

Tuesday, December 29, 2009

Maiden Voyage

Arthur in his 7m l'ImprÃ©vu. Approaching the Spanish coast after 30 hours. What a trip! I set sail on Sunday at 9am, and 20 minutes later, before I've even left the relative shelter of the industrial harbor I had the mainsail on second reef and the genoa furled mostly in. Arthur had left the shipyard half an hour before me. At 2pm I saw him coming the other way. Over radio he told me that the waves outside of the Golfe Du Fos were too big and he was afraid for his boat and the new rigging. I decided to continue on. Later I measured 25kn wind from NW in the cockpit (6 Bft), and I furled the Genoa away completely and set the self-tacking jib. I had no luck with the tiller-autopilot: a wave ripped it's wooden mounting to pieces. I also couldn't get the wind vane to work. So I trimmed the sails until Vespina held more-or-less course with a lashed rudder. Around 8pm the wind dropped to about 4 Bft and I slept for half an hour sitting in the cockpit. Then it was back to work, because the wind began to change frequently up and down the scale, and I was busy reefing and unreefing the main and changing from Genoa to jib to storm-jib and back. With a rough sea (5) balancing on the foredeck in the dark was not very easy, but a cloudless night and almost full moon shone enough light to work with. Needless to say that I was tied to Vespina with my life line at all times. Around 3am the wind changed to S, and in the distance I could see that it brought plenty of clouds. At the time I had the mainsail in the first reef and the genoa furled mostly out. But I had a funny feeling, and decided to put the main into the second reef, furl in the genoa and set the storm-jib. I also doubled-checked that everything was ok and secure inside. Then I ate and drank a little, changed into my warmest jacket, and waited. A little later it became utterly dark and the wind and waves increased very quickly. Vespina was rocked thoroughly and plenty of spray was blown into the cockpit from the sides. I was glad for the shelter that the steel sprayhood provided from the froth that swept over the deck. Earlier I had seen lights of cargo vessels a few miles away to the south and west, but now I couldn't make them out any more. Not being able to see worried me a little, and I turned on the working light, which bathed the deck and the foresail in a harsh light. This way at least other boats had a chance to see me. By this time it was 5am. I realized that I had done everything I could do, and now there was nothing left but to wait it out. For a while I watched the spectacle that happened around me. From the sea state the wind speed must have been well over 30kn, probably a low 8 Bft. I looked at my hand-anemometer, but I was too tired to hold it into the air and so can't say for sure. I felt very secure tied to Vespina, and anyway 8 Bft is pretty uncomfortable, but not something to worry too much about on a ship like Vespina. So I wedged myself tighter into the cockpit, set my alarm to 30 minutes and slept. After 30 minutes I had a look around, but the scenery hadn't changed much: very dark and plenty of water in the sea and in the air. I slept for another 30 minutes, and another ... until when I woke up at 7:30am the night was gone and with it the clouds and the wind. I had just spent my first night ever alone at sea. For half an hour I sat totally mesmerized by the scenery. No sign of land or other ships could be seen. The sun shone, the sky was blue and almost cloudless again, and nothing remained but a pretty rough sea (which annoyed me until well into the afternoon). After a total of 36 hours and 120nm I reached the marina of La Escala at 9pm on Monday night. After docking and checking Vespina over quickly (a little water in the bilge, but everything ok) I prepared my first hot meal in two days. Then I crawled into my sleeping bag and slept for ten hours .

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 11:33

Sunday, December 27. 2009

To Spain!

Finally a decent weather forecast for the next 24 hours: Winds 2 to 5 Bft veering from NW to S, a moderate sea and only little rain with reasonable visibility. So today I will finally set sail for Spain, with destination La Escala. I hope to do the 120nm in 25 to 30 hours. I've downloaded the maps regarding wind, waves and precipitation for the Golfe Du Lion from weatheronline.co.uk, and it should just be possible with some safety margin before the wind turns to a strong SW for the rest of the week and I'd be stuck here even longer. For the last week Arthur and I have been sitting daily over the weather forecast and the map. We are both longing to be gone from Port Saint Louis Du Rhone. Arthur even more than I, because he has been waiting for an opportunity for three weeks now. Because of the weather I'm now already one month behind the optimistic schedule. But I knew that the first months would be the hardest and most unreliable ones in terms of planning of the whole trip, especially crossing the Golfe Du Lion. And rushing it means accepting unreasonable risks at this time of year. But I'm still one month ahead of the pessimistic schedule. I'll just have to see how today will go, and how fast I can then make it to Gibraltar. I thank you all for your kind XMas wishes. In case you wondered, I spent XMas mostly working on Vespina (additional bilge pump, gas alarm, external iridium antenna, radar connected but not working, tiller extension fitted) and reading about storm tactics. I also slept a lot.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 00:32

