

SPREE LADY'S IRISH CRUISE 2011

Part 1. Just another day at the office, really.

Our office is Ralph Roberts' customised cruising Wayfarer World. There are the usual overcast skies, possible drizzles, SW winds F4-F6. The salty spray of the Celtic Sea jets up my sleeves and nose, down my neck and stings my eyes. And occasionally, just to keep the crew alert, bigger bully waves shoulder their way over the foredeck and into the boat. I'm seated at my usual station on the thwart facing forward, ready to adjust the genoa sheets or reef the main as the Captain decrees. All's well in our wet little world as we head for Kinsale, just one of the 14 ports along the Irish coast that we would visit en-route to our destination of Dublin.



Spree Lady is scampering along nicely in spite of the secondary waves reflecting back through the primary, Atlantic-born waves destined to hurl themselves against the Irish headlands. Suddenly I hear Ralph call out and quickly turn to see what's up. Ralph is indeed, (in the technical sense) still at the helm, tiller extension very much in hand. The one aspect of this scene that is utterly alarming is that Ralph is not *inside* the boat, he's in the *water*. He remains attached to the boat by nothing more than the small piece of rubber which connects the tiller to the extension! In that split second between panic and adrenaline-fuelled action, a most terrifying scenario flashes through my mind . . . a fate which, even now, I am reluctant to contemplate.



Spree Lady heading for Kinsale in strong winds.

Prologue - But I've already gotten ahead of myself. Properly told, the log of our 200 mile cruise along the southern Irish coast from Baltimore to Dublin began the year before when, after buying some used sails from Ralph, he cast me the offer to crew for an Irish cruise he was planning. I had bought an old Wayfarer two years earlier and in terms of dinghy sailing experience, considered myself a complete novice. On the other hand, I had done my homework; I had **read** numerous accounts of dinghy cruising, including Ralph's. I was later to appreciate that armchair sailing is a whole lot warmer, drier, and has inherently more options than the real thing. Even in the most treacherous predicament, I could always put a paragraph on pause while I fetched another beer from the fridge. Out there on the water, pursued by endless legions of white horses, the only thing I managed to pause was my need to spend a penny+ as Margaret Dye so quaintly phrases it. Indeed, often unable to spend+, my piggy bank was regularly filled to capacity and then some. And this was just the pennies, which is to say nothing of the pounds+.



Brandon McClintock sailing his Wayfarer, W3576 on his local inland sailing water in California.



Parked at our B & B, Westfield House, just outside Cork, where we met up with Philip Murphy who lived nearby.

So in June, 2011, having met up at Dublin Airport, we set out for the B&B reserved near Cork. We managed to arrive well past food serving time at the local pub, so our dinner consisted of a pint of Murphy's. No matter. The jet lag persisted like a cheap whisky hangover; food easily taking second place to the need for sleep.

Philip Murphy (left) and Ralph near the launch slip after arriving at the harbour of Baltimore.

Day 1 - A full Irish breakfast, including fried haddock more than made up for the previous evening's missed dinner. After shifting the cargo in the hold of Ralph's Citroën, we were joined by local Wayfarer owner Philip Murphy and got underway for our departure point at Baltimore. This harbour lies 10 miles from the Fastnet Rock, on the extreme southwest shore of Ireland, and is famously associated with the 1979 race of the same name in which 15 perished in a vicious F 10 storm. We would be sailing in waters deserving our utmost respect. Managing to arrive without being stopped by the police for being considerably overweight with both car and trailer, we began the lengthy preparations for launching.



At this point I should interject that launch sites in Ireland are not at all like the California versions I am accustomed to, with well engineered anti-slip patterns laid into the ramp and, of course, the usual pontoon / floating dock to which one ties up while loading or unloading. No, in Ireland, with tidal ranges of up to 4 metres and significant surges, to launch your boat you must launch yourself as well. Ralph has done this many times and all went well until an inept line handler (me) allowed the boat to become angled to the intractable surge bent on shoving the boat broadside. I managed to stop the bow from charging back onto the slipway but couldn't control the stern, which slewed toward the rock wall bordering the launching slip. The Iroko outboard motor mount smacked soundly against the wall and split. The profile of my learning curve took on that of the 1930's stock market crash. In an instant my Bright Monday had morphed into Black Friday.

Ralph made an amazing emotional recovery after the shock of seeing his careful preparations for the trip dashed even before setting sail, and effected ingenious repairs with bits and tools from Box 5, Bin 7, and Canisters 3 & 4. As a librarian, I am acutely aware of the need for precise organization. Ralph's boat stowage system easily rivals the book shelving system of Melville Dewey. Within a short time he had drill, saw, scrap wood, fasteners and completed a fine repair. The cruise would continue after all. We bid farewell to Philip, who kindly drove the car and trailer back to Cork for safe keeping.



Brandon fending Spree Lady off the wall responsible for the damage to the outboard bracket.



Setting off from Baltimore, bound for Sherkin Island.

We pushed off into a F4 wind bound for Sherkin Island. Coming into the first tack I heard Ralph say "Late, please!" + "Plate???" No response from the crew. Ralph immediately leant forward and pulled the *centreboard* into its proper position. Tack saved; ego bruised. I had serious qualms about ever being any help to Ralph.

