

Sailing a Wayfarer from London to Helsinki

A series of 6 independent cruises - total distance sailed 1750 mls



The complete distance was made up of a series of sails in 3 different Wayfarer dinghies that took place over a period of 12 years. It started in 1998 with a North Sea crossing from Southwold, Suffolk to Esbjerg, Denmark, and was completed in 2010 with the sail from Southwold to Tower Bridge. The various cruises were accomplished with crew from 5 different countries: UK, France, Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland, as well as one section sailed solo. A boat tent over the Wayfarer was the only overnight accommodation used throughout the trip, with the exception of a land tent used whilst at the Rantausminde campsite. It took over an hour to convert the boat from a sailing dinghy to a rather confined, but sheltered living space; with about the same period of time each morning to revert it back into a sailing dinghy. The experience gained from a prior 15 year period of cruising was used to equip the boat with every item of gear likely to be needed for the various trips. Each item was stored in a specific place, and also secured and/or tethered to the boat at all times when sailing, so that nothing could be lost overboard, even in the event of a capsizing.

Safety and seamanship were of paramount importance, though the problem of poor decision making due to tiredness was experienced. The possibility of capsizing was minimised by having the simplest of reefing systems, and reducing sail area early in any strong wind conditions in order to be in full control of the boat at all times. A buoyancy aid was always worn, with a waterproof VHF and a GPS immediately to hand.

Spree Lady set up with one side laid out for over-night sleeping and the near side when sailing.



Section 1 - Southwold (Suffolk) to London, Tower Bridge

Sailed in Sept 2010 with crew Jacques Boirie (France)

Time Taken:
6 days



Distance sailed:
145 mls

We were suddenly awoken by a loud bang, with Jacques immediately sitting up alarmed. Since we had anchored off a pile of rocks along the muddy shoreline of the River Roach, my immediate thought was that with the falling tide, the boat had settled on a loose rock that had now gone through the hull. Though very concerned about the situation, there was little we could do in the darkness of the night, and the problem was best left to be resolved in the morning. The various options for rectifying the situation to enable me to complete the final leg of my cruise from London to Helsinki were considered during the remaining hours of a very restless night.

We were up at daybreak to effect what repair we could to the hull, and were pleasantly surprised to find that the loud crack had been caused by the anchor line snapping the wooden rail across the transom. The relief it was nothing more serious was palpable.



Spree Lady anchored off an area of rocks that had given us access to the shore at a lower state of tide.

Day 1 - We had set out from Southwold two days previously to sail to Tower Bridge, as this appeared to be the perfect location for the starting point of my 1750 mile odyssey to Helsinki. A gentle northerly breeze with sunny periods had been forecast, though Jacques quickly decided that this was just for tourists like himself, since the wind was nearly on the nose and became increasingly strong. Jacques' newly acquired sailing gear was given a thorough test. Conveniently protected from the worst of the spray by the crew, I had declared optimistically that it was a fine day to be sailing.

Our first overnight stop had been at Felixstowe Ferry, since with only a rather basic facility of a bucket on board, it was always useful to stop where washroom facilities were available. The harbour had natural beauty and character, but was rather spoilt by debris on the shoreline where we landed, giving Jacques the impression of an abandoned Wild West mine. A good evening meal of pasta and stewed steak was prepared on our basic, but very effective Trangia stoves, and nicely finished off with some fine Bordeaux wine Jacques had brought along. We slept soundly in our snugly fitting boat tent that night.

Day 2 - We had been able to make a very leisurely start the next morning whilst waiting for the tide to turn, and enjoyed an excellent breakfast at a nearby café. We finally set sail around mid-morning in a good breeze that deserved a single reef in the main. The wind slackened after rounding The Naze and the reef was taken out, for Jacques to experience a good day of sailing in Mediterranean-like weather conditions. The navigation target for the day was Southend.

Spree Lady ready to set sail from Felixstowe Ferry.



Jacques at the helm across the Thames Estuary.



The wind however, had different ideas. By the time we had reached the shallow waters off Foulness, Southend was still on the distant horizon. Feeling somewhat hungry, Jacques made the suggestion of stopping somewhere nearer to prepare a meal, so we opted for an overnight anchorage in the River Roach, motoring first into the River Crouch, and then into the Roach. At half tide it proved difficult to find a suitable anchorage along the muddy banks that would enable us to get ashore.

