

SV AT FIRST SIGHT

On the Move Again – Islas Balaeres to Cartagena January 31, 2021



AFS and the beautiful city of Mahón, Menorca, showing their holiday spirit at Christmastime.

A belated welcome back from the extended Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year holiday period. While many couldn't wait to say goodbye to 2020, a tumultuous year if ever there was one, 2021 has not started out on a particularly auspicious vector, globally, has it? That said, Vicki and I remain *sano y salvo* and generally upbeat and bullish on the future, in general, and in ours, in particular.

The first thing to report is we're on the move again – in a westerly direction. As we noted before the holidays, we canceled plans to sail a 2-3-month circuit around Sardinia, southern Italy, and Sicily. Instead, we lingered in Mahón, Menorca through the holidays, and accomplished several boat projects there that we had planned for Cartagena and Gibraltar in the coming weeks and months. Our biggest boat project was replacing the canvas Bimini top and its 4x 110-watt flexible solar panels with a fiberglass hardtop and 2x 275-watt rigid panels. Although we were a little reluctant to give up the flexibility of the ragtop, the reality is we have never taken the Bimini top down except to mend it or clean it. And the lure of considerably more solar power was too compelling to pass up.



AFS, before and after her new hardtop Bimini. The 4 smaller panels produced a max of 6amps each at 24volts, and the new bigger panels produce a max of 9amps each at 38volts. The end result is the sun does a lot more charging of our batteries so we don't have to use our generator as often. And we're hoping that when summer comes, we might not have to use it at all.

Once the projects were done in late December, leaving this wonderful city was just a matter of waiting for favorable wind and sea conditions. And so, wait we did... and wait... and wait... and wait... Finally, we saw weather window that would allow for safe and reasonably comfortable sea conditions for 18-24 hours, just enough time to transit from Mahón to Palma de Mallorca.

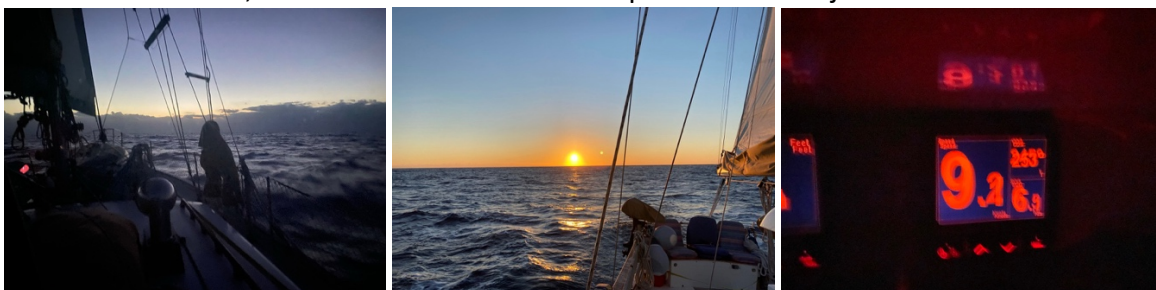
We left Mahón as the sun was setting on January 11, with the forecast calling for northerly winds at 20-25kts, gusting to 30kts, and with seas 6-12' for the first 12-15 hours while we crossed the Canal de Menorca. Then the wind would diminish and clock around to the west, before rebuilding back to 25+kts. Our route would take us on a generally SW course until we rounded the southern tip of Mallorca, and then we would track WNW until reaching the Bahía de Palma, and finally the Puerto de Palma itself. If the forecast was accurate and held, we expected a “sporty” ride for the overnight crossing, but with both wind and waves from abaft the beam, then a period of motoring with little or no winds, and then the final leg would be either close reaching or close hauled into Puerto de Palma.