Spree Lady, behind the ramp to the pontoon, with Baltimore clearly visible in the background.

We made it to Sherkin Island, where I am introduced to the intricacies of his boat stowage system . a marvel of organization and efficiency evolved over decades of dinghy cruising. We (mainly Ralph) converted Spree Lady to sleep mode and our short first leg was celebrated with a well deserved pint and meal at the pub overlooking the bay.



Day 2 - After breakfast we readied the boat for sailing. It was the reverse of everything accomplished the previous evening. Even if the twice-daily drill became familiar, it was still over an hour of meticulous stowage and attention paid to lashing everything into its proper place. Sisyphus has *nothing* on this dinghy cruiser! We eventually cast off in a beautiful F3 breeze, bound for Dublin . with as many or few stops as we fancied or the changeable weather dictated.



Spree Lady packed and made ready for the day's sail.

Our first port of call was Castletownsend, intended only as an opportunity to stretch our legs and enjoy a pint. The landing was tricky as there was no pontoon or guest dock, only a concrete slipway. Ralph sailed in for a perfect landing and I stepped off. Deciding to tie up temporarily against the adjacent wall, I was charged with getting quickly to the top of the ramp and over to the wall with the painter. I was not fast enough and my desperate tug on the painter was too little, and too late. The protective metal band on the stem grazed the stone steps and was damaged.



In one moment I was entranced by having sailed on the Celtic Sea in a dinghy to one of the most enchanting harbours on the south coast and, in the next, I was filled with self-condemnation and doubt. Had there been a plank on board, Ralph would have been quite justified in ordering me to walk it. The resulting capsize would have delayed getting that pint of Murphys, though, so Ralph just made the necessary repairs.

Moored up in typical fashion in one of the many quaint harbours along the Southern Irish coast.

We cast off again bound for Glandore in winds F4 . F6. It was glorious sailing and worth all of the thousands of miles I had travelled to experience it. It was the kind of sailing that draws Wayfarer sailors to the open ocean, with Ralph being completely in his element; I was less sure and somewhat nervous, but totally exhilarated. At times we were planing at over 10 kts, which is something I would have thought nigh on impossible in such a heavily laden dinghy.

Spree Lady sailing in lively conditions under full sail.



It took only a short time to sail into the bay of Glandore, and on to Unionhall. There was no guest dock, as is common in most of the small harbours, and we found our only option to get ashore was to tie up to a pontoon used for the local rowing boats. Ralph noted from his Cruising Guide that the pontoon was aground at low tide, and repositioned the boat to the end of the pontoon, where it could bottom safely on the mud.

A local police constable was a keen sailor and enquired about our cruise.



Spree Lady tied up on a pontoon that is normally for the exclusive use of the local rowing club.

Day 3 - Next morning we were visited by a most engaging police constable. At first I thought we might be fined for using the pontoon. But he came by to inquire as to our passage and to assure us that we had been personally looked after in the wee hours. With his interest in sailing and expert local knowledge, he warned us of a number of hazards in the bay at low water.

Time and tide wait for no man. And so it was for us. Rather, it was we who needed to wait for the tide. Within half an hour we had sufficient water to press on to Courtmacsherry. We were carried by strong winds and again found ourselves planing under full main and genoa. Beating into the shallow inner bay was a struggle and on reaching the pontoon dock we discovered that all available space was occupied by two large yachts and the local offshore RNLI lifeboat. There emerged two options: 1) to shoehorn ourselves into the cluster of local dinghies at one end or 2) tie up to the dock opposite the large yachts. The downside to this was the need to drag the boat through an accumulation of thick, green algae so that Spree Lady ended up resting in *and on* the algae much like an elongated entrée served on a huge bed of wilted lettuce.

Finally fed and tucked in for the night, I was more than ready for a quiet night's sleep. Although Spree Lady was resting silently on her green algal quilt, the sloping gangway leading down to the pontoon intermittently creaked and groaned for the next 6 hours on a falling tide. The sounds reminded me of Hollywood movies in which submarines are taken to their *crush depth*. My dreams were sprinkled with scenes of seams springing leaks which (perhaps not so oddly) coincided with my need to *spend a penny*.



Snugly moored against the pontoon for the night.

Day 4 - Our destination was the picturesque town and harbour of Kinsale, well known for its excellent restaurants which reputedly offered some of the finest seafood in all of Ireland. We set sail that morning in strong winds, clear skies and with gastronomic anticipation, oblivious to the events that were to unfold during the day and described earlier.

Sailing in strong winds and rough seas with a fully furled genoa and 2 reefs in the main.



Leaving the bay of Union Hall and Glandore, and heading out for Kinsale in lively wind conditions.

It was another day of lively sailing in winds of F5 . F6, my ability to take in a proper reef being well tested. It was off the coast at Seven Heads that we encountered more turbulent conditions. Just moments before Ralph deserted his post, the waves seemed erratic and confused. With the winds from the SW, we were reaching on a starboard tack, Ralph

compensating for the rolling, as always, by simply leaning inward from his seat on the side deck. Whether it was a rogue wave, a rogue trough, a momentary lull in the wind or some combination, we never know. All we do know is that the roll to weather was so pronounced that Ralph found he was unable to lean in long enough to prevent being tipped overboard.