We eventually found a landing place near some rocks and blocks of concrete. It was far from ideal, but served our purpose to get ashore, with the added advantage of having the area completely to ourselves. The quietness, broken only by the sounds of the birds, made the place quite surreal. A seal popped its head out the water to take a curious look at us in the twilight, much to Jacques' delight. It was a final compliment to the beauty and wonder of the tranquil location. We settled down for the night in blissful ignorance of the ensuing night-time drama ahead.

Moored along the River Roach near rocks to get ashore.



Day 3 - With our overnight drama easily resolved, it was necessary to decide on the best route to Southend. A stop in the River Roach hadn't been planned, so I had no details of the opening times for Havengore Bridge. It therefore seemed a safer option to sail back out of the River Croach. Jacques was amazed at how far out into the estuary we had needed to sail to clear the shallow sandbank, but with a falling tide it would have been far too risky to have attempted any shortcut, even in a Wayfarer. The passage to Southend was uneventful in the light winds and after landing at Thorpe Bay, we were treated with great generosity at Thorpe Bay Yacht Club. Their kind assistance in providing an anchorage, as well as the hospitality of their Clubhouse, was much appreciated.

Day 4 - Jacques had friends in Thorpe Bay, so we arranged to stop the next day and enjoy an evening meal with them at a local restaurant. Our plan for the night had been to row out to Spree Lady in a dinghy provided by the Club, motor the dinghy back to shore, and then anchor out in deeper water for the night to enable us to catch the early morning tide. The weather proved to be against this plan however. On returning to the slipway, the wind was blowing at least a F.7. and made launching a rowing dinghy out of the question.



Spree Lady (in foreground) moored at Thorpe Bay Y.C.



Passing the classic 3-masted ketch, Trinovante.

Day 5 - Having spent the night ashore, we had needed to wait for the incoming tide to float our beached Wayfarer and therefore missed much of the flood tide for our passage. With Jacques' time limited, we had to press on despite the still strong headwinds, so made use of the outboard again. Just beyond Southend Pier, we passed two more of Jacques' English friends sailing their beautiful 3-masted ketch "Trinovante".

Our progress slowed once the tide had turned against us, and made fuel consumption far greater than had been allowed for. Our situation became quite critical. To quote Jacques: "I faced another stressful time: we were about to run out of fuel in the middle of the Thames with no place to land, fast tide against us, wind on the nose, and a huge amount of boat and shipping traffic. What to do in such a situation?"

As easy as in any street: you stop by a barge and the man on board gives you the location of the best sailing club in the area. Is this luck? I am impressed. Sometimes I wonder if the Captain organises these events so that I don't get bored! Directed to Thurrock YC, we managed to berth in a sheltered spot that gave us access to shore via an iron ladder minutes before the tide departed from under us. We were looked after royally, being given free access to all the club facilities. It was a greatly appreciated gesture.



Berthed at Thurrock Y.C. just before the tide ebbed away

Day 6 - We woke early to move Spree Lady into the river and tied up against the Club's safety boat moored in the deeper water to enable us to catch the start of the flood tide to Tower Bridge. The wind was still blowing from the west, so having replenished our fuel supply, we had no choice but to continue under motor. The day was bright and sunny, with only the wind being in the wrong direction to enjoy the remainder of our sail to Tower Bridge. It proved a most interesting spectacle to view the many familiar London landmarks from the water.



The M25, QE2 bridge was the first landmark we passed soon after leaving Thurrock Y.C.

Approaching the Thames Barrier, with light signals clearly marking the channels.



Jacques on the helm after passing through the Thames Barrier.



The distinctive Millennium Dome – situated on a promontory in a loop in the river.



The Royal Naval College with the Greenwich meridian obelisk in the top background.



Tower Bridge being raised as we approach – though not for our benefit!!

We didn't always keep on the correct side of the river, taking short cuts across any bend . for which a boat following was reprimanded, we were later informed!

We moored up to a motor cruiser also waiting to enter St Katherine's Dock, with the skipper kindly agreeing to take photos of Spree Lady sailing with Tower Bridge in the background. We were fortunate in being able to raise our mainsail for the first time in two days to get the desired pictures. No sooner had this been done than the signal sounded for entry into the lock gates.



Moored up in St Katherine's Dock alongside some of very expensive and elegant craft.



Spree Lady, with the iconic Tower Bridge featured in the background.