Wednesday, December 23, 2009

Adventures in the Golfe de Fos

The weather forecast for yesterday read: "S 4 to 6, locational 7. Gusts. Moderate or rough. Locational very rough." Not too bad. But Arthur and Andr   warned me that "locational" would include our location, the Golfe de Fos, because it opens to the south and is very shallow. But because I've never sailed here, I couldn't help wondering what "very rough" meant exactly. I also believe that it makes sense to learn what Vespina and I can take as early in my journey as possible, and as long as there is still help close by. So I decided to find out . I started the engine and motored first towards the east out of the canal, then keeping clear of the traffic separation scheme I turned directly south past the huge ocean going freighters at anchor, where I wanted to set sail and head east for Marseille. It was indeed rough going directly against the short and steep waves from the beginning. But Vespina handled them very well, and feeling secure I had quite some fun. But as I got more south the waves became longer and higher, and I began to wonder whether turning 90 degrees and having them coming from the side would still be fun, or even save. Moments later a wave stopped me, turned me around, and pushed me almost flat onto the side. Question answered . After four more times I very much doubted that I had stored away everything securely enough, especially the two heavy spare anchors. But it was also obvious that leaving the Golfe de Fos in these conditions would be absolutely impossible. I would have to wait for northerly winds, NW ideally. So I turned around and headed back to where I came from, surfing down the waves this time. Yeah Checking the hold later I was happy to find everything just where I had tied it down, especially the anchors. But I will have to do something with the mast for the generator and radar, it was swinging like crazy in the wind. The southerly winds will prevail over the next few days, so I will have to spent Christmas in the harbor and not at sea, as I had hoped. But there is a chance for NW winds on Friday, which means I can hopefully leave Saturday.

Posted by Axel Busch at 08:57

Sunday, December 20, 2009

SecuritÃfÂ© SecuritÃfÂ© SecuritÃfÂ© ...

... is all I hear on the radio these days. Gale warnings. Reefed mainsail. I've attached the reefing lines permanently to the bottom of the boom. Last night has been the worst yet. 10 Bft wind, a very rough sea even in the harbor here, and temperatures well below zero. Vespina was shaking so violently that I was afraid the mooring lines would break (all six of them) and I got up several times to check them. One had broken last week, as well as two fenders. But this time everything held. Around four in the morning the storm began to weaken and I could finally find some sleep. When I woke up at nine everything was completely quiet, no breeze at all. Today was only the third day after my arrival 1 1/2 weeks ago, that the wind dropped below 7 Bft. Like before I used the chance and spend some hours working on top of the mast, on the rigging, the wind generator and the radar. The radar is still not working, but everything else is ready now. My soldering iron has simply not enough power to heat the wires in the cold & wind. This work will have to wait until I get somewhere warmer and less windy, or until I find a 200 Watt soldering iron. But the radar is not vital. More important is the fact that I could practice putting the reefs into the main sail and setting the storm jib. I have also stowed away all gear securely, and now Vespina and I are finally ready for the sea. But unfortunately the forecast for tomorrow is again very bad: Gale warning, from the SW, and very rough sea. Yep, SW is exactly the direction I need to go. But the temperatures are predicted to rise to 15C, and stay there for a while. This is very good news, because the low temperatures stopped me actually more from working and leaving than the wind. All I need now is a forecast of not much more than 6 Bft for two days, and I can finally leave Port-Saint-Louis. I'm placing my bets on Wednesday.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 18:44

Thursday, December 17, 2009

Finally - the rigging is complete

Reefed Mainsail. On Tuesday afternoon the wind had changed from NE to N, which is straight ahead and ideal to set up the rigging. Unfortunately with 6 to 7 Bft it was still way too strong. But yesterday around 1pm the wind finally dropped. I had prepared for this over the last few days and had every shackle, line, sheet and all five sails ready for the great moment. First I adjusted the alignment of the mast - it was leaning a little to port. Then I could increase the tension on the stays to the right amount. The stays keep the mast centered and prevent it from bending under the load of the sails in the wind. After that I quickly set one sail after the other to check that everything is working fine and all equipment is in place and works as expected: main sail, genoa, self-tacking jib, self-tacking storm-jib. Everything worked great, and the sails seem to be in good shape. The jibs look brand new. I had hoped that I could leave for a test run today, but the weather forecast does not look favorable: 8 Bft and the coldest day of the year. As much as I can hear and feel from inside my sleeping bag at the moment, the forecast was accurate. Yesterday was already cold, with -4C and ice on the windows in the morning. The cold, especially in combination with a strong wind, is slowing down all the work. Everything takes a lot longer because the fingers go numb within a few moments, and everything needs to be fastened and unfastened all the time. I got more done yesterday afternoon when the wind was light, then I had in the whole week. Today I won't get much done either, I'm afraid. Sailing is out of the question, and all outside work will again progress at a crawl, with a lot of stomping of the feet and clapping my arms about me. But hey, the rigging is finally set up and now Vespina is a real sailing yacht again! And as Arthur said: "Welcome to the life of a Voyager: waiting for the right weather."

