn't. There has not even been enough water for our catamaran, *Voyager*, to leave the pontoon for a week, and she only needs a metre of water to get her afloat. Emsworth, in the upper reaches of Chichester Harbour on the south coast of England, has arranged to have a period of very low tides from July 31, which is also the day which Fate has decreed that David and I can finally set off. As a result, *Voyager's* two hulls are sunk deep in mud.

Our port hull is giving us concern. We have converted its forward cabin into a storage and workshop area, with the emphasis on storage. It has absorbed a massive amount but the weight is horrendous. We wonder if the boat will list to one side when we do finally get afloat again.

On August 9, with a sufficiently high tide imminent, we anxiously watch our port bow as the water begins to trickle across the mud flats towards our pontoon. It is above our waterline before the starboard hull drags itself free and rises from the mud with a *thhhhlock*. We sit, chin on hand, wondering if the port hull will follow. Time passes.



2 Getting Started

We had known before we left home that Chichester was due to have unusually low tides just now but had decided that a week on board would give us time to get shipshape and then have a rest before setting off. The first day of August was also our 34th wedding anniversary. We were unwaged now and would not be eating out as we had done when we were both in full-time employment. We therefore decided to start as we meant to go on, but still celebrated in three-course style thanks to a Chichester supermarket's gourmet counter. Dinner began with shellfish followed by stuffed bream and oriental sauce and finished off with apple and cinnamon in filo pastry with goat's cream. With a jug of carnations on the chart table and a decent bottle of wine we hadn't felt at all deprived.

The truth was that we weren't sure we should really be setting off yet. Ideally we should have waited until we were closer to our pensions. But reviewing the decline in our health over the past three years we had begun to question in what condition we should both be, in another five or six; and whether we should wake up one morning and find that we had left it too late.

In particular, David's respiratory problems were getting worse every year. He was allergic to almost everything now and despite specialists and prescribed medication he sneezed all the time, summer and winter. He would return home from work each evening congested and wheezing, from dust, pollen, perfume and traffic fumes. Latterly even newsprint could set him off, while a Sunday colour supplement would produce paroxysms of sneezing.

The previous winter he'd had fluid on his left lung. I'd wondered if this year it would be pneumonia. Worst of all, he had developed sleep apnoea. He would go to bed so congested that soon after falling asleep he would stop breathing. Just as I'd be about to shake him awake shouting, *'Breathe!'* his own diaphragm would give an almighty





kick, he'd wake with a start and begin breathing again. This would go on all night.

It is odd, though, once you know what you want to do but are still reluctant to do it, how people unwittingly collude with you and all sorts of peripheral support begins to materialise. A colleague with no knowledge of our long-term plans gave me a card on my birthday that year bearing a quotation from the American explorer Richard Evelyn Byrd. It said: *Half the confusion in the world comes from not knowing how little we need. I live more simply now and am happier.*

Then one Sunday morning, washing our cars along with the neighbours in our small cul-de-sac, the subject of early retirement came up in conversation. One neighbour said it would be quite impossible for him because he would need to invest – and he mentioned a vast sum – simply to maintain his present living standards let alone improve them. But we didn't want to maintain our present living standards of a house, two cars to reach two jobs, overwork, a poor climate and declining health.

My major concern, however, was that we didn't condemn ourselves to an impoverished old age. I did not want to end up a bag lady. Nor did I want us to spend our final years in separate National Health Service nursing homes, should they even still exist by the time we needed them. On the other hand, a relaxed, physically-active lifestyle in a warm dry climate would considerably delay the need for any sort of nursing home for quite some time.

A simple question posed by an unexpected source finally transformed our dilemma into a decision. I was getting breakfast, with BBC Radio 4 playing as usual, when the seamless gloom and cynicism of national and international affairs was interrupted briefly by *Thought for the Day*.

The speaker that morning was an Anglican bishop and he began by saying, in the formal tones of the pulpit, 'Today, I want to preach to you about the Philosophy of Enough.' Then, over the next few minutes, he breezily invited his listeners to reflect on how they



lived, what was really important, and how much they really needed materially to be happy.

When he had finished, I went to find David. It had been a particularly long winter. His face looked rather grey and he was wheezing from the damp air in the shower. ‘How much is enough?’ I said. When we both got back home that evening we sat down together and worked out the minimum we needed. The result was that we would go sooner rather than later.