For the first time on our trip we were charged for our overnight stay and our designated berth amongst the extravagant yachts reminded Jacques of a similar situation in Antibes on a cruise that we had made together along the French Riviera. Our boat tent made a rather incongruous site amid the luxury yachts around us, a fact that seemed to make us a much greater focus of interest.

We celebrated the successful end of our trip with a fine meal at a nearby restaurant and finished the evening with a tot of whisky, brought along for the occasion. It was a most treasured and memorable occasion to mark the completion of a series of epic trips from London to Helsinki.

Ralph Roberts W9885

Section 2 - Southwold (Suffolk) to Esbjerg, Denmark

Sailed in June 1998 with crew Cedric Clarke (UK)

Time taken: 9 days Distance sailed: 390 mls



Just you tell em to stay right where they are my dear, there's a gale blowing and it's coming their way . the Yarmouth lifeboats been out 3 times already+ This was the message given by the Great Yarmouth Coastguard to Cedric's wife, after asking her to report our safe arrival in Den Helder. We had brought forward our departure from Southwold by 18 hours due to these forecasted gales, and in the favourable south-westerly wind conditions, we had arrived in Den Helder with time to spare.

Day 1 - This was to be Spree Lady's maiden cruise, having bought her as the latest design of Wayfarer just 6 months previously. Packing all the gear needed for the 120Nm open sea crossing took rather longer than planned, and it was 22.30h by the time we were ready to depart. Bob and Clare Harland had agreed to accompany us in their own newly acquired Wayfarer World, and had telephoned the local Coastguard station to confirm our final passage plan and request the latest weather forecast.



Spree Lady moored at Southwold Sailing Club's pontoon.

The forecast had given us westerly winds up to Force 5, with a complex low pressure system and gale force winds expected 48 hours later. With sufficient assurance of arriving in Den Helder before the gale, we decided to set sail. A reach out of the harbour was followed by some easy sailing in the offshore winds. Once away from the protection of the land however, the wind and sea state steadily increased until a reef was needed in the main. Unknown to Cedric and I at the time, this activity had made Bob thoroughly seasick. It was not until dawn that we noticed that there was no sign of Bob, with Clare continuing to helm stoically without a break.



Bob and Clare Harland sailing Sea Rocket in strong winds and big waves to Den Helder.



Clare Harland helming Sea Rocket on genoa only with Bob recovering from seasickness.

Day 2 - By the early dawn we were surfing along at over 6kts on a near dead run in very strong winds. It seemed prudent to take the main down to sail on the genoa only. Bob and Clare followed suit, with Bob raising sufficient energy to do so, only to collapse again immediately afterwards. We continued on genoa only throughout the morning, surfing along comfortably in the big seas, with our speed only dropping to 5kts. Our new Wayfarer Worldsq proving every bit as seaworthy as their predecessors, bucking and rearing over the passing waves like an untamed colt, giving us confidence that it could cope with virtually all but the most extreme conditions.

When the occasional wave broke as we neared its peak, showering us with spray, any water that came aboard disappeared from the self-draining cockpit in a matter of seconds. I regretted not having a waterproof throwaway camera, as I invariably seemed to miss the best shots of the largest waves breaking. It was inevitably too late by the time I had got my camera out of the waterproof container. Just as we neared the halfway point of our crossing, we were caught in a rainstorm. Strong winds can be coped with in good spirits, but rain makes sailing particularly unpleasant and rather depressing, especially without any shelter.



The best shot that it proved possible to take of the huge waves we experienced during our trip.

We were not the only ones to feel bedraggled, for just as the rain was beginning to ease, a racing pigeon landed on the foredeck. It looked exhausted, and allowed me to pick it up and put it under the thwart, so that it was in a somewhat less precarious position. A couple of hours later it had recovered sufficiently to object to me clearing up the mess it had made in my new boat, and hopped up onto the mainsheet block to fly off. I wished it well, but was not optimistic about its chances of survival.



A racing pigeon, identifiable by its rings, on the foredeck.



Cedric, asleep on the side seats and boom, and in a rather precarious position that required a safety line.

During the day the wind eased occasionally, allowing us to raise a reefed main. But a few hours later it would increase sufficiently to warrant taking it down again. This activity didn't help Bob, whose seasickness was causing him real problems. I was amazed at how Clare had managed to keep going for so long without falling asleep at the helm. She had been continuously awake for over 30 hours, much of that time helming in extremely demanding conditions. It is essential for the success of any extended dinghy cruise for both crew to be experienced helms, and to cope on the helm for so long was beyond anything that I could ever have managed.

