

## How We Enjoyed a Summer in France

(Without Crossing The Pond)

It was a beautiful clear day with winds of 15-20 knots from the northwest when we left the RNSYS dock aboard *Aisling I* on July 3, 2006, but before I had even filed the sailplan winds had dropped to 8 knots. The weather remained clear as we motor-sailed up the Eastern Shore about 8 miles off the coast, and sunset brought a beautiful starlight night with a quarter moon. With Bonnie sleeping below, I was completely alone until I spotted stern lights slowly converging on our course. At 2230, a sailboat crossed ahead of us by less than 500', and 20 minutes later I received a call on the VHF from the startled Quebec skipper, who had been below decks as our vessels passed.



**St Peters Canal**

Bonnie took her watch at midnight, just as the moon set and the sky filled with even more stars. The rest of the trip was beautiful and uneventful, and we arrived at the locks in St Peters at 13:45 on July 4<sup>th</sup> having motor sailed most of the way in 5-10 knots of clocking southwest wind. We locked through, tied up on the other side, and, after showers and lunch, walked into the town to buy a few last-minute provisions. By 1630 we were underway for

Damions Cove, where we tucked in between McNabs Island and Joe Sampson Island in 12' of water and nice thick mud. With the anchorage entirely to ourselves, we cooked a delicious meal, had drinks on the "after deck", and admired the beauty around us.

The next day we woke to foggy surroundings and followed a 120' power yacht through the Barra Strait to Maskell's Harbour, where we took advantage of the CCA mooring. The crew of the power boat made a brief foray ashore, and then departed, leaving us again alone in the anchorage, with the exception of a huge bald eagle standing guard over the cove. Although we had visited this cove many times, we were amazed anew at the incredible beauty of the Bras d'Or lakes.

Much of the day was spent cleaning and readying the boat for the journey to St. Pierre, and at 1530 we sailed to Baddeck, where we anchored off the wharf and were met by our son Christopher. A 30 minute car ride took us to Bonnie's mother's house at Cape Dauphin, at the mouth of Great Bras d'Or, for a home-cooked supper and a few days of family visiting.



**Maskells Harbour.....** courtesy Ron Sabash

The evening of July 7<sup>th</sup> was spent relaxing on Aisling with Christopher, listening to a search and rescue operation on the VHF and awaiting our remaining crew. Wally Fraser, Martha Reynolds and Nancy Lewis finally arrived at 1 a.m., armed with more bags, food and wine than we thought possible to fit in a Volkswagen (or in Aisling for that matter!). As Bonnie fruitlessly tried to convince the crew to leave some of the wine behind, we gradually got everything stowed, and managed to retire to our bunks just before 2 a.m. The following day, after visiting the Baddeck Co-Op for even more provisions, we said good-bye to Christopher and headed up the Great Bras D'or to Otter Harbour to wait for the current to turn. After a brief encounter with a rogue shallow spot in the cove, we sat down to an appetizer of Cape Breton lobster sandwiches, and dined on a delicious lasagna and salad.

We departed Otter Harbour on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2006 at 1 minute after midnight and sailed under the Seal Island Bridge with Bonnie and I on watch and the others below. Our near-miss with the grounding had left us spooked, but the channel was well marked and the night was clear, with wind out of the southwest at 22 knots true. With perfect weather for the Cabot Straight crossing, the trip was quick and uneventful, with only two vessels sighted during the night (one being, predictably, the Marine Atlantic ferry to Newfoundland). Our watch system of 3 hours on and 4 and ½ hours off allowed us to stay well- rested, and the more fortunate crew members were awake at 1300 when a large pod of dolphins danced through the waves around *Aisling* for over 15 minutes! ,

With favourable winds, we arrived in St. Pierre at 04:20, four hours earlier than predicted, in thick fog and total darkness. Since this was our first time in St Pierre, we opted to anchor outside and wait for daylight. We dropped the anchor in 30' in very poor-holding, rocky ground at 46 47.35N and 56 09.66. As dawn broke, we slowly poked our way into the harbor, not really knowing where to go. Eventually we saw the wharf of L'Ecole de Voile, with Joseph Soltesz, a French Literature professor and writer from Montreal, waiting on the dock to grab our lines. Joseph had been stranded on St Pierre when the engine of his Kelt 39, *Furlane*, died just as he was leaving St. Pierre Harbour for the Azores. Within an hour



**Bastille Day, St Pierre**

*Furlane* for dinner, and, as often happens on these trips, we made a wonderful new friend! Over the next few days we greatly enjoyed each others company: exchanging stories, cooking on board, depleting our wine supplies and practicing our French.

The islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon are the only remaining French holding in North America, and the clearing-in process was a great experience in French bureaucracy, with

separate visits from Customs and military representatives. Because of the imminent arrival of the boats from the Route St Pierre race, the Harbour Master assigned us a berth near the town square, which was both a blessing and a curse during the Bastille Day celebrations.



**Francois**

The town of St. Pierre is picturesque and charming, with houses nestled on rocky terrain and numerous small businesses along narrow streets reminiscent of Europe or St. Barths. With Aisling safely at dockside, our first priorities were to obtain some euros and find the local patisserie! Nancy and Rick mounted a reconnaissance mission, and returned with croissants and pain au chocolate for all!

For three days we explored the town, socialized with the Route St. Pierre racers and enjoyed the local scenery and ambience. The spoken French in the town seemed similar to Parisian, and easy to understand. With a fully stocked grocery store within walking distance of the dock, we were able to supplement our galley stores of the few items that had been depleted. (Fresh milk, which was not available in any of the smaller shops, was available at the grocery store for those willing to pay the rather shocking price.) The specialty wine shop was also of great interest to certain crew members, and a bottle of Calvaldos was added to the ships stores. Wally, Martha and Nancy also took a ferry ride to the small “Sailor’s island” and toured the museum and church.

