

SV AT FIRST SIGHT

On the Move Again – Cartagena to ~~Ceuta~~ to La Línea

January 26-28, 2021

As we noted in our last post, we think very highly of RCRC Marina and Cartagena, and it would



AFS docked at Muelle Norte, RCRC. It is calm when this shot was taken shortly after sunrise, but it would be blowing 30kts 2 hours later.

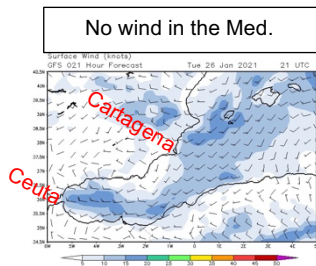
be easy to spend another season there. But our immediate objective is to stage in Rota and depart from there by mid-February for blue water Atlantic passages to Madeira and the Canary Islands in order to spend several weeks in those archipelagos before our legal stay in the Schengen Zone expires on/about March 4. Accordingly, we intended for this to be brief stop, and at 6 days, it was relatively short, but the best we could do given the 3+ days of westerly winds at 30+ knots.

Our berth on Muelle Norte, which parallels the *paseo marítimo*, was more open to passersby than our previous spot alongside Muelle Levante, which is somewhat more secluded inside the RCRC Marina compound. The Spaniards love their evening strolls, but with a partial lockdown and a 22:00h curfew in place, pedestrian traffic was down by at least 1/2 - 2/3, so we didn't mind the nearby foot traffic. Besides, we were only 20m from Burger King, and although we're not fast foodies at all, I will admit to two trips there during our short stay. Once for full meals, and once just for fountain sodas.

Our neighbors on the quay were Blake and Erica in SY *Alice in Wonderland*, and Steve and Sandrine in SY *Poseidon Rex*, two delightful young couples living the dream. Blake, an Australian, and Erica, a Canadian, cut their nautical teeth and met while crewing on super yachts in the Med, Steve as a captain and Erica as stewardess – think Bravo TV, *Below Deck*. In fact, Erica was twice invited to a casting call for the series. They're planning to spend the upcoming season in Portugal readying for a transatlantic crossing next spring. Steve and Sandrine, on the other hand are French. They are relatively new to cruising, but are in route now to the Caribbean, and then to Panama, just like us. We expect to see more of them as we leapfrog each other going toward the Canal.

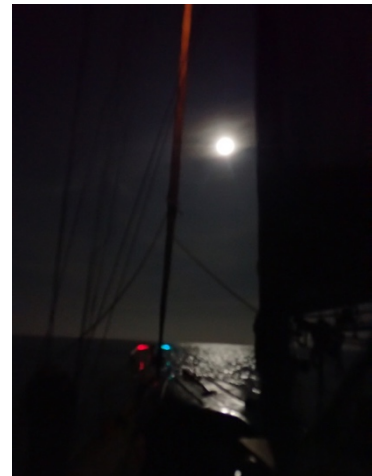
We said our final goodbyes to the RCRC staff and departed at midday on Tuesday 26 January, when the first weather window came through permitting further westbound travel. About an

hour before our departure, however, we were pleasantly surprised when our friend Juan Peñuelas's brothers, Pagote (*right*) and Emilio, brought by an impressive, homemade, farewell Tortilla Española for us to enjoy while underway. Vicki and I agree that the Familia Peñuelas has perfected the art of making these delicious Spanish culinary artforms. (Saylor was obviously hoping she'd get to try some, too.)



Unfortunately, forecasters predicted little to no wind for 48-72 hours, which would mean motoring all 260nm from Cartagena to Ceuta, Spain, our intended destination on the African side of the Strait of Gibraltar. And motor we did. Our logbook shows we sailed just 4.9 miles the entire passage, which ended up being 298nm, for reasons that will become clear below.

Most of the transit was totally uneventful, and the two nights, especially, were tranquil with glassy smooth seas beautifully lit by a nearly full moon the first night and a full moon the second. And there was a real sense of a higher power controlling things as I watched the moon disappear below the horizon on the bow in synchrony with glorious sunrises off the stern. The only negative was the humidity, which completely drenched the windscreen and eisenglass cockpit enclosure with dew making it difficult if not impossible to maintain a proper visual lookout. We relied heavily on our Raymarine radar to scan for contacts, as well as the electronic Automatic Identification System (AIS).