Around this time Cedric also succumbed to a bout of sea-sickness, but after a few hours of sleep and then resting quietly for a while, he completed his recovery by helming, as this helped him concentrate his focus on the horizon. I was thankful that unlike Bob, he had been able to recover quickly.

The wind dropped considerably as we approached the main shipping route off the Dutch coast - just at the very time we needed to make good speed. We put up a full main and genoa for the first time since leaving Southwold, but progress was still too slow to offer the manoeuvrability to deal with a constant stream of ships. Clare accepted a tow using my outboard to clear the shipping lane. We motored out of the path of a vessel coming from the north before the wind picked up to allow us to continue under sail only. I packed the outboard back in the boat again.



Sea Rocket being towed across the shipping lane.

The wind continued to blow steadily to give us good speed through the second, North going shipping lane. This proved to be fortunate, since we encountered an even greater number of ships, and it was much easier to negotiate a safe passage under sail than would have been possible towing Clare with the outboard. The wind gradually increased again after exiting the shipping lane, making it necessary for us to take down the main and sail under genoa only again in the increasingly big seas. This was done to ensure a safe passage for both boats during the night.



Sailing in big seas under genoa only in the early evening.

Day 3 - Just after midnight, we picked up the sequence of light flashes from Den Helder lighthouse, which was a most welcome sight in the bleak darkness of night. Sea Rocket's masthead light had ceased to work the previous night, and with Bob on the helm, having recovered from his seasickness to give Clare a well earned rest, they had disappeared from sight without the moonlight of the previous night to see them. In the early morning light around 04.00, we approached the shallow water of the Noorderhaaks sandbank, blocking the direct route into Den Helder. The ominous sound of breaking waves on the sandbank signalled the obstacle ahead. Reluctant to turn north to go round the top of the island, I decided it should be possible to get through the area of lumpy sea directly ahead as it looked no worse than conditions I had often experienced off Southwold. What I didn't take into account, and never even imagined, was that the onshore winds would meet an offshore breeze in this area of water, providing us with too little drive to sail through at this point. Without the outboard readily available to get us back to safety, the tide quickly took us into a shallower, and much more treacherous area.

We were soon in amongst some horrendous breaking waves, which would suddenly appear around us with a roar and thunder, before crashing down with furious pent-up energy that could have easily engulfed our small boat. In my tired and anxious-to-get-ashore state, I had made a monumental error of judgement by deciding to cross the shallow water and whilst it was a decision I now bitterly regretted, it was too late to rectify. By more luck than judgement, we managed to avoid an actual breaking wave. This was entirely down to chance, since whilst trying to avoid the worst areas of breaking water, thundering waves would often suddenly erupt around us, in places where previously there had been only extremely rough, but non-breaking water.

It was a welcome relief when deeper, calmer waters appeared directly ahead, though the Sea Gods, as if to act as a warning, decided not to let us escape completely unscathed. A metre high wave, less than half the height of the previous waves we had encountered, suddenly reared up to our starboard. With both Cedric and I sitting well out so as not to present the hull to the wave, (which would have resulted in the boat being turned turtle - as learned from my days as a canoeist), the wave crashed over us, dashing the centreplate and rudder against the sea bottom and completely filling the boat with water. It was a heart stopping experience that I would never want to repeat. We were both totally drenched, though to our continued good fortune, there had been just sufficient depth for the hull not to be dumped on the hard sand below, which, with the considerable weight of water it now contained, would have resulted in serious damage to the boat. The situation of the centreboard and rudder swinging up into their fully raised position was easily rectified.

Once in deeper, calmer water, it was possible to put the outboard on the transom bracket to enable us to motor through the Marsdiep channel towards Den Helder. Our thoughts then turned to Bob and Clare, and we wondered how they had fared in their approach to Den Helder.



The strong tides in the Marsdiep indicated by the sloping mark.

Bob, having fully recovered from his seasickness, was in a far better mental state to take a much more rational approach to the situation. After taking a GPS fix, and plotting it on the chart, he decided on the safer option of sailing round the north end of the sandbank, and through the Molengat channel. With no motor to assist him, he immediately crossed over to the mainland to avoid being swept past Den Helder on the strong flood tide. It had been a great relief to see the top of Bob and Clare's sail in the main channel on their approach to the harbour.