It had been an unusually cold, wet spring that year. In fact, the only really good week for anti-fouling *Voyager* had been in February. Like a lot of other people, however, we had decided to ignore those few bright, dry but bitterly cold days and wait until it got a bit warmer. Like a lot of other people we also discovered too late that those few dry, bright days were all there were going to be for quite a while. March and April had brought almost constant rain.

Things weren’t helped by the fact that our jobs and our home were in the north of England, while our boat was now on the South coast. Putting in an hour or two after work is not an option when it takes half a day to get to the boatyard. So it wasn’t until May that we were antifouling *Voyager* on the hard.

Our transistor was tuned as usual to BBC Radio 4. The programme was *Woman’s Hour* but, because the speaker was Mrs Bobby Moore, David had begun listening too. Bobby Moore, national hero and captain of the England football team that won the World Cup in 1966, had died of colon cancer.

His widow was spearheading a campaign to raise awareness of its symptoms and the need to take responsibility for getting treatment. Because, she explained, if his concerns had been heeded when he first began expressing them, Bobby might not have died when he did. And if someone as famous as Bobby Moore is ignored, how much harder is it for the rest of us to be heard? Caught early, she said, colon cancer can be successfully treated, but Bobby kept being told that his symptoms were normal and nothing to worry about until it was too late.



I had stopped slapping on antifouling paint and begun staring at David as she began listing nine classic symptoms of colon cancer. ‘Got that one,’ said David. ‘And that. And that.’ By the end of the list he had counted off seven of them on his fingers.

Some of them, like blood loss, he had had for a long time. Others, like fatigue and minor weight loss were more recent. Listed all together like this they sounded like a death sentence. He had visited our local medical practice only recently for the results of a cholesterol test and had promised to mention his latest symptoms at the same time.

‘David!’ I howled. ‘You were supposed to tell the doctor!’

‘I did,’ he said in his characteristically quiet way. ‘He said it was normal. Nothing to worry about.’

In subsequent weeks there were tests, surgery, and then more tests which confirmed that David did not have, nor had he ever had, cancer of the colon. There had been some internal damage, however, which it was hoped the surgery would correct and in fact it had. He might continue to lose blood but happily, after a few weeks, he no longer did. The other symptoms either lessened or disappeared and his general health improved. But by the time the final test results were available it was late July and the European sailing season was already half over.

There are two ways to sail a yacht from England to the Mediterranean. One is to lower your mast and motor through the French canals; the other is to sail down the Atlantic coasts of France, Spain and Portugal and enter through the Strait of Gibraltar. We preferred the latter, but knowing that this coastline is notorious for autumn and winter gales we wanted to have *Voyager* in the Mediterranean by the end of September.

We could, of course, have reached the Med in only a couple of weeks with constant sailing, but having anticipated the voyage for over five years we felt we should like to see a few places along the way. If we wanted to do that, we had to go immediately. The alternative was to spend another winter in England and leave the



following spring. Since our need for a warmer, drier climate had been the major factor in our decision to go blue water cruising in the first place, we loaded the car with things crucial, things useful, and lots of things I should only have had to throw away otherwise. They had filled the boot, the back seat to the ceiling, the roof rack, my lap and all around my feet. Many hours later we had staggered down the boatyard's long pontoon with our first armfuls.

Emsworth is one of those wistful places of shallow water, salt marsh, curlews and large egrets. Unfortunately a great flock of starlings had also moved in to gorge on local crops of soft fruit and berries from the hedgerows. As a result, our boat's white polished surfaces had become purple and sticky as the starlings had excreted the seeds and a large residue of undigested fruit and juice over every inch of it. Before we could begin to put our goods on board we had to attach our hose to a tap and scrub off all the sticky purple goo that the birds were even yet depositing from their perches up in our rigging.

Getting that first load on board had been the start of more trouble. When *Voyager* had settled into the mud she had done so further away from the pontoon than was comfortable for us to climb on and off her, especially carrying heavy loads. As the tide was just then rising to its full if inadequate height, David had tried to drag her closer, and felt something go in his lower back.

Over the next few days he had taken on an increasingly disturbing shape. As he had done several times in the past, he had pulled a major muscle which had then gone into spasm and begun tilting his pelvis. The first time he had done this had been some years earlier, clearing a five-bar gate on his own when the horse that should have accompanied him decided against it at the last minute. Once weakened, the pelvis would twist if subjected to unreasonable stress. Bending double at the hips and dragging towards you eleven tons of boat with both keels firmly embedded in thick mud is about as unreasonable as it gets.

