

Sunday, April 25. 2010

Planning the passage through the strait

View from the rock into the strait. When planning a trip through the Strait of Gibraltar it is important to get the timing right. Many skippers have ended up sailing for hours on the same spot, or even sailed backwards, because the currents were going the opposite way and they can be stronger than a small boat can sail. The currents through the strait own their strength to three facts: • The water level in the Mediterranean is some meters below that of the Atlantic, because water evaporates in the Med faster than all the waters from the rivers flow into it. This creates a constant current into the Mediterranean between 1 and 2 knots. • The wind creates a surface current, depending weather it is levante (easterly) or poniente (westerly). Tarifa, which lies in the middle of the strait, records more than 30 knots of wind on 300 days in the year. This makes the wind definitely a factor, and it is practically impossible to sail against the wind through the strait. • The tides. While they are negligible in the Mediterranean, the spring range is 3m on the western end of the strait, which adds to the current. Fortunately the tidal streams through the strait are well documented, so all I have to do is leave Gibraltar at the right time with the wind from the back (levante). And the weather forecast for the next weeks looks good too: Easterlies the whole week. The tidal streams are documented in my pilot book, and I couldn't find an online reference. Looking at the tidal stream charts it is relatively obvious that I need to be past Tarifa 2 hours before high water in Gibraltar. On the other hand, I should aim to get there not much earlier than 5 hours before HW Gibraltar in order to sail with the west-going current. The distance from Gibraltar to Tarifa is about 20nm, and Tarifa is 10nm into the strait. That translates into 5 hours of sailing, which means I have to leave Gibraltar 10 hours before high water. Because high water happens every twelve hours, this is the same as leaving 2 hours after high water. Next I have to look at the published tide tables for Gibraltar to get the times for high water. Today it will be at 13:49, which means I should leave shortly before 16:00. Hm, this would mean to reach Tarifa just at sunset, and sail the rest in the dark. I do not really want to do that. I want to take pictures! The next high water is at 02:00 in the morning, which means I would have to leave 3 hours before sunrise and sail in the dark until I am halfway to Tarifa. Damn, also not great. Because the hour of high water is getting later over time, it would be best to wait at least until Friday, when high water is at 04:55 in the morning. Fortunately the boat that reserved the berth I am in is late and will not arrive for another week, so I could stay here that long. On the other hand, who knows what the weather will do until then? Sail today into the night, or wait a few days and sail in the morning. Both options are not ideal, but I could live with either of them. At moments like this I wish for a second hand on board, just to talk things through and swing the decision either way.

Posted by Axel Busch at 02:17

the wind blows at Tarifa for sure, this is why it is one of a famous kite surf spot. I just wanted to sit on the beach and watch impossible as it was like in a sandblast ... maybe you should stop there to try
Anonymous on Apr 26 2010, 23:21