We hoisted the mainsail with 2 reefs before we had traveled ½ mile from the boatyard. And the mizzen was set with a reef shortly after passing Isla del Rey, where we had volunteered on several Sundays enabling us to meet and safely socialize with wonderful group of locals, including native Menorquines, as well as British and American expatriates. We were farewelled along the route out to sea by several of these same friends, including Luís y María from Pedro’s Boats, Rene and Babs from SY MOMENTUM, and from the Isla del Rey crowd, we saw Ian and Alison, and Graham and Lorraine. Several groups of friends were standing on seawalls, bluffs and cliffs overlooking the channel, and they were kind enough to send pictures of AFS underway.



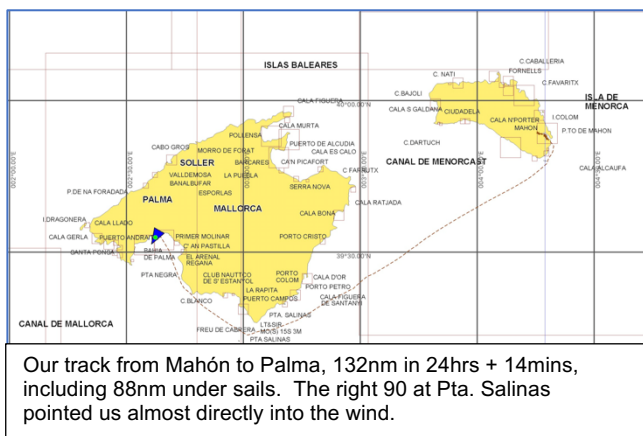
AFS departing el Puerto de Mahón with 2 reefs in the main and one in the mizzen because of rough seas outside the harbor.
Photo courtesy of Ian & Alison Gurney

Passage through the mouth of the harbor entrance was quite rough with 3-meter swells sweeping At First Sight’s stern to port, and not infrequently, waves were breaking around us. But we were only pushed and shoved like this for ~7nm, and then the ride smoothed out as we turned to the SW after clearing Isla de Aire, putting us on a comfortable beam reach. And we began to scream through the water making >9kts at times! In fact, when all is said and done, conditions were much, much better than we had expected. Hallelujah!



Large swells with breaking tops as we left Mahón. But fortunately, the sea calmed while the wind remained fresh and from abaft the beam allowing us to knife through the water at >9kts – a rare treat for a heavy blue water boat like AFS.

Conditions stabilized further during the night, except at one point during Vicki's watch, she had to bob and weave through a cluster of nasty squalls (that I slept through). When we emerged on the other side of the storms, the wind dropped to 5kts for a long while, so we resorted to motoring. Everything clicked and we made great time, such that by 02:00h we were just off Portocolom, one of our favorite harbor towns on Mallorca. It had been our bailout port of refuge, if conditions warranted a bailout; but they didn't, and so we pressed on. As if to let us know we had made the right call, the wind freshened for us on a close reach, only for an hour or so, but enough to advance our position to Punta Salinas, essentially the home stretch into Bahía de Palma and its port at the northeast corner. The wind shifted to just off the nose and stiffened quite a bit as we rounded the next point, but fortunately there was little fetch making the ride not too uncomfortable as our bow knifed through the building swell.



This was our third entry into the Puerto de Palma and Estación Naval Porto Pí, so we were expecting the usual hustle and bustle of ferries, commercial craft, and super yachts coming and going from this beautiful harbor. What we didn't expect was the sharp contrast between "on season" and "off season"; and this was now clearly off season, and we saw just three underway vessels in the entire bay and port.

We docked AFS at what had become our usual spot at the naval station just over 22 hours after our departure from Mahón, and the base commander, Dámaso Berenguer was there to welcome us and take our lines. In traversing the 132 nautical miles, we sailed 88 and motorsailed or motored 44. Dámaso came bearing gifts, dropping off a big care package of supplies from the U.S. that arrived at his residence on base several weeks earlier.



Our Ben sent this package from the States to Rota, where Juan Peñuelas picked it up and forwarded it to Palma. Many spare parts and hard to find items.