The solution had always been deep tissue massage, rest and definitely no twisting or lifting. This, however, had conflicted with



David's determination to prepare our boat for the longest voyage we had ever undertaken alone. And unfortunately there had been an awful lot to stow aboard. Like many before us, far from getting away from it all, we seemed to be taking most of it with us. Some of it, such as the new life raft, large tool boxes and spare parts were essential. Some of it wasn't. We seemed to have brought an awful lot of books and videos and ... things.

'I can't believe you've brought so many clothes,' said David.

'I'd only have to throw them away,' I'd responded lamely. 'And anyway, they're cotton and you can never have too much good quality polishing cloth.'

David's back had got progressively worse until he was bent in the middle, twisted to the left and crabbed sideways when he walked. He was also in a lot of pain. Nevertheless, he carried on for several days, stowing the unstowable into small inaccessible spaces and installing new equipment. It was the life raft that finally did for him and forced him briefly to take to his bed.

In the days following, fellow boat owners stopped by to ask how he was, contemplate the encircling mud and ask tentatively when we were thinking of going. If they were dubious, no less were we. For both of us there was an unreality about all this. We had never even sailed across the English Channel alone before, never mind as far as the Mediterranean. Something had always cropped up to prevent us.

3

Emsworth to the Isle of Wight

And now we sit, head on hand, watching the water rise and anxiously eyeing the port hull. About ten minutes after the starboard side has risen, the port hull finally struggles upward with a similar glutinous sucking sound. We are afloat.

At a little after 1pm we start the engines and edge our way out through very shallow water into the channel that will take us through Chichester's large, busy harbour and out to sea. It is the usual Sunday afternoon pandemonium in Chichester Harbour. Power may give way to sail but sometimes, with a wide boat in a narrow channel, it is not always that simple. Dinghy racers, intent on holding their course to achieve the greatest possible advantage over their rivals, criss-cross the channel. We cannot risk straying onto Stocker Sands to miss them, so we slow to allow one of the little boats to pass under our bows, and then accelerate to avoid the one aimed at our beam. Meanwhile, a yacht in full sail comes hurtling towards us on our side of the channel, while behind us a fast little speedboat jockeys to get past. A subsequent survey found that Chichester Harbour is home to 11,547 boats. On this summer Sunday afternoon at the end of Cowes Week, Europe's most famous regatta, most of them seem to be out on the water.

It is the first time *Voyager* has moved in a year, and we have been unable to try anything out; not least the new mainsail we bought during the winter. Our immediate concern, however, is the electronic equipment. There are so many things on a boat to go wrong, especially one that has lain unused for twelve months.

At least the instruments all seem to be working; even the log, which usually seizes up when the boat hasn't moved for a week let alone a year. So once out to sea we decide to try out our new mainsail. One of our boat's features that we particularly prize is a self-furling main which allows us to pull this sail in and out easily by hand without need of a winch and without leaving the cockpit. This is a





particular advantage for people in their mid-50s planning to sail long distances two-handed, especially when one of them is an unfit woman with weak hands and a dodgy back.

David pulls on the outhaul and three quarters of the new sail emerge from the housing on the mast. The last quarter remains stuck inside. He heaves, strains, sweats and swears. At the point where his face changes from scarlet to purple he decides to use one of the winches to pull the last section out. As is its wont at difficult moments, the wind rises suddenly and dramatically. It sends the sail flying and the outhaul thrashing. The latter twists itself round the winch in a jumble and locks solid.

For a time it looks as if we will have to cut the outhaul free. However, with the aid of a jemmy, and a large screwdriver hammered in between the rope coils, we finally manage to ease the tension enough to free it. In the meantime a supercilious couple, standing on a passing yacht with their hands in their pockets, observes us apparently knocking seven bells out of our winch with a hammer, raise an eyebrow at one another and pointedly turn their backs on us. It is not an auspicious start.

We have no sooner freed the outhaul and got the sail fully out than the wind dies away completely, so we put the sail away again and motor on towards the Isle of Wight.

As David admitted, although not until very much later, once he had put the mainsail away he had completed all the displacement activity that was keeping him from thinking about what he had committed us to: selling up, cutting ties, and not only leaving England but probably the last paid employment we would ever have. It was not even the sort of thing people like us did. We had no sailing background. No-one we had ever known until recently had ever sailed.

