

Monday, May 24. 2010

## **My first ocean passage**

Vespina, Ocean. Finally out in the ocean, water of the deepest blue. Sailing to the Islas Canarias was to be the test before the crossing of the Atlantic. Alone on Vespina for a week, with nothing around me but the ocean and the sky. A test for the ship, for sure. How will Vespina sail in the Atlantic? Will the waves be different from the Med? Will the wind-vane work? The autopilot? How useful is the solar panel ...? And a test for myself, too! Will I have to sit at the rudder again all the time? How will I handle the solitude? How will I sleep? Will I get sick? Will I enjoy the trip or get bored silly and hate it all the way? Have I maybe overestimated my endurance? It was important to get the answers to these questions before setting out to Brazil or the West Indies. But the questions were not at the top of my mind when I left Puerto Sherry. Despite my initial skepticism I had grown very fond of Puerto Sherry, and I can recommend it most warmly for anybody on his way in or out of the Med. And like in Almerimar and on Ibiza before, I had made many good friends there. But unlike in the other ports, these had not been other yachties like me, but locals. Which is not very common for such a short stay as mine, and I feel honored and thankful for the hospitality that I have received. So my heart ached at the thought of leaving them and lovely Andalusia behind. Topping lift having an affair with the wind generator. But Vespina has a charming way of freeing my mind from such troubles. As I was hoisting the main-sail one of the reef lines caught at the end of the boom. As I pulled on the halyard the end of the boom got lifted up together with the main sail. As a result the topping-lift (holds the boom level when no sail is up. German: Dirk) wasn't tight anymore and flying out to the rear, where it quickly wrapped itself tightly around the wind-generator. So I went back to the welcome-pontoon and spend an hour freeing the "Dirk". Great start! I left the port again, hoping that none of my new friends had seen the embarrassing incident. For a few hours everything looked fine. Beautiful weather and a perfect force 5 easterly. And even the wind-vane was working! But in the evening the wind quickly increased to force 9, and the wind-vane started making trouble again. A spanish AEGIS frigate. Tiring conditions. The original problem of the slipping cogwheel had been solved by my modifications in Puerto Sherry, but now new problems had come up. As the sun set and I reached the latitude of Cabo Trafalgar I was hanging out at the back trying to convince the wind-vane to do it's job. My new position added ferocious waves coming with the wind out of the Strait of Gibraltar to the fun, as well as a lot of commercial traffic, going both east and west. The prospect of threading my way through the lines of vessels at night was not great, but it had to be done. Fortunately the AIS display, which shows the speed and direction of vessels around me, proved to be every bit of help that I had hoped it would be. Traffic going in and out of the Strait of Gibraltar. Vespina in the middle. It was stressful nevertheless, and I grew tired quickly. But well after midnight there were still too many ships around to rest for a minute. I had to fight my way further south before I could even think of sleep. By four in the morning I was finally far enough away from the traffic to get some rest. I dropped the sails and went down to sleep for an hour, while Vespina danced in the waves. Would the whole trip be like that? I desperately hoped not. I love cable binders! When I woke up the situation hadn't changed much: lots of wind and lots of waves. But during the morning the wind dropped gradually as it changed to north-east and settled around force 5, plus-minus 2. Which meant I got to reef and un-reef quite a lot. Between reefing exercises I continued to fiddle with the wind-vane. Gradually I was able to eliminate each of the new problems with the simple help of string and cable-binders. And then I got incredibly lucky. I had gone down for a minute to get a tool. After descending the stairs I had closed the door behind me, which I always do when the weather is rough. Just as I had grabbed the hand-holds on the stairs to climb up again a wave hit Vespina from the side. Amidst a mighty clatter of pots and other things Vespina got tipped over heavily to starboard and the cockpit flooded all the way up to the winches. I stood completely baffled and looked out through the acryl door as Vespina righted herself again and the cockpit drained slowly of incredible amounts of water. Had the wave hit only seconds earlier or later I would have been thrown around down below, or out in the cockpit, and would have very likely hurt myself badly. Instead I was standing in the dry laughing. As the sun set I celebrated my luck and my success with the wind-vane with a drop (or two) of Macallan Whiskey and a chocolate bar. Then I reduced the sails and let the wind-vane steer for the rest of the night, while I settled into my routine of 10-minute-sleep/5-Minute-watch cycles. Wednesday was pretty much the same. North-easterly winds between force 3 and 7, and the wind-vane steering, which made me happy. But I was not totally satisfied. First of all there was still one issue with the wind-vane: It only works when the boat is not going much faster then 4 kn. If I put more sail up, Vespina develops a strong weather-helm (tendency to turn into the wind) and the wind-vane is unable to cope. And secondly I was still brooding over last day's lucky escape. If that wave had been much stronger, or followed by a second one, Vespina would have been rolled over just like Jeff's Beneteau a month ago. I took out my books about trimming, seamanship and boat construction and started reading. I read on through the night, and Thursday morning I felt a little wiser. I had read the books before, but now after 2600 nm (4600 km) on board of Vespina it made a lot more sense. After a little sleep and breakfast I grabbed my toolbox and went to work on the rigging. First I wanted to see if I could do something about the strong weather-helm. I tried all combinations of sail-area, and when that didn't improve the situation I tipped the mast forward and I bent it backwards and every time I tried again with the most promising sail configuration. But nothing helped. As soon as

