

# AN AMERICAN IN EUROPEAN WATERS

## Jerry Brecher

(In lieu of retirement, for the past ten years Jerry has been sailing Sirach, his 1982-built Sabre 38 Mk I centreboard sloop, along the New England coast and in the Chesapeake Bay. In 2023 he sailed Sirach from her home port of Gloucester, Massachusetts to the Azores. He intends to sail back to New England during the summer of 2025.)

I can't speak for all Americans of course, but I have a feeling that I'm not that different from many of my compatriots when it comes to travelling abroad. We never have enough time and we want to see everything. So we try to cram too much into too little time. This was certainly the case when I spent June and July 2024 on my boat.



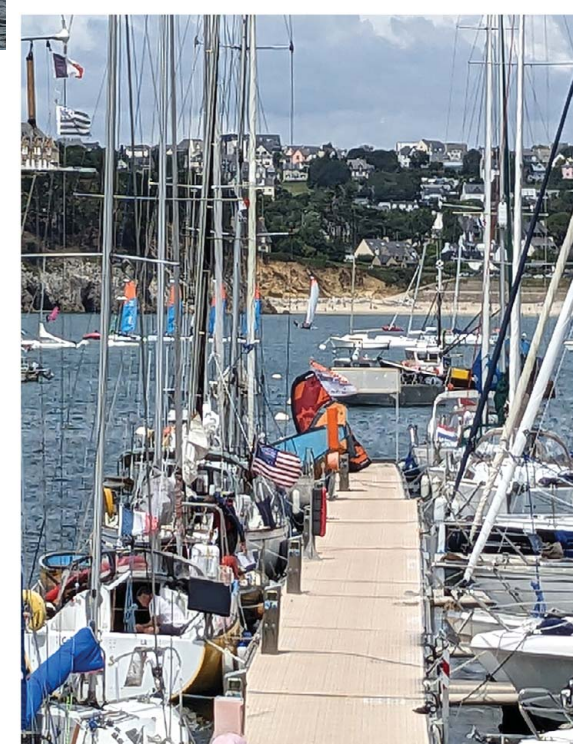
*Sirach on the pontoon at Angra do Heroísmo, Terceira*

Over the 62 days from 4th June, when I left my home near Boston, and my return home on 4th August, we covered about 2,400 miles. Coastal cruising on both sides of the English Channel plus Brittany was sandwiched between two – one longer and

one shorter – offshore passages:

- Offshore from Angra do Heroísmo, Azores to Falmouth, UK – 1275 miles in 9½ days.
- Cruising the southwest coast of Cornwall and Devon, calling in at Fowey, Plymouth, the River Yealm and Dittisham/Dartmouth, before heading south to the Channel Islands to visit Guernsey and Jersey.
- Visiting twelve ports in Brittany (St Malo, Paimpol, Trébeurden, Roscoff, L'Aber-Wrac'h, Brest, Morgat, Audierne, Bénodet/Sainte-Marine,
- Îles de Glénan, Concarneau and Lorient)

*The lone American yacht*



- Sailing 715 miles to visit those 18 ports and harbours, in 31 days.
- Crossing the Bay of Biscay from Lorient, France to A Coruña, Spain – 340 miles in 2½ days.
- Handing over *Sirach* to the marina in A Coruña for storage, refit, etc, the plan for next summer being to sail home to New England.

It was curious, to me at least, that in the course of this entire cruise, I never once saw another American-flagged vessel. Not in the Azores, not in England, not in the Channel Islands, not in Brittany (which may account for the inordinate attention paid to my boat by the Douane Française, about which more later) and not in Spain. And although we had many marine mammal sightings and close encounters, we also never saw any of the dreaded, rudder-chewing orcas, even while sailing through or near the Bay of Biscay twice.

### The Azores to Falmouth

I rented an apartment in the old city of Angra do Heroísmo, a UNESCO World Heritage site, so that our four-man crew could be well-rested and well-fed before our scheduled departure. All were skilful and highly-experienced – there was excellent chemistry. We organised, stowed, provisioned and familiarised ourselves with the boat and went out for an extensive practice sail, making a point of testing out storm sails, reefing and carrying out MOB drills. As one of the crew commented, it was hard to imagine setting the storm sails in a gale but good to have the practice, just in case. We also caught the floating line from the Lifesling in the rudder, necessitating diving under the boat to free it, proving the value of practising these manoeuvres in order to experience what can – and undoubtedly will – go wrong. I also want to give a shout-out to the team at NauticAzores, who had been taking care of *Sirach* since I first reached Angra in August 2023. Their work was impeccable (and considerable). I cannot recommend them highly enough.

After formally clearing out with the Portuguese authorities we shoved off at noon on Saturday 8th June, heading more east than north on the advice of our excellent forecast/routeing service (WRI\*, Glens Falls, NY) in order to avoid a nasty low pressure system heading toward us from the Irish Sea. With a crew of four the watch bill called for each of us to take three two-hour watches each day with six hours off in between. Civilised.

