



Rallying together

Dead calm, 40-knot winds, soup on the deckhead and mid-ocean dental work were just a few of the things experienced during the Biscay crossing of this year's Yachting Monthly Rally Portugal. Miles Kendall caught up with the fleet at Bayona

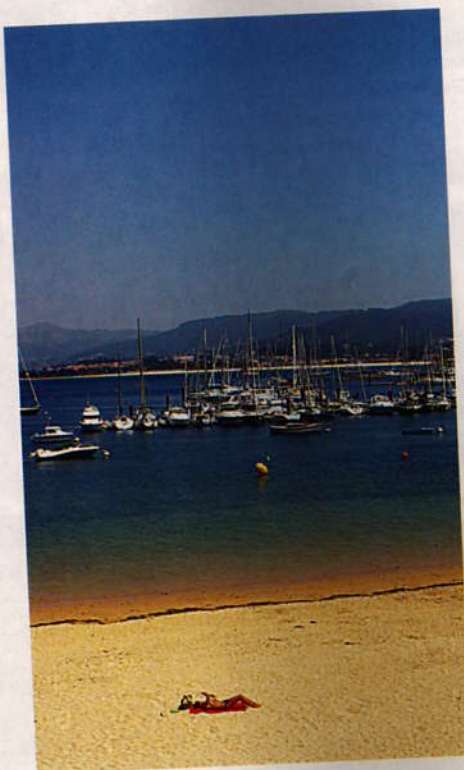
Crossing the Bay of Biscay is a milestone for any yachtsman. Spending three or four days out of sight of land makes the passage feel more like an ocean voyage rather than a giant coastal hop. The countless stories of the giant seas that build up in these almost

legendary waters add to the excitement and sense of achievement when landfall is made, normally in northern Spain. For the last 12 years a group of yachts has made the crossing together, as part of Rally Portugal. They set sail from Plymouth in June with the added security of safety checks, weather

briefings and a radio net. The fleet is bound for the stunning port of Bayona where it berths on the pontoons of the Monte Real Club de Yates de Baiona, in the shadow of the town's imposing castle. YM was on hand to take their lines and hear their accounts of an eventful crossing.



MAIN PHOTO, ABOVE: Waylander, the first yacht across Biscay, rounds the final headland off Bayona. **RIGHT:** The town boasts clear waters and pristine beaches



» CROSSING BISCAY: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Why is the Bay of Biscay feared? In strong weather vicious steep seas build up and 'monster waves' capable of swamping large ships have been reported.

Why are the seas so rough? The bathymetric chart below shows how the seabed in Biscay rises abruptly from some 4000m to 400m or less. The long, rolling swell that builds up in the Atlantic with the prevailing westerlies hits the shallower shelf and becomes shorter and steeper. Research also suggests that the combination of the powerful Gulf Stream and sharply rising seabed can result in monster waves of over 50ft (15m).

How do you avoid the worst of the seas? Most sailing vessels choose to head westwards from the Channel, to the north of the shipping lanes off Ushant. Only once they have reached 10°W do they turn south – and the more prudent skippers head even further west to stay clear of

the steep drop off between the shallow Celtic Shelf and the deep Biscay Abyssal Plain.

When should I cross? It is best to get across the bay before the autumn storms arrive. Anyone who recalls the gale force winds of late August this year will not need reminding that these can arrive well before September. Late May to Mid-August is considered the Biscay crossing season with June and July the preferred months with least risk of storms. Analysing the forecasts is crucial but with crossings taking three days or longer there can be no guarantee of what conditions will be like at the end of the crossing.

Why does Cape Finisterre have a bad reputation? Winds often blow several forces more than forecast around the northwest corner of Spain, particularly when winds are squeezed between the Azores High and Spanish Low pressure systems. Cautious skippers will give the cape a wide berth though the majority of the Rally

Portugal fleet cut the corner, coming inside the Finisterre Traffic Separation Scheme.

What about shipping? The risk of collision is ever-present on a Biscay crossing. Ships from the Mediterranean, Africa and South America all converge around the bay and keeping a good watch is essential. Fishing boats, with their disregard of the correct lights and shapes are also a constant hazard. Radar is recommended.

I think I'll stay at home! Hundreds of yachts safely cross the Bay of Biscay every year. Much of Biscay's notoriety comes from the days when square-rigged vessels dreaded the bay's 300-mile lee shore. Modern yachts have much greater windward capabilities and so less to fear. Study the forecasts carefully, look out for variations in long-term forecasts that suggest uncertainty, and if in doubt pay to speak to a forecaster.

BELOW: Bay of Biscay bathymetric chart

