

On the Move Again: La Línea de la Concepción to Rota February 4-5, 2021



The view of the Rock of Gibraltar from the AFS fantail while docked in Marina Alcaidesa, La Línea de la Concepción, Spain.

We recently concluded a tranquil 6-day port visit to Marina Alcaidesa, La Línea de Concepción, and then got underway for our old stomping ground, Rota, Spain, on Spain's Atlantic Costa de la Luz. Before describing the journey, let's describe the marina and its environs.



The marina is a sprawling mega marina on the east end of the Strait of Gibraltar with more than 600 slips, accommodating vessels from 8 to 90 meters, and it also includes a fairly large RV park for "land yachts." It has an integrated *astillero* (boatyard) with a 70-ton travel lift. But perhaps it's biggest claim to fame is its location, ~100m from Gibraltar, the 2.6 square mile rock that was captured by an Anglo-Dutch force in 1704 and permanently ceded to Britain in 1711 under the Treaty of Utrecht, much to the chagrin of many Spaniards today.



We stayed in one of Gibraltar's marinas on the way into the Med in January 2020, and it was nice enough, but nothing special. And certainly no bargain. However, now having stayed at Marina Alcaidesa, I can't see why anyone would dock in Gibraltar –

except that Gibraltar is exempt from most EU taxes, including the onerous 21% Value Added Tax. And, until recently, Gibraltar was outside the Schengen Zone, so time spent in Gibraltar did not count against one's 90-day visa free stay in Europe.

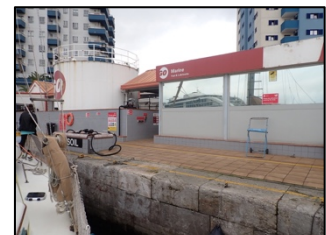
Marina Alcaidesa is a spectacular marina in every respect. The *muelles* and floating *pantaláns* are well designed and spacious. (And at roughly 2/3 occupancy during our visit, robust social distancing was assured.) Security is first rate with electronic key card access to all facilities, which are immaculately maintained. All marina staff, in the office and on the docks, were super helpful and super friendly. It is conveniently located midway between Gibraltar and the town of La Línea, roughly a 10-minute walk in opposite directions to either city (although clearing through Her Majesty's Customs & Immigration is required when visiting Gibraltar). And, surprisingly, it is one of the least expensive marinas at which we've stayed anywhere in the world, €12.79 per night for AFS. Unfortunately, during our visit, the border with Gibraltar was closed as part of its COVID lockdown, and La Línea was reporting one of the highest case rates of COVID in all of Spain. Accordingly, we stayed within the confines of the marina for the duration of our stay.



The case rate of COVID in La Línea was the highest in Spain when we stopped at Marina Alcaidesa. Accordingly, we stayed closed to AFS during our stay.

There is a bit of art and science transiting the Strait of Gibraltar because of tricky and potentially dangerous winds and currents, especially in an eastbound direction. Apparently, the water level of the Mediterranean Sea is naturally 1m below that of the Atlantic Ocean, because evaporative losses in the Med are not met by the combined inflow of all the rivers in Europe and Africa. As a result, water constantly flows into the Med from the Atlantic Ocean to keep Mediterranean Sea at, well, sea level. The Atlantic Ocean has a semidiurnal tidal pattern, meaning roughly 2 high tides and 2 low tides every day; while the Mediterranean has essentially no tides. During a rising tide on the Atlantic side of the Strait of Gibraltar, the west-to-east current through the Strait can exceed 6kts! On a falling tide, the current will decrease to 2-3kts. The art of eastbound travel, then, is to leave the Mediterranean during an outgoing Atlantic tide, and so the ideal time to depart is roughly 2 hours after high water in Gibraltar. That's exactly what we did.