The most exciting part of this leg was the three days of force 7–8 winds as we began to head more directly toward Falmouth. We ran double-reefed for 2½ days, wing-and-wing with a handkerchief jib on the pole in a consistent 25+ knots of wind occasionally topping 40 knots. Our SOG topped 13 knots once or twice in seas described by the crew as ‘raw and tempestuous’, ‘mountainous’ and ‘taller than a house’. We covered 463 miles in three days with the autopilot performing beautifully throughout, though we did have to climb down into the lazarette and spend a few hours reinstalling the cable when it jumped off the steering quadrant. (The only

\* Weather Routing Inc – [www.wriwx.com](http://www.wriwx.com)



*Key to a successful voyage – great crew!*

malfunction of the entire trip.) I doubt if any of us could have held such a good course in those conditions, particularly in the dark.

After all that excitement, a late afternoon log entry on Sunday 16th June noted, 'Under power. 140 miles to Falmouth. Not much wind'. We sighted Land's End late the next afternoon and were on a mooring in Falmouth by 0130 on Tuesday the 18th. We drained the bottle of appropriately named Sailor Jerry rum. Later that afternoon we enjoyed some Cornish ale and a celebratory lunch at the venerable Pandora Inn (parts of which date back to the 13th century) and began to go our separate ways. I spent the next few days preparing for the next legs of the summer's voyaging.

### **Cornwall to the Channel Islands**

I'd had crew from the US lined up for the remaining legs of the trip, but those plans didn't entirely materialise so I ended up recruiting two guys from a crew-finding website. One was a dotty (Marxist) retired university professor from neighbouring Penryn, the other a dual-citizen English/Egyptian we were to pick up in Plymouth. There's only so much vetting one can do online even with video-call interviewing, and neither turned out to be as suitable as I had optimistically anticipated. Nonetheless, the dotty Brit did come with considerable local knowledge, so not entirely unhelpful. These two stayed with me until we reached St Malo.

We sailed out of Falmouth on Saturday 22nd June and spent the next two nights in Fowey, a charming town, though contending with strong winds and current proved quite challenging when picking up a mooring that evening. (No pick-up sticks such as we are used to in New England.) We were towing our 9ft hard dinghy along the coast, so naturally in the commotion (and the dark) the floating painter wrapped around the propeller. Once again, some diving was in order.

After Plymouth, local knowledge suggested we stop in the River Yealm, at the remarkably scenic Newton Ferrers. What a treat! It turned out that the Yealm Yacht Club was celebrating its annual race to their twin town of Trébeurden in North Brittany and 12 French boats had come over for the race. I had never heard of Trébeurden, but having met a number of the French sailors I decided to stop there on my way along the Brittany coast. The Yealm YC put on a wonderful barbecue accompanied by a lusty sea shanty performance by the Noss Wailers from the adjacent town of Noss Mayo.

After stopping for a night in Dittisham on the River Dart we sailed for Guernsey, a lovely island famous for its cows. Taking the ferry over to Sark for a day from Guernsey is also well worthwhile – it's a gorgeous little island!



*Pure serendipity*

### **St Malo to Brest**

Sailing in New England prepares one for fog, chill and occasional dreary weather, but not for 30ft (11m) tides or having to enter a marina via a lock! However, like many French marinas, they send out a small boat to welcome you, guide you to your slip and provide a helpful nudge if needed. St Malo reminded me of Quebec City. Not surprising, I suppose, since the Bretons settled Quebec... and they eat the same pastries! I bade farewell to my erstwhile crew in St Malo and waited out the bad weather. A day-trip up the River Rance to the wonderful medieval town of Dinan was a treat, and what a pleasure it was to attend an outstanding boys choir concert in St Malo Cathedral on my last night there.

*A French  
Customs  
cutter  
checking  
out the  
American  
yacht*



*Routine  
inspection!*



I had a week of solo sailing ahead of me before I was due to pick up a pal from the States in Brest, so early in the morning of Monday 8th I headed for Paimpol. I had to lock out of the marina, of course, but having gained experience entering it was not a problem even by myself,

particularly since the team running the lock provides skilful assistance. (I would also need to lock in and out at Paimpol where, it turns out, there is no assistance at all.)

It was a bright, sunny day with a really good, northeasterly breeze which pushed the boat along at better than 7 knots. Glancing over the stern I noticed a largish vessel coming up from behind at high speed. As it drew closer I could see that it was a grey, official-looking cutter of some sort. I got out the handheld VHF and, sure enough, they began hailing me in French. “*Monsieur*”, they said, “We are French Customs and we want to inspect your boat”. “Is there a problem?” I asked. “*Non*”, they replied, “it’s simply routine”. “Do you want me to stop?” “*Non*. Hold your course and speed. We’ll send a small boat”. The next thing I knew, four armed Customs Officers pulled alongside in a high-powered RIB. One of them spoke excellent English, and after asking permission to come aboard they climbed onto my boat.