We had been able to direct them to the marina, and we were both delighted at having successfully completed the crossing. We had sailed the 120Nm. open sea trip in just under 31 hours, giving us an average speed of almost 4kts. Cedric phoned home to report our safe arrival to the coastguard and his wife got back with the reply mentioned at the beginning of this account. We had arrived at Den Helder in a state of extreme tiredness, particularly Clare, who had helmed continuously for at least 28 hrs, and been awake for a further 15 hrs prior to that. This was an unimaginable achievement that would have been way beyond my endurance. Having first made good use of the superb facilities of the nearby Naval YC with a welcome shower, it was almost mid-morning by the time we had sorted out the various formalities of a berth to stay for the following night.

Unfortunately, we had arrived on the very day the local naval base were putting on a sea and air display to entertain thousands of visitors. We had only just completed clearing out most of the gear from the boats, putting up our boat tents, and getting our heads down to sleep when the loud background music started up for the naval display. But we were far too tired for anything to keep us awake - well nearly anything; I did wake in the early afternoon when a four engined aircraft started making low level sorties directly overhead, but I'm not sure even that woke Clare.

The strong gale force winds that had been forecast duly arrived late that afternoon. But this was no problem for us, and we were only too happy to retreat back into our boat tents and catch up on some more sleep, the display now finished. The timing of the gale could hardly have been more fortuitous for the show's organisers, and for us, the noise of the gale was almost relaxing in comparison to the previous racket. We slept very soundly that night, warm and snug inside our boat tents and sleeping bags.



Den Helder is the main base for the Dutch Naval Fleet and there was a large fleet of all types of ships in the harbour.

Day 4 - The gale blew steadily all through the night, but had abated somewhat by next morning and it was marginal as to whether it would be sensible to run on jib only to our next proposed stop at Terschelling. The decision not to venture out was made by Bob, who felt that it would be better to get the tear in the luff of his sail repaired properly by a local sailmaker, rather than carry out a makeshift repair which wouldn't last, particularly as there would be less chance of finding a sailmaker to do the job properly later on.



Sea Rocket and Spree Lady moored in Den Helder.



The German yacht Hexe, rescued by the local lifeboat.

We found ourselves in luck from the misfortune (or rashness) of another yacht. A high tech racing yacht on its way to Cowes week to compete as part of the German team had tried to sail/motor against the full force of the gale during the previous night, and had been towed into Den Helder after putting out a distress call. It looked as though they'd had an even wetter sail than ourselves, with all their bedding and gear hung out on their enormous boom to dry. Specialists had been immediately called in to make essential repairs.

The local sailmaker called in by the German yacht willingly picked up Bob's mainsail at the same time, bringing it back fully repaired some hours later and taking a great interest in our adventurous trip. With the day being generally fine and sunny, we used the opportunity to hang our sailing gear out to dry, and sorted our various items of other gear, spreading it out along the walkway, finger jetties, and adjacent boats. Yachtsmen passing by usually expressed great amazement that so much equipment could be stored in such a small boat!



Our wet gear, spread out to dry on any convenient spot.

Day 5 - The previous night's gale had blown through without bothering us too much, but the next night had been far less pleasant. Thunder and lightning had accompanied the very strong winds, with rain so heavy that drips of water penetrated through the fabric of the tent. A plastic survival bag was quickly spread over our sleeping bags to keep us dry. The day continued to be wet and miserable with gale force winds and there was little alternative but stay put for another day. Two days of gale force winds seemed extreme weather for mid July, and meant that we were now way behind our intended schedule.

Day 6 - With a forecast of SW winds of F.4/5, we set off around mid-morning under reefed main and jib towards Terschelling, our next planned destination. The sailing on the Waddensea was a complete contrast to our sea crossing, and we soon shook out the reef and changed to a genoa for a more exhilarating sail. With the good wind and a strong flood tide assisting us, the GPS registered 8 to 10Kts. After about an hour of being accompanied by other boats enjoying the conditions, we left them to sail a more direct route over an area of shallow water towards Terschelling.



Bob and Clare sailing Sea Rocket out of Den Helder.

We did hit one particularly shallow area to find ourselves skidding over the sandy bottom with both rudder and centreboard up, and immediately retreated into deeper waters. West Terschelling was reached just after 14.30, a distance of 30Nm, which we had achieved in less than 5 hours. It seemed possible that we might be able to get as far as Nes on the island of Ameland before stopping for the night, a distance we would not normally expect to achieve in one day. We were aware however that we would be fighting an ebb tide on reaching the next island, and would need to keep to the main channels. These weren't always easy to find, even though we had detailed charts of the area, and often needed to use the depth sounder . our centreboard . to warn us when the water started to get rather too shallow for us.