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 01:01

Sunday, December 13. 2009

Making friends in Port-Saint-Louis-Du-Rhône

Attaching the Tricolor lantern to the masthead. My favorite pastime these days: connecting wires. André, Arthur, Birgit having tea on board Vespina. After the mast was stepped on Thursday morning it became very windy, 7-8 Bft, and stayed like this until this morning. During this time I could work only little on the rigging, because I did not want to go up the mast in the cold & wind. Strong wind is typical for the season, and one really has to adjust his plans according to the weather. But I didn't get bored during this time, because the electrical installation kept me very busy. Now everything except the radar is connected and working. For the radar I will need probably another 4 hours. I am becoming very proficient with my Digital Multimeter, at interpreting cable layouts and at connecting wires. Today it was finally ok to climb the mast, although with 3°C it was still pretty cold. It was the first time I've ever climbed a mast, and to be honest, when I was up I was pretty scared for a few minutes. It is something very different to climb up a thin 12m mast alone with the boat moving underneath you, than to climb a solid rock when your best friend is securing you from the ground. The difficult part is not so much the climbing itself. But once you're up, you have to let go with both hands to do the work you climbed up for. But after the second time it was already routine, and by the fourth time I felt as comfortable as in my sleeping bag. Well, almost. Now all the halyards are in, the VHF antenna is connected and my new tricolor led sailing lantern with anchor-light is installed. This is a very cool piece of equipment with very low energy consumption and a good range. A must-have, really. Tomorrow I want to whip up the sails and set up the wind vane. On Tuesday I hope to finish the radar and stow away everything nicely for the sea. Fortunately the weather forecast predicts good weather for Wednesday, when I can make the first sea trials. I plan to sail to an anchorage near Carro. From there, provided the rigging is ok and the weather is good, I want to cross the Golfe Du Lion on Thursday to Cadaques in Spain. It is a little over 100nm, and so I will need 20 to 30 hours. Thinking about that trip, I feel very excited and a little anxious at the same time. It will be the first time that I will be sailing alone throughout the night. I don't expect everything to go well, and it will be surely a very cold and very long night. But I trust Vespina and myself enough to get there without too much trouble. My neighbors here at the shipyard are André and Arthur. André is equipping his boat to sail to the Galapagos with his family after Christmas. Arthur is another single handed sailor (and very gifted musician), who installed a wind vane and new rigging here and is now waiting for better weather to test it. He is sailing in the Med since Mai, when he bought his boat, and is now heading for the Canaries as well. Maybe we will see each other a few more times on the way. We became quite good friends over the last week and meet every day on each other's boat for tea or dinner, or to help each other out with the various tasks that are a lot easier done with another pair of hands.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 13:02

Thursday, December 10, 2009

The mast is up!

Vespina - mast. Vespina + mast. Yesterday I've prepared everything for the big event today: stepping the mast. I've never done it before and have also never seen it done before. But everybody told me it takes approx. 30 minutes and is painless. If everything is prepared right. It took approx. 30 minutes and was painless. Guess I must have prepared everything right. Which wasn't that hard either, because I have a copy of the "Boatowner's Mechanical And Electrical Manual" from Nigel Calder. The book is as big and heavy as the title makes you think. And inside are lots of pictures, drawings and descriptions on what to look for, how to do things, and also how not to do things. I love those pictures the most, some are absolutely shocking. But it turned out that Ulrich, Vespina's previous owner had done everything right in the first place. And he had put all the bits into one big red bucket with "Ketchup" written on it. So all I had to do was put the pieces from the bucket in the right places. Easy! After cleaning them and checking them for any signs or material fatigue, rust etc of course. Finally all the long hours I had spend as a child trying to put together Lego puzzles without the help of the booklet payed off! I have to confess I'm still doing Lego puzzles now and then. What remains to be done now: • straighten the mast and tighten the shrouds • climb the mast and put the halyards into it • attach the boom • whip the sails up • mount all blocks and rollers • attach the sheets to the sails • mount the mainsail stacking system (lazy jack) • mount and connect the VHF antenna to the masthead • connect the 3-color-lantern to the masthead • attach the back gantry • mount and connect the radar to the back gantry • mount and connect the wind generator to the back gantry I hope I don't need a day for each item. Unfortunately the wind is blowing too strong now (Bft 6-7) to do any decent job on the rigging. So I'll start with the back gantry until the wind dies down a bit. A bucket full of goodies. Andr f   helped me to identify some parts. Vespina, the mast, and my new best friend the crane. Almost there!