My first panicked response was to cast off the main halyard and take down the mainsail, before quickly moving to the stern to assist in returning Ralph to his more normal position. To reverse our course would have meant beating back into contrary winds, so Ralph decided to sail on to Kinsale. We swapped duties on the helm and continued under double reefed main and furled genoa toward Old Head of Kinsale, before finally getting into its lee. The concentration that was required whilst surfing toward the harbour at double digit speeds in the strong winds and 3-foot swells was unbelievable. Ralph took over the helm again as we entered the harbour proper and it proved an enormous effort to hand the tiller over to him, as by this time, my hand was rigidly mortised onto the tiller extension.



Heading for Kinsale with Brandon on the helm and sufficient wind strength for the boat to plane.

Our eventful passage was celebrated by hot showers and a superb fish dinner. We were most grateful and relieved that nothing of a more serious nature had happened. Of course, there were near endless permutations of %what if+, %could have+, %should have+ but in the end, things are always as they are and no amount of speculation was of any relevance. The cruise would continue within that same unknowable space/time continuum in which our lives unfold moment by moment.

Spree Lady (with boat tent, next to white cruiser) moored up at Kinsale.



Day 6 - After recovering for an additional day in Kinsale, we performed our morning sleep-to-cruise ritual and were underway in spite of light rain and winds. This day we were heading for Cork and, as we slowly passed Fort Charles, built the 1670s, the wind began to freshen until it wasn't long before we needed to reef the main. After nearly two hours of good sailing, we rounded Roberts Head and found some protection from the F6 winds. The captain offered to let me helm along the next stretch of coast into Cork. An hour later the wind increased once more and the first reef was tied back in. We surfed north in anticipation of finding some shelter from the wind as we approached the lee of Crosshaven Hill. There were full-sized yachts off to our starboard, racing in a big regatta . many single or double-reefed. The winds at this point (F6, gusting F7) were challenging but manageable.



Brandon helming Spree Lady into Cork Bay.

The second option, although a longer distance, seemed less confrontational and promised for a quieter anchorage. Option two it was. As we bore off to starboard and set our course, it became apparent that the winds were growing ever more vicious. Short-fetch chop built at an alarming rate and the now more frequent gusts threatened to overwhelm us in spite of our reduced sail. At times the spray felt like Neptune was aiming his personal fire hose directly into my eyes. My glasses were so covered with salt that I could easily have seasoned three meals. Ralph struggled valiantly to keep our starboard gunwhale above water by constantly easing the main with each invisible punch. It was my job to do the same with the reefed genoa.

We passed Ramshead and entered the harbour proper, fully expecting the winds to abate. They did not. Rather, we found that they were actually increasing and gusting more frequently. These conditions were far beyond my experience and ability to cope and prudently Ralph took the helm. There were two choices: to make for Crosshaven, which required beating directly into these ill-tempered winds or, to bear off on a close reach toward East Ferry in the hope of finding protection in the lee of Great Island.

Ralph on the helm while crossing the Bay.



The wind was now our adversary and we had become shadow boxers who countered blindly, unable to see the blows assailing us. The gusts shrieked through the rigging, and the entire boat shook with the assault from wind and wave. I wondered when the main would shred itself as there were continuous whip cracking reports from its violent flogging. It was impossible to tuck in another reef as we did not have enough sea room - a large oil tanker lay not far off our lee.

I cannot say how long it took us to thrash toward our refuge. It could have been half an hour, an hour, more than an hour, I could not say. For me it lasted a lifetime and, in another sense, time seemed to stop altogether. In retrospect I have to say, Ralph offered a splendid performance. In all his experience, he could not recall a more demanding role.

(Note: We learned the following day that the winds were measured at 40 kts. For the record, 40 kts is the very top end of a gale F8 on the Beaufort Scale.)



Last Passage - photo taken sailing out from East Ferry the next day.

Exhausted but not defeated, we finally reached Last Passage, a narrow body of water that separates Great Island from the mainland. You might imagine, as we did, that the wind Gods would have taken their bows, departed, and allowed us a much deserved final reach to our destination, East Ferry. But our wishes and imaginations deceived us. What we thought would be an easy reach became a beat! And the tide, weak though it was, was foul! We surrendered. Bugger Aeolus and praise to Petroleus. The odds of seeing Ralph fire up the outboard in any sort of a breeze are about the same as sighting Bigfoot. But fire it up he did.

Spree Lady moored behind the red RIB and opposite the motor cruiser at East Ferry.

I was poised with painter in hand and we were within 30 feet of the dock when I heard the purr of the engine suddenly go silent. Of course, the foul tide quickly cancelled our headway. I thought to myself the captain's distance perception had become confused by such an arduous and demanding sail. In an instant Ralph was straddling the bow, paddle in hand, stroking quickly and powerfully to reach the dock. For some reason, the engine had quit on its own. The timing couldn't have been a better final test of maritime mettle to end one of the most challenging days sailing either of us had ever experienced in all our years out on the water.



The hot shower was the best ever; the pint of Murphy's and meal at the local hostelry never tasted better; and the live Irish music could not have been sweeter. Our arrival at East Ferry was, indeed, a most cherished moment as the achievement of having successfully engaged so many forces that day began to sink in.

