

Cruise report: Zaria West Wales

Saturday 28.07.2018

W. and J. have arrived at Milford Haven after a long train journey from Brussels. They join two crew members who have been with me along the South Wales coast since Cardiff. We were supposed to sail around 22h00 at the lock opening, but the weather is not at all good and I prefer to sit the night in the marina rather than at anchor, then we leave in the early morning.

Sunday 29.07

Awake at 05h00 but the weather has deteriorated, now 8 Bft from the SW. I go back to sleep. At 09h00 after breakfast things hardly look better. But by 12h00 the forecast has dropped to 7 Bft and we can go. We motor out to the lock, the gate closes behind us. We wait. We wait some more. And watch as the lock crew wrangle with the sluice gate, which is stuck. The lock can't be emptied and we can't leave. I offer to lend the lockmaster a big hammer but this does not help. Finally, the tide rises enough to equalise the levels and the lock can be opened; we are out in the estuary of the river Cleddau. After some brisk sailing, we are on course for Skomer Island and the very nasty Jack Sound, where the tide reaches over 7kn and the vicious Wolf Rock lurks one-third of the way across at the narrowest point. We are here on schedule at slack water but it is still impressive as the south-westerly green Atlantic swell smashes white into the granite Blackstones, over the Wolf Rock. Navigation here is by hairy eyeball and clenched buttocks, but worse: a squall comes over and the visibility falls off so I risk losing my sight lines...Somehow we are through, and when we turn to the W in the lee of Skomer all turns to calm. A few minutes more and we are tied up to a buoy in a sheltered cove yclept North Harbour, among the cliffs, sea-pinks, tufted grasses, yellow-flowered gorse and, of course, the wheeling flights of puffins and guillemots overhead. A seal cruises around the boat and nuzzles the dinghy curiously. There is just time for a walk ashore before dark, visiting the puffins at their nesting burrows.

Monday 30.07

Today's destination is Fishguard. In this area there are strong tides and quite long distances between harbours. Today we will sail 35 miles, leaving at 09h30 with the tide. The wind is variable, Bft 3 to 6 but from the SW. We see Grassholm in the distance, the second-biggest gannetry in Europe: it is a small island almost completely covered in bird nests and guano, surrounded by a snowstorm of scalpel-winged, black-tipped, electric-white birds whirling around its summit.

Visibility is again poor, so this time I avoid the narrow and fast Ramsey Sound and we take the long way round outside Bishop Rock and its isolated lighthouse. We arrive a little before dusk at Fishguard, which is a very wide but well-protected bay. To the W is the commercial harbour with the ferry port; to the SE is a narrow, drying inlet that marks the entrance to the old town. A seal, resting on a moored raft, lifts his head to glance mildly at us as we motor slowly past and anchor just opposite the old town. A short dinghy trip and a moderate walk, and we are drinking beer and eating pies in a local pub.

Tuesday 31.07

An early start and a day for a challenge. Cardigan, which lies at the head of a difficult, shallow estuary. We arrive past Cemaes Head and over Poppit Sands, but we are a little early for high water and wait for nearly an hour on the anchor. I am timing my entry one hour before HW; it is important to enter unknown waters on a rising tide. The centreboard and rudder are both up and the draft is only 55cm, but I still touch bottom a few times on the way into the narrow entrance to the

estuary. Once over the bar, there are several boats moored here and there and I steer with one eye for the chart and one for moored boats that should show where the deep water is. Nearly immediately, I am firmly stuck on a sandbank. No matter of forward or reverse engine will shift the boat.

But the tide is still rising, so after 15 minutes Zaria can be eased gently off the sandbank. I follow the NE channel on the chart, but this seems to be only a metre or so deep and sometimes disappears. By close attention to the echo sounder I manage to get halfway up the estuary, then I spot a red and white « barber's pole » that could well mean safe water. It gets to 1 1/2 m depth, which is already good, and I can make it across the bay to the moored boats at Saint Dogmaels on the west bank. At least I am in navigable water, a whole metre under the boat! While I am there, a tour boat appears round the corner from the narrow, tree-lined river- now I know the way. Shortly later we are moored on a pontoon at the centre of Cardigan.

A little later, I meet the very friendly and helpful day-boat operator. He is astonished we made it up to Cardigan in such a large boat and with no local knowledge. He kindly goes over the chart with me. It turns out my recently printed chart is based on an 1896 survey and is hopelessly, hopelessly useless. The barely-navigable channel is now all on the west side and is marked by a series of barber's poles: *some of which are out of place and have to be ignored.*

Lunch and a quiet, sunny afternoon in Cardigan, visiting the small, ruined castle. Most of the water disappears and Zaria dries out on the soft mud flat. Cardigan is very Welsh-speaking and rather agricultural. The top shelf in the newsagent was well stocked with tractor magazines.

Wednesday 01.08.2018

With the local knowledge gained in Cardigan we could find the way out fairly easily; round Cardigan Island and on to Aberystwyth. With a very favourable wind and a bit of gennaker we make good time and manage to enter the tidal harbour on the ebb in the early afternoon, well before the flood in the evening that was planned. Aberystwyth is a University town, with some Victorian seaside in its past. A pleasant stop, but Cardigan was more fun.

Thursday 02.08.2018

On to Pwllheli. A big and complicated, tidal marina with a narrow access channel. The marina is some distance from the town, and that was not the most interesting place.

Friday 03.08.2018

Early start, 04h00 with the tide and out of the shallow channel from Pwllheli. We are in heavy fog, near zero visibility and wholly dependent on radar. It is cold, dank. But by 09h00 we are round the corner off Porth Dinllaen, sunshine has burst out and we are anchored in 6m off a long sandy bay with shelter from the S and W. We go by dinghy ashore to an unexpectedly busy scene. The local population is out for the afternoon; children and dogs are playing and running for joy on the beach. The local pub is doing a rocketing trade and people are lining the inside, the outside, the front, the sides, the tables and the sandy beach, sitting with their pints of beer in the afternoon sun. A really happy, really relaxed place to be.

Saturday 04.08.2018

The last stretch; we are sailing with light wind from SW past the spectacular mountains of Snowdonia. I have left the best until last, I am told. The wind finally dies off and we motor in along

the (variable) buoyed channel up towards the Menai Straits and Caernarfon. We glide gently past the grey, angular towers of Caernarfon Castle, turn into Caernarfon harbour over the sill at the rising tide. The trip is over.

Afterthought

This is a wonderful and spectacular area with a lot of wildlife, special cultural features, strong currents, and many miles between harbours with no shelter. Furthermore, most harbours are accessible only for a few hours around high water and facilities ashore are limited. To enjoy this area needs careful planning, fine weather, a strong boat and preferably some local knowledge. But for those venturing into these waters the rewards and sights are outstanding and the memories unforgettable. My thanks to all who joined this trip and made it such a success.



Illustration 1: Grey seal inspects the dinghy, North Haven, Skomer Island



Illustration 2: Guillemots and razorbills



Illustration 3: Approaching Grassholm



Illustration 4: Gannet at take-off



Illustration 5: The gannetry



Illustration 6: Zaria at South Haven, Skomer



Illustration 7: Cliffs at the South Wales Coast, near Castlemartin



Illustration 8: Puffin at Skomer



Illustration 9: Landing party for Fishguard



Illustration 10: Caernarfon, the castle and the walled town