High water in Gibraltar was at 07:50h, and we got underway from Marina Alcaidesa at 09:30h. But we but stopped 1/3nm later at the Gib Oil Marine Terminal in Gibraltar to take on nearly 800 liters of diesel fuel at £0.50/liter, less than half the price compared with Spanish prices (except in Ceuta, which like Gibraltar, is VAT exempt). Our refueling evolution was the smoothest ever for us, and we were underway again 45 minutes later.



Not much to look at, but the Gib Oil Marine Terminal is home to some of the cheapest diesel in Europe.



Our speed through the water was 7.7kts transiting the Strait of Gibraltar, but against a 4kt current our speed over ground (SOG) was just 3.7kts.

From Gibraltar to Tarifa is roughly 15nm, which would normally be a 2-3-hour transit under motor; however, it took us almost 5 hours on this day. We are grateful to have a powerful 354 cubic inch Perkins diesel and a 24" Luke propeller, which easily gave us 7.5kts speed over water (SOW), which netted just half that speed over the ground (SOG) because we were motoring directly into a constant 3.0-4.0-knot current. Meanwhile, our friends from Cartagena in SV *Poseidon Rex* with its smaller horsepower diesel auxiliary, were only able to make ½-1kt SOG. We overtook them halfway through the Strait, even though they departed from La Línea at the same time we did, and they didn't stop for fuel.



These two photos give perspective to the narrowness of the Strait of Gibraltar. They were taken at the same time, with both vessels heading westbound from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. At left, *AFS* overtakes SV *Poseidon Rex* (photo courtesy of *Poseidon Rex*) with Morocco in the background. At right, SV *Poseidon Rex* being overtaken by *AFS* with the southern coast of Spain in the background. The two vessels were ~1/2nm apart.

Once we rounded Tarifa at the southwestern tip of continental Europe, entered the Atlantic Ocean, and headed NW toward Trafalgar and Cádiz, the rapidly building 18kt headwind we had in the Strait became the kind of downwind run that every cruising sailor hopes for on every trip. We were making a steady 6.5kts on a starboard tack with the genoa poled out to starboard.

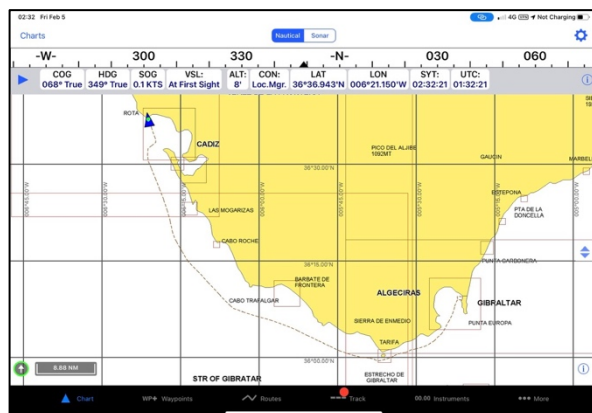
As had often been the case in the Med, however, the great downwind sailing didn't last all that long such that by 22:00h, we had already had a mix of sailing, motorsailing, and motoring, mostly the latter, logging 17nm under sail and 62nm under power. Not only did the wind clock from SE to NW to N, it waxed and waned in velocity between 2-3kts and 20kts. I don't think we have ever started and stopped the Perkins so many times in an 8-hour period.

We had a strange event off Cabo de Trafalgar just before sundown that was right out of the Twilight Zone. Our Raymarine GPS navigation system literally went haywire. Vicki noticed it first when our ship's icon was suddenly 20-30nm west of our intended route (even though we knew with certainty we were on course and on track), and the AIS display showed multiple contacts literally on top of us, when in fact, none were in sight. We immediately shifted to

“dead reckoning” and radar navigation, and began to troubleshoot the problem. What we discovered was baffling. In addition to the chart plotter display described above, our SOG display (which uses GPS) showed us racing through the water at various times between 50-100kts! To add to the mystery, we also lost GPS on our iCOM VHF radio, and our handheld Garmin GPSMap backup device showed us at 39° 22’ north latitude, when we knew from eyeball navigation that we were 5nm off the coast from Trafalgar, which is at 36° 19’ north. Interestingly, though, the internal GPS devices in our iPad and iPhones appeared to be spot on.