The highlight of our visit was the “Fête Nationale” on July 14<sup>th</sup>, when the entire town square was crammed with citizens enjoying music, dancing, food and (it is France of course!) wine. We were warmly welcomed by the local residents, four of whom visited



**Hike to Charlie's Head, Francois**

ended with a waterfront fireworks display, and we drifted off to sleep at midnight to the sounds of the revelry continuing in the square.

Aisling for drinks in the afternoon. In the evening, we were invited to the home of Christine and Lionel Lanqueutin for champagne. Their beautiful home is located on the former site of the St. Pierre airport, with splendid water views and horses grazing in a nearby field. In spite of the fact that some of our party did not speak English and some spoke no French, we were able to communicate

well, and the conversation was lively. The evening

We reluctantly left St Pierre on July 15 at 07:00, bound for Fortune Newfoundland to clear Canadian customs. In Fortune, Erwin and Diane Wanderer on *Ocean Wanderer* arrived shortly after we did, and were able to clear customs immediately, by phone. I, on

the other hand, had to wait for officials to arrive because, in my “wisdom, I had obtained a CANPASS number and a Customs visit was required for the first use. But in the end all went smoothly, and we decided to make a brief foray up the dock into town to visit the local grocery store. Along the way we watch a fishing boat unloading cod into a large tub (an optimistic sight) and sighted what may very well have been the world’s largest Newfoundland dog.

We departed shortly thereafter for the eight hour trip to Francoise, an outpost on the SW coast of Newfoundland. Erwin Wanderer called as we approached to explain that the charts on his chart plotter were showing positions that were about 1,000 feet off from



*Aisling I* in Aviron Bay where they should be. Although typically we would be relying on our Maxsea program as the primary navigation tool, today we were back to the traditional paper charts, pencil, time, speed and distance calculations with the aid of GPS and bearings. This system took us directly to the center of the harbor entrance. We entered at dusk, frantically attempting to capture the incredible sight of the soaring cliffs with our digital cameras-and failing miserably. Once inside, we tied up next to Ocean Wanderer at the floating dock and enjoyed rum and cokes in the cockpit with Erwin and Diane and their son Adam.

Francois is a beautiful little village with no road access (nor any roads within the community) yet they have internet access, a doctor who visits once a week and a ferry that arrives daily with supplies and passengers. In the morning, after a breakfast of fresh muffins, we walked through town, past the two stores and to the cemetery, We then continued our hike along a system of well-constructed walkways and stairs to the top of Charlie’s Head. The view of the harbor entrance and the town below was breathtaking and vertigo-inducing, and we realized that we had reached a truly special spot.

From Francoise we sailed westward for Aviron Bay. With the wind from the southeast at 10 knots, we motor-sailed in sloppy chop to the entrance, which was easy to find even in the fog. Aviron Bay is deeper and longer than Francoise, with dramatic cliffs on either



**Entering Grey River**

side, soaring up into the fog. We motored toward the head of the bay, with water depths of 400’ and more under our keel, and entered a pool to the northwest. On the west side of the pool, a

tremendous 700 foot waterfall roars down



**Waterfall Aviron Bay**

from the top the mountain. We anchored in the pool in depths of 20-30’ and a gravel and mud bottom. It took a while to get the anchor to set but eventually it bit solidly enough



for us to stay two days. In spite of the fact that the weather remained rainy, foggy and cool, the majesty of the surroundings was awe-inspiring. We enjoyed a refreshing bath in the waterfall, and explored the nearby areas from the dingy.

On July 18<sup>th</sup> we headed west from Aviron to Grey River. The fog came in and out and the winds were southeast 15 with showers when we reached the challenging entrance. The entrance is very narrow (with a dog- leg west and then north at the beginning) and the tide can also create a chop if it is counter to the wind. We turned onto our course at buoy QJ, but in spite of visibility of 1000 feet or more, it was very difficult to see the entrance until we were right on top of it. This was yet another spectacular and even narrower entrance, with cliffs on each side rising to heights of about 1000 foot. Rather than stopping at Jerts



**Grey River SE Arm looking back**



**Grey River SE Arm anchorage**

cove, we decided to go to the head of the southeast arm . It seemed there were cascading water falls everywhere we looked! With fog rolling over the hills from the sea to the south and the sun peaking through to give us great shadows, the views were magnificent. It was a long run to the head, where the depth was 25' with a thick mud bottom. Fortunately, the sun came out to give us some drying time, and we launched the dingy to do a little exploring. There were

a few cottages on a pool just up the river, but no people in sight. I tried a few casts with

the fishing rod but had no bites even though fish appeared to be jumping on the other side. We spent the rest of the day relaxing, knowing that tomorrow we would be returning to Nova Scotia. We enjoyed a gourmet meal cooked by the crew, watched a movie and then prepared the navigation for the return trip, calculating that an 8:20 am departure from the anchorage would take us to the entrance at a favorable tide.

After a good sleep, we awoke to a calm, cloudy day on the arm. In spite of our careful planning, it was quite choppy at the entrance. Outside, it was foggy, with light winds, so we headed back to the QJ buoy and then made a bee line past the Ramea Islands and back to the Great Bras D'or and Baddeck. The wind eventually freshened, visibility improved, and through the night we made good time to weather under bright stars. As we approached the mouth of Great Bras d'Or at noon the next day, the temperature jumped about 15 degrees,



**Rick and Bonnie, on the way home**

and we traded our fleeces for shorts and sandals and slathered on sunscreen. It had been a memorable trip, but it was great to be back to summer in Nova Scotia!

The Maskells picture is courtesy Ron Sabash

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