Part 2. Moving on – from East Ferry to Dublin

I raised my pint of that special brew of Irish beer to celebrate our survival of the day's exceptional sailing conditions. It was for sure a beautiful little vessel, seemingly rather fragile in its pint-sized proportions. The graceful lines and curves, its traditional draft, were balanced exquisitely between the demands of function and the aesthetics of form. In my brief reverie I sensed the ancient dance between liquid and solid, the God-made presence of the one inspiring the man-made invention of the other. How the vessel, in all its iterations, gave reciprocal shape to the yielding fluid; how it liberated bubbles along its sides; and how, in turn, those bubbles formed into a miniature boa of foam at the vessel's edge. Yes, before me was both a beautiful and perfect vessel . a simple pint of Murphy's. But this was no ordinary pint. It was a near-sacred libation to celebrate our arrival at East Ferry.

Day 7 - The morning of our departure from East Ferry proved to be as delightful as the day before was dreadful. With very scant room to manoeuvre and little wind to do so, Ralph, after a few well-executed short tacks, had us nicely moving south through the channel and back to the Bay of Cork. And the day's moderate breeze and open sky quelled my lingering fears of ever crossing this bay again.

Spree Lady tied up at the marina and sailing school run by Eddie English, at East Ferry.



The RIB of the local Sailing School overtaking Spree Lady, with Eddie English in the pink sleeved shirt.

Spree Lady sailing across Cork Bay, having given a camera to the crew of the RIB to take the picture.

Once on our course to Crosshaven, we were quickly overtaken by the local sailing maestro Eddy English in the RIB he uses at his sailing school. It was he and his crew who took some great pictures of *Spree Lady* sailing across the Bay and confirmed that the previous day's wind speed was recorded at 40 kts.



The village of Crosshaven is famous for its Royal Cork Yacht Club, which was established at the Cove of Cork in 1720, qualifying it as the oldest in the world. There were hundreds of visiting boats and crew, so it proved a challenge to locate our assigned berth. After completing the various formalities, we were able to watch the regatta awards ceremony and luxuriate in the sun and clear skies.

Groups along the waterfront provided great music.



The Royal Cork Yacht Club – after the race prize awards.

The road along the waterfront teemed with littoral marine life: street artists, musicians, dancers, singers, all performing with the greatest degree of professionalism, accompanied, of course, by gallons of Murphy's. I can still picture the burly fellow in a red satin dress, black lace stockings, and high heels wobbling across the busy street whilst doing his best to neither spill his beer nor sprain his ankles.

Day 8 - We had planned to leave the next day but once again, the fickle Irish weather was oblivious to our plans. In an act of hope we went through the drill of making *Spree Lady* ready for sea, but grey skies and persistent rain won out. Before re-converting our craft to sleep mode, we visited the local hostelry and spent a delightful afternoon in a pub, engaged in conversation with a captivating fellow named Pat who, as only an Irishman can, regaled us with some great sea stories. He was able to confirm two dismastings during the regatta class racing of cruising yachts the previous day when those furious winds booted us across the bay. And these were fully-crewed boats with keels; not an open dinghy with a crew of two and a centre-plate.



Moored up against a pontoon at the Royal Cork YC, with the boat made ready to set sail in the hope that the weather would clear and we could continue our cruise.

Day 9 - The continuous rain of the previous day finally abated and by mid-morning we were able to cast off. The bright sun reigned supreme and we enjoyed perfect (F4) offshore breezes, broad reaching for hours and planing from time to time. By mid afternoon we entered the rather minimal harbour of Ballycotton, which had so many permanently moored work boats with lines criss-crossing around the harbour that it appeared to be an obvious confirmation of the latest String Theory. With no convenient mooring buoys available, we tied up to the high-walled breakwater using long spring lines, which needed intermittent adjustment to accommodate the tides.



Spree Lady tied up to the harbour wall at Ballycotton – there being no other means of getting ashore.

Aside from Ballycotton being a famous fishing village and seaside resort, the most outstanding man-made feature is the lighthouse located about 2 km from the village. It was constructed in 1851 and its lantern is 196 ft. high. In 1936 a storm produced seas so mountainous that spray was flying over the lantern. After learning this, it became obvious that the height of the seawall we were moored against was, perhaps, not so excessive after all.



Spree Lady was tied alongside one of the many moored boats for the night.

Day 10 - Ralph assessed the options for the morning's departure and determined that our best course was to simply reverse out of our night's mooring space alongside another vessel. There were so many other vessels in such close proximity to us and to each other that there was simply not enough room to get underway in the usual manner.

Mooring space was restricted to only the deeper waters within the harbour.

He declared that sailing out backwards, between a selected pair of moored vessels would give us room to fall off on a reach once we had cleared their sterns. And so we did. After all, why disrupt the early morning harbour quiet with two minutes of a buzzing outboard when you can do it all silently and straight-forwardly . or rather, straight-backwardly.



Originally we had considered calling in at the port of Youghal, but with the day's winds as strong and favourable as those of the day before, we pressed on for Dungarvan, another lovely seaside resort town and harbour situated at the mouth of the Collingan River. After a full day of lively sailing along the gradually softening shapes of the Irish south coast, I found myself feeling very tired. Whatever had me coughing for the last eight days and preventing deep sleep definitely had its claws in me now. I knew all was not well on the evening of our arrival at East Ferry 4 days earlier when I tried (but could not), offer my thanks to the musicians at the yacht club. Any attempt at speaking was thwarted by some unknown microbial menace. At the very best, my efforts to communicate mimicked what you hear when your mobile phone is showing half a cell bar. My immune system's defences had been hacked and, as they say, the disease had gone viral.



