

Lockdown break-out- leaving Ireland and homeward bound, at last.

A family cruise from southern Ireland to the Clyde, via the Isles of Scilly.

The plight of stranded yacht owners is hardly the world's first priority, now or ever, but we felt the forced separation from our family boat, a small consequence of the pandemic, sorely. We had sailed our Nicholson 32, Blue Venturer from her mooring on the Clyde around the north and west coasts of Ireland in 2019, wintering her in Crosshaven, Co. Cork at the end of the 2019 season. The plan was to continue to France and then east to Norway, a long held ambition to base the boat for a while in Scandinavia. Roll forward a year, it's 2020 and the world of course has been turned upside down. The covid regulations on both sides of the Irish sea dash any lingering hopes of an imminent reunion with Blue Venturer, who suffers the indignity of having to spend all of 2020 on dry land.

It's now July 2021, we haven't seen Blue Venturer for eighteen months, and we are ready to go. Covid certification at the ready, my partner, Alison and I, along with our two children, Reuben (12) and Donald (10) set out via a convoluted combination of taxi, ferry and hire car, for Crosshaven, where Blue Venturer is back on the water and, we hope, also raring to go.

It takes a day or two to sort out the boat, fix a faulty gps aerial and sit out an untimely gale (when are they ever timely?), but otherwise the boat seems in good fettle. We consider an initial shakedown day sail, just to check everything over. But, restricted to quarantining on the boat by the Irish covid rules, we decide that any remaining 'pre-flight' tests are a luxury we can do without and will just have to be carried out on passage back to the UK.

We had decided on a revised plan to bring Blue Venturer home to Scotland, but to head for the Isles of Scilly first, where we hoped to spend a relaxing first week of our holiday, before setting sail up the Irish sea, probably via Wales, bound for the Clyde. Alison and I were keen to share the Scilly isles, a place of happy holiday memories for us from our pre-children days, with the boys. And it would provide a nice balance we hoped to the long passages we would have to make to bring the boat home.

And so, with a fresh westerly and seas still unsettled and lumpy, the legacy of the retreating gale, we set sail across the Celtic sea, bound south east for the picturesque but hazardous, at least to mariners, archipelago off England's most southerly point. With distance over ground some 135 nautical miles, this would also be our first proper overnight passage, with Alison and I taking shifts through the night as the boys slept. The rolling swell and wind veering to the north meant for an uncomfortable but steady first passage. We enjoyed the company of a pod of dolphins as we left sight of land. I felt unusually queasy, struggling to adjust to life back afloat. The sea state made cooking a challenge and meals were somewhat basic as a consequence. But we gradually adjusted to life back on board and I enjoyed the night time, watching the swell frothing dramatically but harmlessly in the moonlight. And, most importantly, Blue Venturer seemed to be going well, surging forward as, mile by mile, we bore down on our destination.

We sighted land around lunchtime the next day, making a mooring in New Grimsby Harbour, off the delightful island of Tresco, an hour or two later. We spent a very pleasant few days there, in settled conditions, exploring the simple charms of Scilly life, before, with some trepidation, navigating the many hazards of Tresco flats, calling for provisions at St Mary's, before spending our last night at an idyllic anchorage at the Cove, another dream-like bay between the small islands of Saint Agnes and Gugh. We were lucky while at Scilly, avoiding the gales we had heard sweep through these low-lying islands, tranquil yet so exposed to the full force of Atlantic weather systems.

After a week of relaxation it was time to head north, another overnight passage taking us some 120 miles past Land's End and the entrance to the Bristol Channel, to Pembrokeshire, South Wales. I enjoyed this passage more. I felt we had settled into our rhythm and Alison and I were becoming better, and more disciplined, with our night-time shift pattern. In the early hours, far from land or even other vessels I again enjoyed the company of dolphins, playing and surfing with us for over an hour. We had delayed our departure from Scilly to catch the north bound tide and it was well into the afternoon the next day as we approached the shore of South Wales. We then had a decision to make. The straightforward option would be an anchorage at Dale, just to the west of Milford Haven. But we had set our sights on the islands to the west, forming part of an internationally regarded maritime nature reserve. The problem however was the spring tide, which would be against us as we approached the area. We quickly ruled out Jack Sound, the narrow and potentially precarious passage between Skomer and the mainland, with a tidal stream of up to 7 knots and not recommended outside slack water. Although the tide would still be against us, we decided on a passage round the outside of Skomer. While the tide would still be against us, and potentially flowing strongly, we would have more water and, keeping a safe distance from land, felt confident in Blue Venturer's ability to punch through the tide, using the engine if necessary.

The plan worked, but only just. We certainly underestimated the tide (which reached 6 knots against us) and the turbulence of these waters, barely making 1 knot of headway at times, under full sail and auxiliary engine. It was slow progress, and we had to be alert to maintain our heading in the fast moving current, but we got there and the reward, an overnight anchorage to ourselves in the secluded North Haven, Skomer island, made the effort worthwhile. I enjoyed a swim, and photographing the large flock of puffins, circling us as they, like us turned in for the night, cocooned between high cliffs teeming with birdlife.

Next morning we were off early again to catch the tide northbound up the Irish sea. It was a long but gentle day, making slow but steady progress tacking against what was now a dwindling headwind. Reuben is a keen navigator and had quickly mastered the AIS, alerting us to approaching ferries and other vessels as we traversed to and fro across the Irish sea. In the night the wind finally freshened and, alone on deck, I enjoyed some fine sailing before, just after sunrise, making landfall in North Wales.

We had a pleasant day at Holyhead, off Anglesey, with the additional interest and challenge of having to take a taxi ride to fetch containers of boat fuel (Holyhead marine not yet operating at full service following the storm which so sadly decimated the place in 2018). Suitably re-provisioned, we set sail again the next morning, bound for the Isle of Arran, some 140 nautical miles to the north. The Irish sea almost mirror-like, we are forced to motor-sail for the first part of the day until, west of the Isle of Man, we finally get something of a breeze and are able to sail. Reuben stays up to join me on the first night shift that evening, enjoying navigating up the North Channel, watching the lights of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the Christmas tree- like appearance of the ferry coming out of Belfast, passing us as it heads south for Liverpool.

By morning we are properly in Scotland and enjoy some brisk sailing past the Galloway coast, round Ailsa Craig and onwards, arriving at Brodick just in time for our dinner reservation. We are on home turf now, Blue Venturer can almost sail herself from here. And so it proves as, the following day we Clyde is kind to us for the final 30 miles back to our mooring at Rhu, on the Gairloch. A fine holiday, a grand adventure and our boat back. It was nice to be home.

Ben Kemp