Marker buoys seemed widely spaced apart, and channels were often best marked by the various vessels using them.

We encountered working vessels and large pleasure craft as we approached Ameland, and these proved to be of great help in guiding us through the deeper channels. We eventually reached Nes just after 19.30; covering a distance of well over 50 Nm . quite an amazing distance to sail in one day. The channel into the harbour became ever narrower in the falling tide, but the marina was safely reached without difficulty. Completing the formalities with the harbourmaster, we set up our boat tents and went to the marina restaurant for a meal just before it closed.

Day 7 - It had been agreed that our final destination of Rantzausminde, where the International Wayfarer Rally was being held, would be reached by different routes. Bob and Clare aimed to complete their trip by staying inside the Friesian Islands, and sail via the Kiel canal to the island of Fyn, with Cedric and I arriving in time for the start of the rally by sailing the direct sea route to Esbjerg to meet up with a car and trailer, and trail the boat overland to the event. It was at Nes that we decided to go our separate ways.



Sea Rocket (with tent) and Spree Lady moored at Nes.



Bob and Clare setting off from Nes just after Low Water.

Bob and Clare packed up next morning in their usual efficient manner, and were away an hour or so after Low Water. They greatly impressed the harbourmaster, who watched them negotiate their way through the channels on the rising tide until he could no longer see them through his binoculars. They were to report later that sailing the Waddensea at low water was an interesting experience, since all that could be seen were the mud banks either side of the various channels. Cedric and I waited a further hour for deeper water before venturing out.

The channel was clearly marked and easy enough to follow to begin with, but we appeared to miss the route channel markers at the exit to a larger expanse of deeper water, and getting out to sea proved more difficult than I had anticipated. A GPS and detailed chart proved to be essential for navigation as areas of shallow, breaking water kept appearing around us - quite often ahead and to seaward - and it took an hour or more before we were able to break free of the many sandbars and set a course for Borkum.



Navigating out of the Waddensea with a chart to hand.

We enjoyed an easy sail with a favourable tide to the next Island of Schiermonnikoog, but it became apparent before we had reached its most easterly point that the tide had turned, with our progress slowing considerably. With another 15Nm to go against the ever increasing tidal flow, it was necessary to press the outboard into service to increase our speed. It also proved an excellent opportunity to try out our new asymmetric spinnaker for the first time, as this proved rather easier to manage sailing downwind than having the mainsail gybing intermittently.

Borkum lighthouse eventually appeared on the horizon and we made good progress until we reached the Ems estuary, which proved a very uncomfortable crossing in a wind over tide situation. We entered the marina on the most southern point of the island just after 23.00, and set up our boat tent as quickly and quietly as we could.



Sailing with spinnaker only along the Friesian Islands.



Cedric on the helm whilst motor sailing to Borkum.

The crew of the Dolphin, tied up on the adjacent pontoon.



The view of Borkum on the horizon in the late evening.

It proved difficult to unload our gear onto the rather creaky finger pontoon with any degree of quietness, but that done and our boat tent erected for the night, we were pleased to get our heads down for a well earned rest.



Day 8 - The next morning, refreshed after a good night's sleep, we started sorting out the mess we had left everything in the previous evening, and put out our wet sailing clothing over the boat moored adjacent to us. It wasn't until the two crew emerged later that we realised the yacht wasn't quite as vacant as we had presumed! We immediately apologised for draping our gear over virtually every convenient rail, but they didn't mind at all and invited us aboard to share a coffee, being most interested in our venture. They couldn't have been any more hospitable and it was difficult to make excuses to leave, but we needed to finish packing the boat and get away on the last of the ebb, so we finally exchanged addresses and made a hasty exit from the cabin.

The harbourmaster had given Cedric a forecast of a south westerly breeze, F.3 to 4, which couldn't have been more ideal. It seemed almost too good to be true . and so it proved to be! We were also told of a channel around the south of Borkum, sufficiently deep for our shallow draft boat to get out to sea, and thereby shorten our journey a little. Unfortunately we hadn't gone a mile or so before it became too shallow to go further. We turned round to pull the boat back through the ever receding water in the channel, and eventually managed to reach deeper water.