Posted by Axel Busch at 06:13

Tuesday, December 8, 2009

The sea!

After 1480 km and 165 locks I have arrived in Port-Saint-Louis. I have thoroughly enjoyed the last four weeks, and got to know Germany and France from a very different point of view. Now the rivers are behind me, and the sea ahead, and my little adventure can begin for real. After the mast is stepped and the rig is made ready - not a minor detail . I gave myself one day to prepare, and fixed an appointment to step the mast for Thursday 10am. Gulp. Then I'll probably need another day or two to get everything stowed away properly and Vespina and myself ready for our first sea trials. Very exiting!

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 10:29

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Night run / Avignon

Yesterday it was very busy at the locks, I spent literally half the day waiting. It wasn't too bad because the weather was very nice (got a little sunburned even) and I could clean Vespina thoroughly. But of course it totally ruined my plan for the day, and by four I had only made 25km. Not enough to reach Avignon in time today for a little sightseeing. Because the sky was clear, the river wide and the traffic light, I decided to drive into the night. I was lucky because I could follow in the wake of a unusually slow freighter. Usually they pass me, but this one was only going at 5 knots. With it's radar and strong searchlights I could follow savely a few hundred meters behind and enjoy one of the best hours of this trip. I am very much looking forward to sailing at night. Now I'm in Avignon in a little Cafe with wifi and am enjoying my first coffee on land for a week before exploring the local Christmas market.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 08:11

Friday, December 4, 2009

Mistral!

Clear night sky above the Rhone valley seen from Condrieu. A clear (and freezing cold) night had promised it already, and the morning brought it: Mistral, the famous wind which blows from the north-west along the Rhone valley. It pushed me with up to 17km/h (instead of my usual 13km/h) down the river. Which was great fun, especially with the newly mounted and configured autopilot doing most of the steering. Until I came to the first lock. With the wind blowing up to 24kn (not a very strong mistral) from behind, and the Rhone pushing with 3-4kn, everything had to happen a little faster and more precise than usual. Good that I had had enough practice in the last 154 locks! Now I'm in Valence in a, uhm, McDonalds. Free wifi exerts a strong gravitational pull on ex IT people. The Marina here is by far the most expensive I've encountered. 19.50 EUR per night. So far I have never payed more than 10.00, mostly 6.50 in France. But usually I'm staying for free at some suitable quay along the way. I came here for the gas station, because I wanted to refill my diesel tank in time. Unfortunately the machine's data connection to the bank was broken, and it doesn't provide fuel for cash. So no fuel for Vespina this time - again. I'm not very lucky in this regard. All of the gas stations I have encountered in France were either dismantled or shut down for the winter. Luckily Vespina has a mighty huge diesel tank for a sailing yacht her size, 500 liters, which I had filled up in Worms.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 12:39

Thursday, December 3. 2009

On the Rhône

Autopilot fitted to the tiller. The Borg have landed in Lyon! Today I've made it past Lyon and 40km down the Rhône. Originally I had planned to stay in Lyon for half a day. But then it stopped raining just as I got there and so I decided to use the chance and drive some more miles. Good decision - it's raining again already. Driving has become a lot easier now. The Rhône is often several hundred meters wide, which means I can fix the autopilot to the tiller and let it steer the boat by compass for a few hundred meters, while I get something to eat or simply pee. What a relief! I've noticed that after about eight hours without even a short break my skills begin to deteriorate. Unless the conditions are perfect I often need a second try to dock for example. I could stop somewhere for a lunch-break, but then I would lose valuable daylight time. Instead I prefer to just push through and reach my destination by 4pm at the latest. I am very much looking forward to coastal waters and the open sea, where there is more space and I can rest a little now and then and stay fresh. But if I can maintain the speed of the last three days, I should make it to the Mediterranean by Monday. And maybe it'll be a little warmer too. Fog in the morning is very romantic, very much indeed, until a cargo ship pops up 100m in front of you.

Posted by Axel Busch in Vespina at 22:07