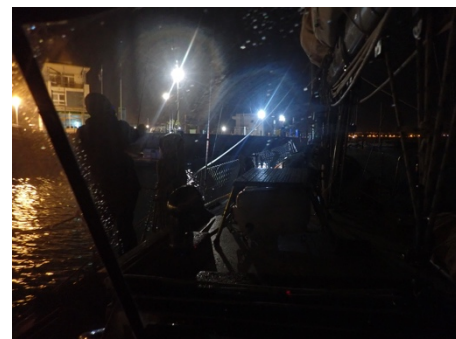
With GPS running amuck, check out the calculated SOG, 65.6kts! A new record for a Sunward 48 under sail.



The screenshot at left shows our track based on semi-automatic logbook entries from our Raymarine Axiom GPS navigation suite, which erroneously diverted us on a quick circuitous side trip to Batna, Algeria! The screenshot on the right shows our actual route based on iOS software. Our subsequent discussions with Raymarine tech support offered clues as to why our iPad and iPhones maintained our position accurately despite likely radiofrequency interference coupled with what may have been a poor constellation of satellites in view at the time. Mobile phones, Raymarine said, actually have a more sophisticated position locating system than purpose-built marine navigation systems, using not only GPS signals, but also triangulation from cellphone towers, and even dead reckoning software algorithms that enable mobile devices to maintain relatively accurate navigation when going through tunnels and the like.

When our troubleshooting yielded no additional information, we cycled the sailing instruments, the VHF radio, and the Garmin off/on, and the Raymarine and radio systems corrected, although it took at least 15 minutes for them to lock onto a new GPS fix, which normally takes ~30 seconds. Fortunately, we had no other weirdness during the rest of the night.

We arrived off Castillo de San Sebastián, which has defended the northern flank of the ancient city of Cádiz since the early 1700s, around midnight. From there, we cautiously navigated our way from buoy to buoy across the Bay of Cádiz toward Rota, arriving at its Puerto Deportivo at 01:18h. Since the marina offices were closed, we docked at the fuel pier and would remain there until morning. Of note, this would have been a far more stressful entrance had we not retained some



Final approach to the fuel dock at Puerto Deportivo de Rota, 01:18h.

modicum of local knowledge gleaned during our 3-month stay in Rota which closed out 2019.

We both quickly fell sound asleep within minutes of getting cleaned up after securing *AFS* to the fuel pier. Neither one of us moved a muscle all night. Our good friend Juan Peñuelas was patiently waiting for us when I first poked my head out of the companionway hatch at 09:00h. After a quick bite to eat, we checked in with the marina office, and Juan helped us move to our assigned slip on *pantalán E*.

Juan insisted that we use his car while in Rota, and so I drove him home and then returned to *AFS* in the marina via a circuitous route that took me through old town Rota, the neighborhood in which we lived from 2000-2003. The area was like a ghost town with almost all business temporarily closed due to COVID restrictions; and one can only imagine how many of those businesses might never reopen...

When I returned to the boat shortly after noon, the beautiful sun-filled morning quickly deteriorated into the nastiness our marine weather forecasts had predicted. It was dark, cold, windy, and rainy for the rest of the day – perfect weather for post-transit naps. In fact, it was nearing dinner time when we finally awoke for good, and what a dinner it turned out to be, too. Juan had left us Pez Limón fish steaks, to which we added baked potatoes and a fresh green salad. It felt great to be *home* in Rota. Next up, Madeira! Maybe...



AFS docked at *panatán E*, Puerto Deportivo de Rota. As the cloud cover suggests, the weather was unstable for several days, which allowed us to rest, to enjoy time with friends (properly masked and socially distanced, of course), and to provision and plan for upcoming blue water passages.