Aground in the southern channel around Borkum.



The crowded beach at the holiday resort of Borkum.

It was early afternoon before we finally cleared the shallow water off Borkum and were able to set a course for Esbjerg. The intention had been to cross the two shipping lanes in daylight. It now seemed unlikely that we would clear the second lane before darkness.

Hugging the shoreline closely against the strong flood tide, it proved to be a slow sail out of the Ems estuary. The decision to try to cut a relatively short distance off our trip had cost us 2½ hours of valuable time - not the best of starts for the most demanding leg of our trip to Denmark.

Cedric on the helm in calm seas off the German coast.



On a more positive note, the weather was fine and sunny, with a good F.4 south-westerly wind. In fact, the conditions could hardly have been more perfect and sailing on a full main and genoa, we had high hopes of a relatively easy sail to Esbjerg. In such conditions, it seemed worth hoisting the spinnaker to get all 3 sails in action, which increased our speed from 4 to 5 kts . at one point planing on with the crest of a small wave for nearly a full minute. It was one of the highlights of the trip.

Reaching the channel markers for the beginning of the first shipping lane, we found our earlier hopes of an easy sail to Esbjerg were far too optimistic. A period of heavy rain started and the wind strengthened. The spinnaker was taken down for safety to allow for greater manoeuvrability in the shipping lane. No ships had been



***Making use of all 3 sails
off the coast of Borkum.***

seen on the horizon as we had made our approach, but 5 appeared just as we began our crossing. We erred on the side of safety and changed course to steer in the same direction until they had passed. No further ships were then encountered.

Approaching the shipping lane in deteriorating conditions.

The light drizzle continued into the evening and sailing conditions worsened further with increasing winds requiring a reef to be put in the main. It became apparent when approaching the second shipping lane that our delayed start meant that we would be crossing in virtual darkness. This had certainly not been our intention, and was far from ideal, though we had no option but to keep going. The increasing blackness of the night was matched by a greater wind strength and the genoa was furled completely to continue on reefed main only to give us some manoeuvrability should we need to avoid any shipping. It was with some relief that we saw the lights of only one vessel in the distance whilst crossing this lane. On completing the crossing, the wind increased steadily to near gale force . at least F.7 . it's difficult to tell when it's too dark to see anything! It was an easy decision to take down the fully reefed main and sail during the night under jib only for safety.

Day 9 - Having opted to take the first watch, Cedric woke me just after midnight to take over the helm. It was not only raining heavily, but obvious from the howl of the wind through the rigging that its strength had increased to a full gale. It had also become very cold, and we were both thankful we had on plenty of thermal layers to keep us warm. My immediate concern on taking the helm was a constant, quick flashing white light, appearing to be in the near distance to the east. In my tired state and in the appalling conditions of complete darkness, I didn't feel the least bit motivated to get out my GPS, almanac and chart to check what it might be, and eventually decided the safest course of action would be to change the jib onto the other tack, and steer a more northerly course to give us plenty of sea room.

It had been reassuring after changing course to see the light disappearing into the distance, and I was only later to learn that the light was most likely that of a submarine on the surface . its other lights obscured by the brightness of the oscillating white light. (With there being a submarine exercise area marked on the chart between the two shipping lanes, it seemed possible that a submarine on exercise had picked us up on its radar and was tracking us, until I had decided to change course out to sea to move away from it). A couple of hours later . we didn't do strict watches, when one of us felt too tired to helm any more, we would just wake the other to take over, which sometimes might mean helming for longer than 2 hours, and sometimes less . Cedric took over the helm and at some point later I was awoken abruptly by a wave breaking over the boat which completely drenched me. Water poured down my neck making me both wet and cold, and I had no further inclination to sleep for the rest of the night. The newly designed Wayfarer ~~W~~Worldqhowever performed brilliantly in this situation, with the boatfull of water draining through the self-bailers in just a few minutes until it was completely empty again. It had been a relief that we had been sailing on jib only, for capsizing at night in the horrendous conditions we were experiencing at the time could easily have been fatal. The wind strength was impossible to be sure of in the pitch darkness, but if the way we were being tossed around in the sea like a cork and the shrieking of the wind through the rigging was anything to go by, it was at least a F.8. *(See postscript at end)

Although I had put on an extra layer of clothing after being drenched during the night, I was still cold and wet, so it was a welcome relief when the sun made an appearance on the horizon to at last feel some warmth penetrating my body. The wind had abated and the sea calmed down during the morning, so we decided to hoist a reefed main. Whilst standing to do so, a wave lifted the bow of the boat, causing me to fall backwards and smash the back of my head against the end of the tiller. Thankfully I was wearing a canoe crash hat and was only stunned. Had I not been wearing the crash hat, it is likely I would have suffered a fatal injury. Not my opinion, but that of Cedricsq a practising G.P. at the time, (now retired).