Our six days in Palma went by in the blink of an eye. Much of this beautiful city was closed or operating at significantly reduced capacity due to a bad spike in hospitalizations for COVID, although most businesses found innovative ways to remain partially open to legally serve their clients. For example, we met with an immigration attorney to discuss the "what ifs" should we exceed our legal length of stay because of adverse weather or because of travel restrictions due to COVID. We went to the U.S. Consulate Agency office to have passport and other documents certified. We made several trips to MercaNautic, a European equivalent of West Marine, only with far less fashion and far more *nautic*. And we got caught up on laundry and replenished consumable foodstuffs and supplies.

In addition, we rented a car with intentions of returning to Sóller and Portocolom to say goodbye to locals we had met in those two picturesque harbor towns. Then a 2-day weather window suddenly appeared so we turned in the car, rigged for sea, and departed for Cartagena (240nm / ~40 hours) at mid-morning the next day.

Sure, the forecast was favorable, but... We hoped we would be able to sail for the first 25% in moderate but variable winds. We were fairly sure we'd have to motor for the middle 50% due to no wind. And there was a good chance we'd end up motoring directly into rapidly freshening winds and building swell for the last 25%.

As we passed the lighthouse at Punta de Cabo Figuera about ½-mile to starboard, it dawned on us that when it disappeared below the horizon behind us a short while later it would signify our final departure from the Islas Baleares. It was a wonderful seven months in this island paradise.

Shortly before sunset, a gentle but steady 7-9kt breeze developed forward of the starboard beam prompting us to happily set the drifter, mainsail, and mizzen, and cut off the Perkins. The setting sun shined beautifully on the multicolored drifter, unexpectedly revealing several runs of pinholes up and down the luff of the sail. The only course of action was to immediately douse the sail before the pinholes got worse. Vicki sprang into action and she quickly repaired all the holes with ripstop repair tape, finishing the job in the damp cold that settled in after sunset, but allowing us to sail into the night on a comfortable close reach.



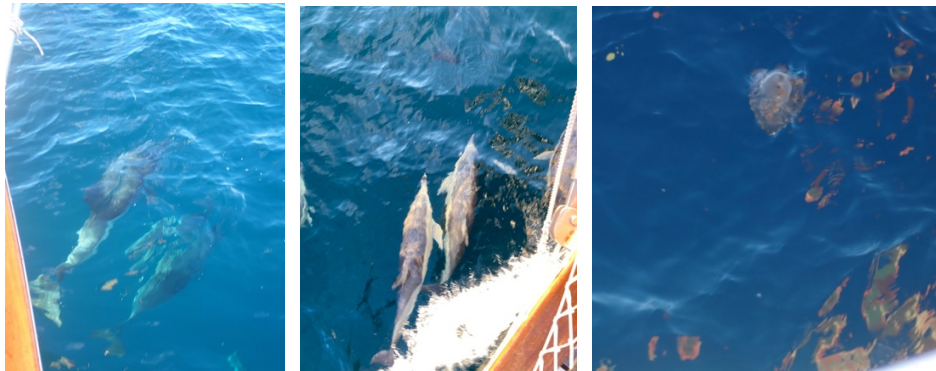
Left. Sailing on a close reach at 6kts into the sunset – until we saw a run of pinholes tracking parallel along the luff of the sail. Right. Vicki using ripstop nylon repair tape to fix the problem, at least for now. We think we may be fighting a losing battle if we see any more pinholes.



In fact, we had a terrific sail – while it lasted. But by our midnight change of watch 5 hours later, we had been headed nearly 90 degrees and we were now steering almost due west directly toward the reef at the tip of Formentera. We restarted the Perkins, doused the drifter, centered the remaining two sails, and turned due south to safety. Shortly thereafter the wind died to 3kts, and we resigned ourselves to motoring the rest of the night, validating the pre-departure weather forecast, unfortunately. At least the ride was as smooth as silk.