Vespina heels over, which she does very quickly, all chances of using the autopilot or the wind-vane are gone. They only have a chance if I have just the genoa up and furled away so that Vespina doesn't heel over too much and the weather-helm is well below 10°, on the tiller. That gives me a speed of 4 to 4,3 knots. If I put more sail area up to go faster she heels more, which produces a weather-helm of 20° and more on the tiller. That is too much for the wind-vane and the autopilot. So it looks like Vespina likes it slow. Well, one thing I've learned in my life is that it's no good to argue with a lady. Slow it is then. Sailing ever onward. During the night to Friday the wind dropped well below force 3, which made all thoughts about speed academic anyway. The autopilot did a great job of steering, and I put all troubles out of my mind and relaxed. The sun was shining, the sky clear, and the sea a deep blue. Vespina was slowly but steadily making her way towards my destination, and I didn't have a care in the world. I sat on deck and enjoyed the scenery (or lack thereof), and suddenly an incredible feeling of peace and happiness settled over me. It lasted, and lasted. And the memory of all the trouble I went through from my start in November to this moment only made it the sweeter. As did the memory of all the friends I've made. It is a feeling that I have never experienced in this intensity before, and the solitude only makes it stronger. I begin to understand why some people sail around the world alone again and again. It is a feeling born of the ultimate solitude on a vast and apparently lifeless ocean. A feeling that cannot be found in a crowd, or on any other path walked upon by man. This I will carry forever in me. Saturday not much happened, except that the wind dropped for a few hours and I had to start the engine. The V-belt (Keilriemen) began to squeal and I tightened it. I cooked curry with tuna and rice, squashed some oranges, read a little, slept a little, studied Spanish, and wrote the first part of this entry. I also proved the theory that any organism will expand until it has consumed all available resources: I had cooked enough curry for two days, but manage to eat it all in only six hours. AIS info screen for a vessel. Cool, ey? In the night to Sunday I was very tired and tried something different: I hadn't seen any ships in two days, and decided that I could risk it to let the radar and the AIS look out while I sleep a littler longer: 30 minute intervals. I set a "safe zone" of 2nm radius around Vespina, and a "time to safe zone" of 24 minutes. That means the system should alarm me 24 minutes in advance if another vessel will pass within 2nm of Vespina. I was excited like a child and surprised that I could sleep at all. Around four in the morning a slight fog settled, and my vision was reduced to only a few hundred meters. "This thing better work", I thought. And it worked! At half past six the alarm woke me in the middle of a half-hour sleep period, because a ferry was on collision course. But far out still, and time enough for me to change my heading without stressing out. I would have seen the ferry in another 15 minutes myself without the alarm, because the fog had lifted again. But I was very relieved to find that it is actually working. And 24 minutes warning is better than 15 minutes. Awesome. Blister & dwarf power! Poser! The wind was still very light on Sunday, and it is about time that I got to test my Blister (cruising chute). The five times I had pulled it out of the bag so far, the wind had either increased or died completely, and I always had to put it back. But not today, and 20 minutes later I was sailing for the first time in my life with a Blister. Wow. Unfortunately it turned out that the wind was too light for the wind-vane to work. And also the autopilot had big troubles with the Blister. So when the sun got too hot and I wanted to get into the shade I had to put the Blister away again and start the engine. And still 65nm to go. I hoped that the wind would increase again soon, because I am not very fond of motoring. Approaching Puerto Calero in the evening the wind picked up again, and I set the genoa and sailed through the night. I was closer to land again, and I could smell the volcanic ash in the air. And feel it under my soles as it settled into the cockpit. I kept a tighter watch for fishing boats and ferries, but the night was very quiet. After dawn the wind died again, and I motored the last two hours into Puerto Calero. I've arrived on Lanzarote and successfully completed my first ocean passage. And surprisingly ... I didn't even break anything! Levantine Shearwater. I love my "Seabirds of the World" book. Unfortunately I didn't see any whales or dolphins on the way. But I saw a few turtles (which look from a distance like old plastic bags), Black Terns, Seagulls of course, and a wasp (!). No idea how she made it 100nm off the coast. But on the same day I had half a dune of sand in my cockpit, so maybe she had hitched a ride.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 06:03

A success!

Anonymous on May 25 2010, 08:19

thanks for a great lunch-time-reading. Is like a little holiday each time.

Anonymous on May 27 2010, 00:16