Brandon on the helm, heading for Dungarvan.

As we rounded the point to enter Dungarvan Harbour, Ralph took over the helm. The last hour turned into a nasty beat in F5 winds with a falling tide and our sense of urgency escalating, knowing that Dungarvan is a drying harbour. Ralph's technique for navigating up the ever narrowing, poorly marked channel was low-tech but highly effective: he used his bronze-edged centre plate as a depth sounder. As soon as he felt the centre plate hitting the bottom, he called for a tack. I remember the last 100 metres being amongst the hardest of the entire cruise, as we were forced to tack every 15 seconds.



Moored to the pontoon at Dungarvan.

I had no idea how serious my condition was or how long recovery might take. The previous nights aboard *Spree Lady* had been extremely difficult because, even though the urge to cough had been constant, I had tried to stifle it for fear of waking Ralph. Not to detract from *Spree Lady's* accommodations, I have to say that the first evening in a warm, dry, bed with an en-suite bathroom came as close to experiencing wondrous rapture as I can possibly imagine.

Fortunately there was sufficient space on the pontoon. We tidied up the main and Ralph headed to the local yacht club for permission to berth. I collapsed on the dock, completely exhausted, certain that another 50m would have lead to my burial at sea. We set off for the nearest pub and a pint on Ralph's return. To my good fortune, it also provided Bed & Breakfast facilities, with the upper floors designated for guests. A room was available and my credit card materialized instantly.

(Most of) the kit stored aboard Spree Lady spread out along the pontoon.



Days 11 – 15 - To be honest, there were moments during the following days when I felt certain that Ralph would have to enlist alternate crew to finish the cruise; indeed, when my sense of defeat was most intense, I almost hoped that he would scuttle the whole thing and call a cab. Nevertheless, a combination of much needed rest sleeping in a comfortable bed, life-affirming Irish breakfasts, and a course of strong antibiotics brought me back from the brink. After five days of convalescence we were able to continue our adventure, bound for Dunmore East.

Day 16 - Around mid-morning we cast off the dock lines and eased our way out of the harbour to coincide with the beginning of the ebb tide and the awakening of the day's off-shore breeze. We retraced our inbound track . requiring dozens of tacks . on one effortless reach. The day's leg evolved into another glorious day of play on the water. A constant 10 to 12 kt breeze allowed us to complete the entire distance without needing to reef . a welcome relief for a recovering convalescent.

Brandon on the helm, and able to relax in the easy sailing conditions.

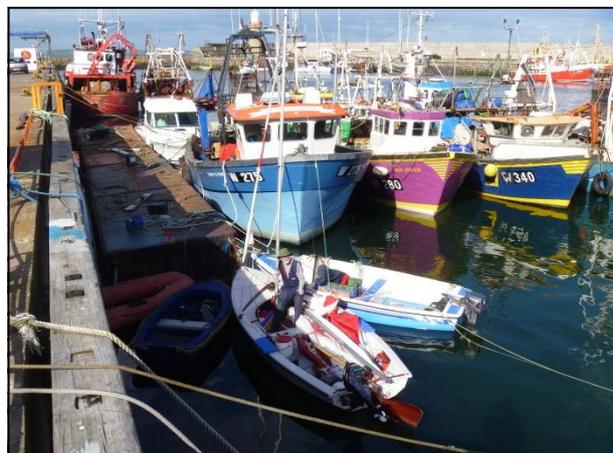


Rounding the point at Dunmore East, we sailed toward a sheltered bay behind the harbour, looking for a pontoon to moor up against. There wasn't one. The mainsail was dropped and we headed directly for shore under reefed genoa . as in directly toward the big rocks on the shore. Expert approach by the helm, and our inertia absorbed by the crew, we tied up alongside a concrete ramp. My task was to fend *Spree Lady* off the rocks while Ralph scouted for overnight berthing options.

Approaching a sheltered anchorage set behind the harbour at Dunmore East.

There were few. We were directed to the inner working harbour clogged with numerous, closely spaced fishing boats and literally no room to manoeuvre under sail. This was clearly one of those occasions when the skipper had to change hats from purist to pragmatist. Ralph fired up his largely ornamental outboard and we motored into the harbour packed with densely populated working vessels. With no apparent "room at the inn", we took advantage of our diminutive size and went where no dinghy had gone before. With *Spree Lady* secured in her new niche, we set out to enjoy a walking tour of the town, taking in its spacious parks; calm-inducing views; the very grand Haven Hotel; and ending the evening with a fine dinner at the Spinnaker Restaurant.

Spree Lady tied up in Dunmore East harbour at the only spot which gave access to the shore without impeding the fishing boats.



Day 17 - After a sound and peaceful night's sleep we were awakened by the sound of hundreds of screeching seagulls and marine diesels belching to life as the local fishermen expertly manoeuvred their vessels out of the crowded anchorage toward the sea. We soon followed after enjoying our usual breakfast of muesli, bananas, and a hot cup of tea. Our course was directed east toward Kilmore, a small village in County Wexford. Like every other day of our cruise, it began with a minor sense of adventure, of wondering what it would bring - so unlike the daily experience of commuting to one's workplace.