Nothing quite as serene as a calm, moonlit night at sea.

Soon after passing Cabo de Gata, not far from Almería, we opted to cut south across the Mediterranean rather than continue west along the Spanish coast. We did this for two reasons. The first was to take advantage the moderate westerly breeze that was forecast during day in the hope of logging some sailing miles on the trip. The second was to pass as close as practicable to Isla Alborán, a known hangout for large schools of tuna.

The tranquility was broken on Wednesday morning when we were hailed on the radio by the Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, Almería, which asked that we deviate from our course and attempt to find a possible vessel in distress they had lost contact with. We came right 30 degrees and proceeded under power at 7kts to the coordinates the MRCC gave us (missing out on the first opportunity to sail). Approximately 2 hours later, we sighted with the binoculars a small white boat ~3nm off the starboard bow.



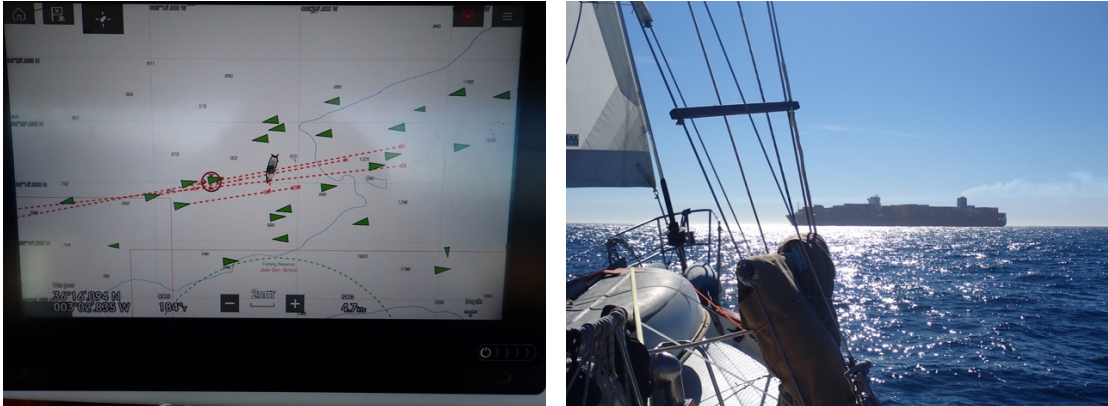
Isla Alborán, midway between Europe and Africa.

Proof that we did sail...
Even if it was for only 5nm over 1.5 hours.

Vessel in distress, ~15nm offshore. Sierra Nevada mountains in the distance.

We reported our sighting to the authorities over the VHF and advised that we were proceeding to assist. The MRCC waived us off, however, saying that they suspected the vessel was engaged in illegal activities, and they would dispatch a vessel to assist. From books and movies, we suspected things like Trafficking in Persons or drugs, but as we watched the vessel from afar through the binoculars, it appeared that, at worst, he was doing commercial style fishing with large nets, speculatively without the proper permits. At any rate, shortly thereafter we saw a Spanish Coast Guard vessel on AIS making 30kts out that way. By the time it arrived on the scene, though, we were out of visual range leaving the rest of the story to our imaginations.

We didn't have long to think about it, though, because our course deviation toward Alborán put us right in middle of shipping lanes of commercial vessels entering and leaving the Med. There were dozens of cargo ships making 10-18kts all around us, with MV *Erving*, at 370' and 18kts, crossing our bow well less than 1/2nm in front of us! We chatted bridge-to-bridge on the VHF, but as the CPA loomed, it was clear we were not on the same page with their watch officer, and we were glad this too-close-for-comfort crossing took place during daylight hours and not at night.



AFS is at the center of the display crossing perpendicular to the shipping lane. Green triangles are cargo ships moving east-west in the lane. The red dashed lines are indications of possible collisions! MV *Erving* at right.

But it was all about the tuna anyway, right? Thus far, not even a nibble – that is until just before sunset as we were bringing in the lines for the night, when all of a sudden, WHAM!

Something hit one of our lines. We slowed AFS down to idle speed and fought the fish for 10-15 minutes, bringing aboard a ~5kg Skipjack tuna. Not the prized Bluefin or Yellowfin we had been hoping for, but an edible tuna species nevertheless. Unfortunately, dinner was already prepared for the night, so we filleted our catch and put the meat in the refrigerator for the next night.