The morning sun on the horizon – with a foreboding red sky.



Wave tops breaking as we surf along on an exhilarating broad reach in the open sea of the German Bight.

The wind increased gradually during the morning and we found ourselves speeding along on a broad reach at up to 8 kts (being the reading on our GPS). Just as I had thought about taking the main down again, we broached, and with water pouring in over the gunwhale, we only just managed to avoid a capsize. The main was taken down immediately and not used again until we reached the more sheltered waters of Esbjerg. Changing the jib over to the genoa, the GPS still registered 5 to 6 kts . quite fast enough.

By mid morning the island of Westerland appeared on the horizon, and the sight of land was a great reassurance. The sky above however indicated deteriorating weather which was rather less than welcome. We steered a course a little closer to land, so that if we couldn't reach Esbjerg by 18.00, then a nearer port or safe haven would be sought.



Photos taken during the day of the deteriorating weather conditions and the enormous waves – not readily apparent in the photos, but 20m high.

Our GPS based position showed that at our present speed (6kts), we would make Esbjerg before our deadline. The wind increased again by mid-day, possibly gusting as much as F.8 . it was difficult to judge in such strong winds and big seas. We changed the genoa down to jib size to sail through the biggest waves I have ever experienced.



The distinctive tall white tower of Esbjerg in the distance.

Cedric settled down for a sleep, having been on the helm for most of the morning. He awoke an hour or so later to look around and see the tall white chimney of Esbjerg in the distance. I hadn't noticed it, being more concerned with helming through the waves and reading the compass bearing. It had however been a stirring sight against the ever more ominous skies above. The now definite prospect of reaching our destination caused a good degree of elation . though at that point we still had a further 20 Nm. to go.

There had seemed little need, or opportunity, to take another bearing for the next few hours as we surfed along under jib only at speeds of 6kts and more towards Esbjerg. It was only as we approached the island of Fanø that it was appreciated that closing the coast as a useful insurance against the weather deteriorating was now to our disadvantage. It was evident that the strong onshore winds had created an area of turbulent water far further out from the shallows off the island of Fanø than I had expected from my chart.



Approaching the Ho Bugt Sailing Club, north of Esbjerg.



Anchored at journey's end, with an ominous sky backdrop.

We hardened up the jib to get as far to seaward of the rough water ahead as was possible. With only a small foresail available however, it was too late to avoid the area completely, and for some 15 minutes, the boat was tossed about in the short steep waves like an item of clothing in a washing machine. Reaching the safety of the deep water channel into Esbjerg between the headland and Fanø, we turned north to make for the Ho Bugt Sailing Club, where a Danish Wayfarer friend, Jens Konge Rasmussen had kindly arranged for us to make use of its facilities.

We managed to reach the Club slipway just 20 minutes before our target of 18.00, and only 4 hours before a severe, F.10 gale blew through. We had covered the 140 Nm. from Borkum in 28 hours at an average speed of 5 kts; over half of the distance on jib or genoa only. We had arrived tired, hungry, wet, and bumsore, with my fingers swollen from salt water getting into cuts and grazes. But the exhilaration of completing the trip made any small level of discomfort more than worthwhile.

Ralph Roberts W9885

Postscript.

Bob and Clare also successfully reached Rantzausminde, though they had a narrow escape from disaster when a cruiser giving them a tow through the Kiel canal, had stopped to refuel. A manoeuvring coaster just missed their boat, and smashed into, and crushed, the 3 yachts moored immediately behind them. It would have been a bitter irony for them, had they been a little further back, to have survived crossing the North Sea, only to come to grief in what one would regard as a much safer stretch of water. They managed to sail around 30 Nm. most days, and were holed up for only one day in Wangerooge with the bad weather we experienced.

* We learnt later from the crew aboard the German yacht Dolphin in Borkum that the weather during the night was so bad that they were barely able to sleep whilst they were moored up in the harbour.