About an hour into the sail Ralph put up the spinnaker, which was a first for me on a dinghy. It became one of the most exhilarating moments of the entire cruise - and one of the most exhausting. Ralph let me helm for about 2 hours. We were pursued by legions of white horses driven by the persistent F4 winds. We easily surged down the faces of the small 3 - 4 foot seas often surfing at 9.5 kts, occasionally faster as our bow came unnervingly close to impaling the backs of the waves before us. Perhaps it was more than "Six Degrees of Separation", but never before has so much concentration been required to avoid either gybing or broaching. By the time Ralph handed the spinnaker, and took over the helm, the wind was up to F5 and I was a wreck.



Brandon helming the boat toward Kilmore, on his first experience of dinghy sailing with a spinnaker.



Spree Lady moored up at Kilmore.

The entrance to the harbour was narrow enough, guarded as it was by a high breakwater, but made even more challenging by two large fishing vessels moored on either side that towered above us, and effectively blocking our wind. Getting through became another unexpected test of seamanship. After near interminable tacks in the variable shifting airs, we finally emerged from the fishing vessels' wind shadow, and now had more than enough wind to lay a short course toward the crowded pontoon moorings. Judging from the round of applause given by the crew of an adjacent yacht, a gentle nosing into a vacant berth under sail is a rare occurrence in the harbour at Kilmore. We treated ourselves to a most welcome hot shower, followed by a deliciously decadent dinner at the Silver Fox.

Day 18 - Our morning departure required just as deft a hand at the helm as our arrival, since the airs were very light. While voices in my head were silently screaming "just start the outboard", Ralph was effortlessly merging into the day's adventure with lots tacks, occasional paddle strokes, and his Viking-like determination. We at last cleared the breakwater and set course for Wexford. We had a delightful passage east once out at sea, and surfed for hours under full main and partial genoa, finally rounding Carsore Point to leave the Celtic Sea astern and enter St. Georges Channel in the Irish Sea. We sailed very close to the shoreline to minimize the effect of the ever increasing strong counter current. At times we were no more than 5 to 10 metres from the shore and only a metre above the large boulders on the bottom, which were clearly visible as we skimmed by.

Rounding Carsore Point and entering the Irish Sea.



This long stretch of shore-hugging finally brought us to the outer limits of Wexford Harbour. The harbour is natural and lies at the mouth of the River Slaney. In earlier times it was considerably larger than today, up to 10 miles wide with mud flats on both sides known as the North and South Slobs from the Irish word *slab* meaning mud. At this point we had to surrender our beam reach for a very wet (wind now against tide) beat, requiring a single reefed main and reefed genoa. This was also coupled with a vicious squall, with the rain lashing us in sheets. It was one of the wettest and most uncomfortable parts of our cruise.



Approaching Wexford bridge under motor.



The boom crutch used to support the mast.

Squalls pass, and this one was no exception. We eventually progressed further into the harbour, where we became intimately familiar with the Slobs, our progress being continually punctuated by warnings from the depth sounder - aka *Spree Lady's* centre plate. We found there were no berthing facilities available for small craft except west of Wexford Bridge, and a bridge too low to transit without lowering the mast. To accomplish this, Ralph approached an unused mooring buoy, which I clung to as he proceeded to lower away. With mast secured, we motored against the wind under the bridge and upriver to the local sailing club.

Over a much-yearned-for Guinness, we were graciously granted permission to tie up to the pontoon for the evening. Before enjoying a hot, delicious, skipper-prepared dinner of pasta and chili con carne, we were treated to a great flurry of sailing club activity, involving an enthusiastic fleet of



An enthusiastic hive of activity during the training evening at Wexford Sailing Club.



the youngest skippers I have ever seen sailing little prams, all of which had safety lines tethering them to shore. Both Ralph and I were amazed at how accomplished these young tykes were at handling their craft and suspect that they'll be collecting their racing trophies soon enough.



Day 19 - The departure from Wexford became a living example of what I'd only read about in the lore of dinghy sailing. Our course offered a fair wind and tide. Ralph decided we may as well save all of three teaspoons of fuel and just "shoot the bridge". That is to say, lowering the mast under sail in order to transit the bridge and then raising the mast after clearing it. If not done properly, things can quickly go disastrously wrong. We got underway on genoa only, boom unshipped and stowed. Once clear of the bridge we raised the mast, shipped the boom and hoisted the main. All went smoothly and there was a decent sense of satisfaction in having performed one of those rare manoeuvres that give depth to one's seamanship.



Brandon on the helm out of Wexford Bay.



The deep water channel was well marked, with the sand bar behind packed with seals.

The skipper had very often cut corners . quite literally . during our trip when following any channel markers in shallow waters. Not so on this particular day. With a falling tide, we ran out of sufficient depth on numerous occasions in the open expanse of water of those ancient, notorious Slobs. We were actually forced to seek out the navigable channel, just like other sailors. It was almost humiliating. If we could have displayed our track on a GPS, I suspect it would have looked much like a 3-year old's Etch-a-Sketch. The well marked channel was definitely longer, but way more scenic and we saw literally hundreds of seals, as well as a good variety of shore birds atop the sandbars we were trying so hard to avoid.