We had a cordial conversation. They didn’t see many American boats in Brittany, so they were curious what I was doing there. Was I carrying weapons? Drugs? They inspected the ship’s papers and asked permission to search the cabin. After poking around – including in the fridge – one of them reappeared in the cockpit with a look of gleeful triumph on his face. Brandishing a plastic bottle of cheap Italian white wine he declaimed, “Aha, *Monsieur*, now we are going to have to seize your boat! This wine is an offence against France!”. We all started laughing. I signed a form evidencing their inspection, which they told me to show anyone else who made the same request so they’d leave me alone. They bade farewell and away they went in their RIB.



*The entrance to Trébeurden at low tide*

The *Shell Channel Pilot* (see page 323) helpfully explains that “... a first-time night entry [into Trébeurden] would need considerable confidence and very quiet conditions”. Fortunately

conditions were indeed ‘very quiet’ and my arrival after midnight coincided with the top of the 10m tide, so my first-time night entry was uneventful. At lower water and in broad daylight perhaps I might not have had such confidence! While I was trying to trouble-shoot and repair a leak in the freshwater system, Didier, one of the French sailors from Trébeurden whom I had met in Newton Ferrers showed up, and together we solved the problem in a trice.

There are any number of ominous, cautionary remarks in the *Shell Channel Pilot* (and other such publications) about what are supposed to be hazardous, challenging passages along the coast of Brittany, such as the Chenal du Four and the Raz de Sein. The only thing challenging about the day I transited the Chenal du Four (flat water, favourable current,



minimal wind, with the same benign conditions in the Raz de Sein a few days later) was heading into Brest at the height of the International Maritime Festival and having to slalom through all the hundreds of boats tacking back and forth across the harbour!

*Exploring these sea-caves by dinghy was a highlight of the cruise*



## Morgat

Of all the harbours we visited along the coast of Brittany, Morgat is probably my favourite. I would not have even known about Morgat except for the suggestion from a French sailor we met in Brest. Spectacular craggy coastline, moonlit beaches and a wonderfully gaudy fried seafood and ice cream stand! And to top it off, fabulous sea-caves to explore by our dinghy.

Flying the Stars and Stripes must be a magnet for French Customs as when we left Morgat, heading for Audierne, they once again stopped us! This time I simply handed them the form I had been given previously by their *confrères* and they did not even board us, departing disappointed, no doubt...

## Quimper

Many of the harbours in Brittany lie at the mouths of rivers. The River Odet separates the twin ports of Bénodet and Sainte-Marine and is navigable almost all the way up to the fascinating city of Quimper. It passes some impressive real estate... We got as far



*Waterside real estate –  
Château de Kéraudren on the  
way upriver to Quimper*



## *Cathédrale Saint- Corentin de Quimper*

up the river as possible before the water ran out, tying up to the pier at Corniguel which is ordinarily used by tour boats and sand barges. From there we took the dinghy right into the heart of Quimper, where I finally managed to get a haircut!

## **Glénan, Concarneau and Lorient**

Les Îles de Glénan are often described as the Caribbean of Brittany, although it was not exactly tropical when we sailed in there for dinner. Nonetheless, dinner on this remote island was certainly notable. '*Vaut le voyage*', as Michelin would say!



*The walled city of Concarneau*

Concarneau encompasses a heavily-touristed medieval walled city as well as a French Navy boneyard. And while we were there the 266ft sailing cargo vessel *Anemos* was completing her fitting out. Her first destination was to be New York, carrying 1000 tons of champagne and cognac. Before the next-leg crew arrived in Lorient (one from the US, two from France) I treated myself to some tasty bivalves – as local as they can get!

#### **A Coruña**

Across the Bay of Biscay to A Coruña, and once again this reputedly fearsome body of water turned out to be quite tame. Just 62 hours after we shoved off from Lorient we arrived in A Coruña and amazingly, even at 0400, the marina staff were there to lead us into our berth!

*SV Anemos, the world's largest sailing cargo ship completing her fit-out in Concarneau*



*Pre-dawn arrival  
in A Coruña*

**Author's note:** In addition to high-quality paper charts, three books are indispensable resources for cruising the English Channel and the coast of Brittany: *Reeds Nautical Almanac*, published annually by Reeds, a part of Bloomsbury Publishing plc; *The Shell Channel Pilot*, author Tom Cunliffe, published annually by Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson; and *Atlantic France*, author Nick Chavasse, published by Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson / the Royal Cruising Club Pilotage Foundation.

*The end of a successful  
voyage. Sirach and her  
crew on the pontoon  
at Angra do  
Heroísmo, Terceira*