I kept remembering newspaper articles about people embarking on similar ventures after years of boat-building and planning, only to sink just outside the harbour mouth. We were asking for trouble; you could see that in the eyes of almost everybody we knew. At an age when our contemporaries were planning retirement bungalows,



we had committed ourselves and our resources to a life afloat. And although I had every confidence in David, I knew that I was a lousy sailor. Only a very close relative, or the truly desperate, would have taken me on as crew.

Our intention now is to anchor in the Solent for the night to the east of Cowes on the Isle of Wight, near one of Queen Victoria's favourite residences, Osborne House. For in the same way that we shall not be eating in restaurants any more, we also plan to avoid the expense of marinas by anchoring wherever possible. We had anchored in Osborne Bay last summer but, unlike last year, when we approach it there are no other boats in sight. This adds to the unease that David has been feeling since leaving Chichester Harbour.

It is a year since our last sail and yachtsmen always feel a little tentative about how the boat is after a long lay-up. So he decides to head for the security of the mooring buoys outside Yarmouth Harbour. We had tied up to a buoy there the previous summer also, and though unspoken, the fact that a mooring buoy is more securely fixed to the seabed than an anchor can ever be is more than a little reason for choosing one now.

While uneasy at casting ourselves adrift, however, neither of us considers the possibility of turning back. Neither of us, we subsequently discover, had thought for a moment that since we still had a furnished house, we could always give up and go back to it. We just wanted someone to buy it, so that it would no longer be a large drain on our resources.

Our plan is to spend a year in the Mediterranean, and then cross the Atlantic to the Caribbean – if we feel like it. The problem with telling people you are going cruising is that everybody says, 'Are you going to sail round the world?' We are as well-prepared as we can be, but we lack experience and are determined not to put pressure on ourselves to do anything that we feel we are not ready for. So whenever anybody asks the question, we always give the same answer, 'No, we're just going to head for the Mediterranean and then see how we feel.'



By 5.30 that evening we are tied to a buoy just outside Yarmouth Harbour on a stretch of water called Yarmouth Road. There is a Ferris wheel behind the breakwater, but no sound at all beyond the odd seagull. A uniformed man in a small boat chugs out to collect £10 from us for a night's use of the mooring buoy, and we settle down to chicken tikka masala and gooseberry fool, courtesy of a last-minute shop-up in Chichester.

There is a glorious fluorescent pink sunset, and as darkness falls a huge russet moon rises behind the ferry terminal. The wind is from the north-east and slight, but the sea is so choppy that we are both up on deck at lam to reassure ourselves that we are still safely tied to the mooring buoy. It is so bumpy, in fact, that I had shot awake convinced that we were about to be dashed onto The Needles, that notorious group of rocks nearby.

Actually, had we *been* adrift, we should have hit a lot of other things before The Needles, but in the dark irrational reaches of the night, a famous local landmark becomes a natural bogeyman. The truth is: it would not have surprised us at all if something had happened to end our voyage right there, twenty miles from where we had set out. But none of these things were spoken of at the time.

Finding a boat

When I had suggested, five years earlier, that a catamaran might be a way of overcoming my resistance to sailing, David had immediately booked a weekend trial on one, complete with a professional skipper, to see how we got on with it. I felt quite relaxed doing 10 knots in blustery conditions with all the sails up and no heeling. I observed carefully the monohulls we overtook. They were heavily reefed and heeling mightily, their crews hunched into their cockpits at an angle of 45 degrees. I was standing upright and there was no impediment to my walking upright anywhere on the boat that I wanted to go. I could live with something like this, I decided. More to the point, I could live *on* something like this.

The plan then was to find a catamaran that really suited us, and learn to handle it in all sorts of conditions. We quickly decided on a 40-foot Solaris Sunstream. Built for offshore cruising, it had full headroom for David, two roomy double cabins each with two windows and an overhead hatch for my claustrophobia, plus a generous galley for domestic harmony. Unusually for a yacht, it also had a bath. The only problem was that there were very few for sale, only thirteen of them having ever been built.

We found *Voyager* in southern Spain and spent two weeks sailing her back to the UK with the help of Ian, the skipper from our weekend trial. He was also an experienced delivery skipper and a Royal Yachting Association instructor. Having a professional skipper on board was essential for us, as we were too inexperienced to have attempted such a trip alone.

It was a fair distance to cover in the only couple of weeks the three of us had free at the same time, and most of it was spent at sea. The only time we stopped was for fuel and water or to sit out a gale. It was a tremendous experience to be under sail with a professional in our own boat in all types of conditions, especially the gales. As