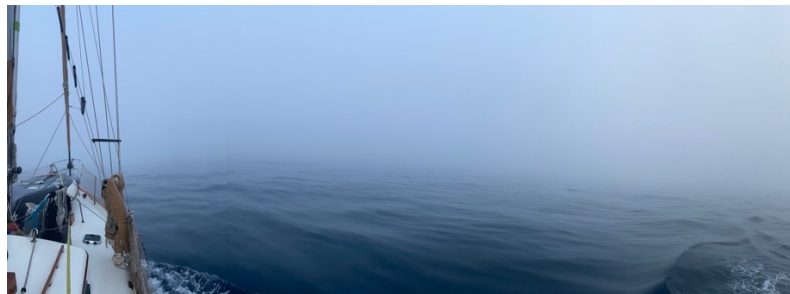


Skipjack Tuna, ~5kg.

Watches were uneventful on our second and final night of the passage, which is a good thing considering the extra heavy dew that was covering everything on deck. Still, we had a brilliant full moon overhead all night, and another spectacular sunrise at sea. However, shortly after daybreak, a blanket of thick fog descended over the water reducing visibility down to 100m or so, and it stayed just as densely fogged all day until nearly sunset. We would have to enter port using our radar to navigate.

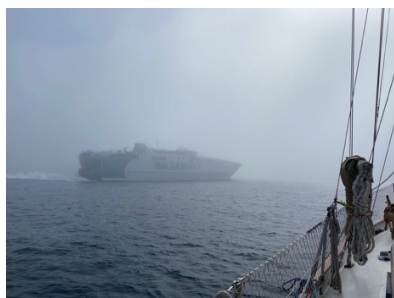


Saylor on the midwatch.



After a crystal-clear sunrise, dense fog rolled in and stayed. Visibility = 100m.

We arrived at Marina Hercules, Ceuta, ~1430 with the port completely socked in. Just outside the harbor, a Balaeric Lines fast ferry from Gibraltar passed close by to our port side at an uncomfortably close range given he was making 15kts in the fog. After he passed, Ceuta harbor control radioed us and directed we delay our entry until another ferry departed the harbor, which we did despite feeling somewhat vulnerable just drifting in the fog in a busy sea channel.



Preparing to enter el Puerto de Ceuta in dense fog. The ferry blew by us at 15kts. Radar navigation was essential for entering the port.

About 10 minutes later, ~14:30h we were given clearance to enter Ceuta harbor, and we made our way through the fog to the fuel pier at the entrance to Marina Hercules. The fueling station

was closed until 16:00h for the traditional Spanish siesta. While we were waiting for it to reopen, however, an officer with the Guardia Civil came over and informed us (and the marina staff) that transient vessels were no longer allowed to dock at the marina due to a recent upsurge in COVID cases in Ceuta. The measures were just put in place, and they were expected to in place for 2 weeks. We would have to leave.



The fog magically and nearly instantaneously lifted as we approached Gibraltar, in route to Línea de Concepción, which sits behind "The Rock" from this perspective.

We had to make a fast decision; sunset was in ~3 hours. Should we anchor in relatively unprotected water near Ceuta? Should we proceed overnight to Cádiz in advance of strong winds forecasted late the next day? Should we cross the Strait of Gibraltar to Algeciras or La Línea de Concepción? Or should we turn back somewhat and make for Marbella or Málaga? We opted to cross the Strait and try our luck with docking at Algeciras or La Línea. We learned by cell phone while crossing the Strait that the Club Náutico in Algeciras was open, but could not accommodate a vessel our size. The Marina Alcaidesa in La Línea was our last shot, and

fortunately, it was open and welcoming. We arrived there, checked in, and were safely docked just as night fell.

Ordinarily, we would look forward to a self-guided walking tour of La Línea since this was our first time in this town, famous as the terrestrial gateway to Gibraltar. At the moment, however, La Línea has the highest per capita rate of COVID cases and hospitalizations in Spain, so we'll be confining ourselves to AFS and the immediate surroundings in the spacious, well-equipped marina that appears to be about 2/3 occupied, ensuring plenty of space for social distancing.



Our view of the Rock of Gibraltar from the stern of AFS, comfortably docked in Marina Alcaidesa, La Línea de Concepción, Spain. The wind is 20+ kts from the west in the Strait of Gibraltar today.