Finally clear of the shifting, wet sands we turned north on an easy F 2-3 reach. This was the first stretch of coastline that did not afford us a predictable harbour or natural refuge within our sailing range. Our chart showed that the next available refuge was Arklow, but that, even with a fair current, was quite beyond our reach. We would need to improvise that day. After several hours at the helm the wind had picked up to about F4 with the air turning quite cold. Our attention became fixed on finding a suitable place to beach, just as was done in scenes from Private Ryan's War, a film shot (I was told) very close to our location near the town of Polduff.

The shoreline was comprised of rough shingle and rose rather steeply. Ralph selected the best of the far-less-than-ideal options and we made ready for the landing with rollers, lines and other tackle. As we both struggled to align *Spree Lady* with the rollers, it became obvious that because of the unruly surge and significant ebb current, we would not be able to hold the boat perpendicular to the shore for long enough to position the rollers under the hull. A number of abortive attempts confirmed this.



The shoreline along the east coast.

Wet and cold, we abandoned Plan A and opted for Plan B. We didn't actually have a Plan B, but hoped there might be something around the next corner further north. A small, private slipway appeared, but nothing that offered any protection when tied up. We moved on to Plan C, which entailed going a bit further. Nothing obvious appeared and Plan C evolved into Plan D - anchoring. Though before committing to that, Ralph carefully scanned the shore, mentally exhausting the odds and probabilities for another go at Plan A. Nothing seemed worth the effort or risk, so plan D it was.

This stopover point was the first unprotected anchorage of our cruise and it became noticeably more of a challenge to transition from cruise mode to boat camping mode in the absence of a pontoon on which we could temporarily stow our gear while re-arranging things. Coupled with the lively rolling and pitching of the boat, I was more than retrospectively grateful for all of our previously protected berths. Even so, nothing was lost overboard and Ralph served up a much appreciated meal of chicken stew con pasta, Tubourg beer and the last of our bread. As the wind subsided and the gentle rolling diminished, sleep came quickly and soundly.



Spree Lady anchored off the coastline near Polduff.

Day 20 - Before weighing anchor for Arklow, Ralph wanted to get a few shore-based pictures of *Spree Lady* at anchor off the east Irish coast. Since the anchor line was handily stowed on a rotating drum under the foredeck, it was easy to veer the line to its limit which, as coincidence would have it, allowed *Spree Lady* to come within a few feet of the shore. Perfect! Ralph took a stern line ashore whilst I hauled in on the anchor line to keep us safely offshore. Ralph scouted the terrain and shot some great photos from the small bluffs overlooking the shore.



We reversed the process to get Ralph back on board, changed *Spree Lady* from sleep mode to cruise mode; weighed anchor; and finally made sail. Uncharacteristically, we encountered very light airs and spent nearly five hours covering only thirteen miles. The wind died completely just as we reached the harbour entrance and the outboard was pressed into service. We eventually found a pontoon for visiting yachts well beyond the uninviting commercial docks. A Danish lady on a large cruising yacht berthed ahead of us kindly shared the code to the restrooms and showers. I remain in her debt forever as I had not been ashore for two days - to answer a call of any kind. We shared a delightful pub dinner with her and her Norwegian husband, who informed us of their plans to venture into the realm of round the world cruising.

Moored up in the marina at Arklow.

Day 21 - Well rested and nourished we made a leisurely departure around 11:00. There was a useful southeast F3 wind and a favourable current for the first couple of hours.



Approaching Wicklow Head with the tide now running strongly against us.



Ideal sailing conditions after leaving Arklow with Brandon enjoying the pleasant sail.

It was actually sunny and we made good speed until the tide turned, when we began to slow appreciably. Ralph set up the spinnaker to compensate. The tide was most definitely foul by Wicklow Head and there were visible rips as we approached the point. It was a struggle, but we eventually rounded the point and Ralph called for a change of helm to execute a gybe. I bungled it whilst handing the helm and we accidentally gybed all standing . or in my case falling . onto the lee side of the boat. I was sorry, embarrassed, and we were lucky that nothing fouled, broke or resulted in a capsizing. Ralph, having moved quickly to balance the boat, sorted out the mess and retrieved the spinnaker.

We experienced an agonizingly slow run toward the shore of Wicklow, with our speed dropping from 6.5 kts to a mere 2.5 kts. Finally, at some 5 metres off the beach (give or take a few metres, we were damned close!), our speed increased and Ralph again called for the spinnaker. We enjoyed a fine 2-hour run to the Harbour at Greystones, being our penultimate destination. Within the towering walls of concrete that form the breakwater of this newly built and unfinished marina, there was a slipway and a single yacht tied to one of the inner walls. No pontoons or mooring places had yet been put in place. Another moment of serendipity. However our most wonderful Irish host, Monica Schaefer, had spotted our shore-hugging approach from the vantage point of her lovely, hillside home, and not only did she greet us with two bottles of beer, but had also arranged for us to raft up to the yacht. We shared one of the best cups of tea ever with the yacht's owners, Percy and Aine, and left *Spree Lady* safely nestled against it for the night. We had enjoyed a run of twenty-five miles without reefing or, thankfully, a major catastrophe. It had been a good day for sure.



