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# Remnants sail

Stu Davies faced fierce winds and a big swell left over from a hurricane when entering Portugal's tricky port of Figueira da Foz at night

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**STU DAVIES** writes practical articles for PBO and is also one of our Ask the Experts panellists. He and his wife Laura keep their Bénéteau Océanis 381 *Sacha* moored in La Línea, near Gibraltar.

A couple of years ago we set off on our big adventure, heading south to the Algarve for the sun. It was something we'd planned and plotted for years, and now the kids had done uni and sorted themselves out with jobs it was time for us to have our fun.

We made day-hops from Loctudy in southern Brittany to La Coruña in northwest Spain, and had crossed Biscay without any major issues.

After the big one of Biscay the rest of the journey to the Algarve looked, on the face of it, relatively simple – just port-hop down the coast to Cape St Vincent and turn left!

We left La Coruña and rounded Finisterre, a dark, foreboding rock coast with nothing between us and America except big Atlantic swells, and headed down the Spanish and Portuguese coasts.

We settled into the routine fairly quickly, and once towards Oporto the Portuguese trade winds from the north start to kick in.

In our case they were north-westerlies. The remnants of hurricane Bertha had passed to the north and were blasting the Channel, but some effects – a fairly large swell – were also making themselves felt where we were.

Basically, the Portuguese Trades work by being the squeeze point between the Azores high and the Iberian low. The air over the land cools down during the night and warms up during the day: as a consequence, the mornings normally start with hardly any wind, then it starts to build from mid-morning until about 7pm when it usually starts to die down. We were getting wind speeds in the mid-20s and 2-3m of swell.

We'd set off early-ish with full sail at about 8am, then reefing as the winds got up from mid-morning onwards. We were sailing downwind with the north-westerlies aft of the beam most of the time, with the only issues arising when we had to turn the head to wind to reef the main. We had





Shipping held up Stu's departure from Leixões, resulting in a tricky nighttime arrival at Figueira da Foz, his next port of call



tried reefing going downwind, but having the wind aft of the beam meant the main was blown on to the aft sweeping spreaders – not good!

We got into the swing of it: reef the genoa, loosen the kicker, engine on, wait to get to the bottom of the swell and go for it. I would give a big handful of throttle, hard over the wheel and catch her just as she rose up the next one with her head to the wind: Laura would then haul down the main to the next reefing point (we have single-line reefing so everything comes back to the cockpit) and then power her back on course.

Another issue was lobster pots – lots of them. Whether close to shore or four miles off, they were everywhere, usually laid with a head and tail marker about 50m apart, and dropped in bunches. It proved to be a nightmare continually looking out for them – I didn't want one of those around the prop!

Just north of Porto is Leixões, a commercial port that is accessible most of the time with a small marina in the north-east corner. The wind and swell had

been particularly high that day, with hurricane Bertha still making herself felt.

We had crossed the 'border' from Spain into Portugal, and upon getting into Leixões we found the marina unstaffed (forgetting that Portugal has an hour's difference to Spain): we scraped the gelcoat berthing in the high winds.

The next day we were aiming for Figueira da Foz, quite a long leg, and were going to try and get off early: fat chance. Portuguese office hours, and having to check in and out? Hah!

So we were late getting off, after nine, and then we had to wait while some freighters exited Leixões port, so we were going to be pushed to get to Figueira before dark.

### Difficult entrance

Entering Figueira can be difficult. I was aware of the issues that could arise, having visited there on council business a few years previously, and had heard about and seen the entrance when the wind was blowing hard.

What particularly concerned me were the comments in pilot books: 'don't attempt the entrance if the swell is too big', and 'lights are exhibited from a signal station

on a fort on the north side of the entrance when the bar is dangerous or closed'; not forgetting 'a river entrance where swell, tides and a bar can

combine to cause a dangerous entrance.'

We were getting a 2-3m swell on the way, and the wind was in the high 20s from midday on. But the sun was shining, and we were well reefed and scooting along.

We made good time, and I worked out that we'd arrive just before it got dark at about 8.30pm.

The bits about the harbour being closed if the swell was too high were going through my mind. They didn't define what

'too high' meant: was 3m too high? What if we couldn't get in? Another five or six hours to Nazarre, in the dark, with all those pots?

The wind stayed fresh, and as we approached the headland before Figueira we decided to drop the main and just use the reefed genoa for the last bit. We got around the headland OK, and darkness was just setting in when, BANG – the katabatic wind off the headland hit us.

A quick glance at the wind speed showed 38 knots, and *Sacha* hit hull speed on just the partly furled genny. I could just make out the breakwater in the distance with the red showing, and beyond it was the beach with lots of white surf.

### Pots everywhere

Laura started calling out, 'Port a bit... starboard a bit' – the place was infested with pots! We had about two miles to run.

Was Figueira shut because of the swell? Where were those 'traffic lights'? Everything was happening too fast. I shouted to Laura, 'let's try to get the rest of that genny in!'

I have a good co-skipper. I slowly let the sheet out and Laura cranked the furler in: meanwhile, the katabatic wind was still shoving us along, and it was now dark.

I fired up the engine in readiness and we approached the port-hand light: the beach wasn't far away. I swung her hard to port around the breakwater, and calm descended on us almost immediately. All was well: the breakwater did its job. I now know that 3m of swell and 38 knots of wind from the north doesn't shut Figueira da Foz. We never did spot the 'traffic lights'...

When we reached the Algarve a few days later we met up with some friends who'd made passage a few months earlier in their Trintella 44 ketch. They broke their boom on the way down, and when I asked them where it happened, their reply was: 'Figueira da Foz!'

## LESSONS LEARNED

**1** If making a long passage down the Portuguese coast, make sure you can leave early – even if that means waiting an extra day in your port of departure.

**2** Leaving early means there's less wind, and it's easier to dodge pots in the half light and the calmer conditions in the morning than in the evening.

**3** Be wary of headlands down the Portuguese coast – similar conditions presented themselves as we got to Cascais, although we were ready this time.



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