When just the two of us are aboard on passages, we've settled on a unique watch rotation that works for us. Vicki usually takes the first watch from after dinner until midnight, I take the midwatch from 00:00-03:00h, Vicki returns at 03:00h, and I'm up again from 06:00h mid-morning. I had a busy morning on this particular passage. It started with a big strike on one of the fishing lines I had put out at daybreak. I fought the *monster* for ~5 minutes, and then it

threw the hook. A short while later, two separate pods of dolphins converged around AFS and frolicked in our bow wave for what seemed like 10 minutes. And just when the excitement abated, we passed by a small sea turtle that appeared to be resting on the surface.



One advantage of the sunny skies, light winds, and calm sea during this passage was crystal clear water and quite a few pods of dolphins, which seem to be attracted to the sound of the motor. We also had a big strike while trolling, and we saw a juvenile sea turtle resting on the surface.

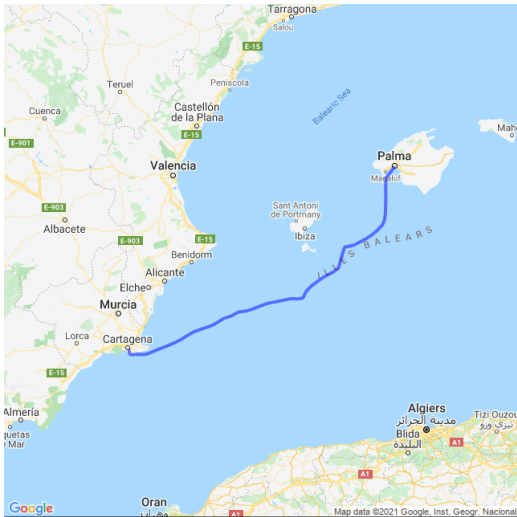
We tried our hand at sailing for about an hour around midday, but we were repeatedly headed and having to steer significantly north of west; or in other words, in the wrong direction. We might not have cared; except we wanted to get as many miles behind as possible before the harsh winds arrived the following morning. All in all, despite the constant motoring, we had a great day, which included seeing at least five more pods of dolphins before sunset.

We approached the Cabo de Palos and its busy Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) as I went below after my midwatch, and we were still dodging cargo ships in the TSS when I came back on at 06:00h. But during Vicki's three hours on watch, the nighttime glow of the lights of the Spanish mainland became increasingly brighter on this moonlit night. It wasn't long before the glow of Cartagena's lights shined above the coastal cliffs.

As predicted the winds whipped up significantly shortly after sunup, bringing with it wind chop and sea swells. We fell off just enough to starboard to set our 140% genoa close hauled to the wind and, once again, douse the Perkins *iron genoa*, in an attempt sail into Cartagena. But it wasn't to be as we were headed to starboard several more times which meant we were being set on the rocky lee shore. Oh well... We doused the sails and motored into the port of Cartagena and then into the Real Club de Regatas Cartagena (RCRC) marina, our home for 6 months at the start of 2020, and the first COVID lockdowns in Spain.



Vicki readying our mooring lines and fenders during our final approach into the Puerto de Cartagena.



Our track from Palma to Cartagena, ~50 hours and 250nm, including ~210 under power. The "points" in the otherwise smooth contour of the track are when we tried to sail close hauled to weather; but unfortunately, we couldn't point high enough into the wind to make efficient progress toward Cartagena.

It was bittersweet returning *home* to RCRC. On the one hand, we felt as welcome as Norm on the classic sitcom, *CHEERS*. Everyone knew our name and they remembered *AFS*, from the *marineros* that helped us dock to the receptionists in the office that handled the paperwork and finances. On the other hand, Cartagena was in a relative state of public health lockdown, much as it had been during our earlier stay. So, once again we'd be mostly confined to the boat and the surrounding marina during this stay, too, because we saw enough of the city and its surroundings before the first lockdown to know Cartagena is beautiful city to explore.



We are very happy and feeling quite fortunate to be doing what we're doing at this watershed moment in time.



AFS moored starboard side to Muelle Norte at Real Club de Regatas Cartagena on a chamber of commerce January day.