Spree Lady tied up to the only convenient mooring facility in the unfinished harbour of Greystones.



The view of Greystones harbour from Monica's home.

Our fine day's sail was made even better by Monica's invitation to spend the night at her lovely home with incredibly scenic views overlooking the Irish Sea. This was preceded by a barbecued dinner at which our most gracious host cooked a much appreciated meal for two very hungry sailors. It proved a most memorable evening, spent as it was in the camaraderie of a fellow sailor. It was quite a shock, as well as a definite luxury, to find I was able to reflexively stretch in the comfortable bed at Monica's home . and to discover that I could actually do so, since a week of squiggling into a mummy bag has a defining influence on one's sleeping habits.

Day 22 - Our last day's sail took us from Greystones to Dun Laoghaire, a suburb harbour just a few miles south of the greater Dublin Harbour, which serves thousands of large commercial vessels and pleasure craft. Dun Laoghaire was also the staging venue for that year's annual Class Regatta, a major event that attracted sailors from all of the UK and Europe to compete in the various class races held during race week. Before casting off, we were again treated to the hospitality of Percy and Aine in their cockpit, a space capacious enough to accommodate most of *Spree Lady*.

It was a gentle morning on the water, with a slow broad reach/run north. Once the wind had picked up, Ralph hoisted the spinnaker to have us skipping along at 3 to 4 kts. I wished to avoid gybing the spinnaker but also needed to avoid an outcrop of rocks. The need to avoid the rocks eventually became more compelling than an accidental gybe. With this manoeuvre finally executed, we continued on a run that brought us into a kaleidoscope of hundreds of boats on courses that were like intermingled roundabouts at rush hour.

Spree Lady lying in her temporary mooring berth at the Royal St George Yacht Club.



Ralph helming within the inner harbour of Dun Laoghaire, with the town behind.

There were boats on every possible point of sail and I felt extremely nervous about being among so many vessels, so close to one another. Ralph took over the helm in order to thread us through the moving maze of masts. After negotiating the high walled harbour entrance, he sailed *Spree Lady* in for another ho-hum perfect landing, which turned out to be about 50 metres from our assigned berth. With predictable consistency, instead of firing up the outboard, he paddled to the new mooring. I would have bet anybody in the harbour a couple of pints of beer that Ralph was completely devoid of stockholdings in BP.

Upon completing the cruise, I often asked myself why two respectfully-past-mature, apparently sensible gentlemen would want to risk such a potentially perilous undertaking. After all, it is a commonplace knowledge that the waters off southern Ireland are routinely treacherous and the weather moody. (In 2011 alone there were on average of 22 lifeboat launches per day off Ireland's coastal waters). Even in the most unlikely coastal crannies we often saw the largest and most powerful RNLi lifeboats solemnly poised to intercede on behalf of those who, either due to poor planning, lack of skill, incapacitating injury, or just a stroke of bad luck, needed seaborne assistance to avoid what might certainly become an irreversibly grim fate.



Sailing the southern Irish coast in F. 6/7 winds.

The answers to my inner inquiry emerged over time in vague associations of childhood memories. As children we don't intellectualize experiences. We quite naturally lose ourselves in the sights and sounds of the present moment. We may not have known the names given to things by adults, but that never detracted from our sense of joy and wonder. We didn't need the names of things in order to take delight in the smallest of miracles that, as adults, we overlook as ordinary and unremarkable. This, too, is a simpler time before career, family, and mortgage take over, a time before life becomes complicated.

For myself, the cruise became an opportunity to return, if only in an unconscious way, to that naive, childlike state in order to experience everyday things as if for the first time. This was my first dinghy cruise in ocean waters, as well as my first experience of Ireland. Nothing was familiar and, therefore, everything was fresh. Our cruise unfolded spontaneously, without the trappings of expectations or the inflexibility of plans. For a few weeks we revelled in the rush of the wind, the play of vessel and water, and that childhood feeling of freedom. Each day we sailed into the realm of not-knowing, and it was exhilarating.

Would I do it again? Perhaps. My learning curve was as steep as the market crash of '08 and I now know I was way too inexperienced to be considered competent crew for such an undertaking. In a less critical light, I was initiated into this rather elite class of sailors by a fine teacher and learned an enormous amount about open ocean dinghy cruising and uncovered some weaknesses and strengths in the process. And as meaningful as the sailing experiences were, I cannot help but recall the underlying sense of kinship and kindness that touched us each day in the many harbours, pubs, markets, and government offices. In Ireland, courtesy seems natural. Cut off from newspapers and TV as I was, perhaps my social sensibilities were sharpened a bit by the creative, resilient, real-world people of Ireland rather than the virtual-world people of the media.

This I know for certain: I long to visit Ireland at least once more in my lifetime. And my first quest upon arriving will be to find an old pub overlooking the sea where I can re-experience my love affair with that beautiful, frail little vessel and its contents . a contemplative glass of that most blessed Irish brew . a pint of Murphy's.

Epilogue - Ralph brought a wealth of skills to bear on the cruise and skilfully drew upon them in what could otherwise have been disastrous situations for the less experienced. Without a doubt, I added some critical dinghy-sailing skills to my repertoire and learned many things about myself while often tested to my limits of physical endurance. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and it turned out to be far more memorable than I ever could have imagined.

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