

Riviera reverie

Mishaps and mistrals awaited Morvyn Phillips on his eventful summer Med cruise. However, the stunning scenery of the French and Italian Riviervas more than made up for it.

It was early May before Karen and I returned to Darius, our Moonraker 36, in Port Napoleon. She had spent the winter there, safely tucked up inside a hangar, secure from the terrible storms that had ravaged the French Mediterranean coast in December. Now, on a calm sunny day, she had been put back in the water to await our arrival.



That sinking feeling

Driving south and thinking about our planned five-month cruise along the coast of France and Italy, we were unaware of the shock in store for us. When we arrived I looked at Darius lying against the pontoon and noticed she was low in the water. I quickly clambered aboard and my worst fear was realised. She was sinking!

The water was already lapping the top of the batteries between the two Perkins engines, the freshwater pump was submerged and water was beginning to creep across the floor of the aft cabin.

Intuition told me it must be the stern glands and so it was. I had asked the local boatbuilders to repack them, and had left specific instructions to check their tightness when the boat was returned to the water, to ensure that only an occasional drip came through them. They had failed to do so and the water was gushing in. Couple this with the float switch jamming, so the 'automatic' bilge pump didn't work, and the result was disaster, or it would have been had I arrived an hour later.

As it was, four batteries and the freshwater pump had to be replaced, the bilge pump switch repaired, and several hours were spent draining out sea water and mopping out the engineroom and the aft cabin. It was fortunate for the proprietor of Yacht Services that it was his day off, for I was much calmer when I confronted him the following day to negotiate replacement of the damaged equipment and compensation.

Ten days elapsed before we left Port Napoleon and made the 24-mile passage to Port du Frioul, near Marseille, a handy shakedown cruise on which to check if the ingress of sea water had done any damage to the engines. Luckily it hadn't.

Port du Frioul is relatively peaceful, with good walks for our two dogs, Bodger and Frost, around the two islands which were joined to form the harbour.



It was the first time we were able to have the dogs with us, thanks to the Pet Travel Scheme (see MBM Jul 00 p77). At first they were a little wary of 'walking the plank', our passerelle being the only means of getting ashore from the typical stern-to Med berth, but they were quite happy once I had glued pieces of carpet to it so their claws could get a better grip.

It's been Toulon

After four days exploring the area, we left for the naval port and city of Toulon. With little wind, we decided to take the narrow passage between the Ile de la Maire and the mainland. It is 60m wide and 2m deep, and should only be attempted in calm weather. We approached gingerly and with Karen glued to the depth sounder we crept slowly through.

We then headed for Bec de l'Aigle (eagle's beak), a 155m-high promontory that signals the approach to the old town and port of La Ciotat. The coastline here is stunning and with clear visibility we could see the rock strata as the rugged hills fell almost vertically to the sea. It is possible to cru-

ise really close inshore with no worries about submerged rocks, so we slowed down to eight knots and hugged the shoreline. The coast is indented by calanques, narrow inlets dwarfed by high hills, and we were tempted to enter one of them and anchor for the night, but after one attempt we abandoned the idea as the anchor wouldn't bite on the shingle bottom. Also it can be dangerous in these places if a mistral should blow up; this fearsome wind blows down the Rhone valley from the north and is funnelled down the calanques.

Arriving at Bec d'Aigle we had intended to turn to port and stay the night in the marina at La Ciotat, but as the sea was calm we decided to press on for Toulon.

One of our older pilot books on France is full of dire warnings about the approaches to Toulon: "Surface craft, submarines and aircraft may be encountered by day or night, and on occasions surface craft may not show lights. Guns, torpedoes, and bombs may be used and flares, smoke signals, and lights, when shown, should not be confused with distress signals. A torpedo range stretches from the north end of the Grande Jetee at Toulon at 112°T"

The torpedo range is still in use and it was with some trepidation that we approached, hoping we wouldn't be blown out of the water by the French navy. We passed into Toulon via the Grande Passe and, turning to starboard, headed into the Darse Vieille (old port), finding a vacant spot on the visitors' quay.

As in nearly all the marinas we were to encounter in France and Italy, we had to back into the berth and pick up a rope and chain from the quay. We then had to haul it up while walking towards the bow, to attach it to the anchor winch, with the stern secured to the quay.

We restocked at the huge Carrefour supermarket near the marina, but the area was noisy at night and a bit run down, which was probably reflected in our mooring charge of just £9 per night.

Heading east

Heading out east from Toulon we soon arrived at the Petit Passe, a channel between lie de Porquerolles and the small island of Grand Ribaud. We had thought to moor in Port de Porquerolles but, having been told it gets very crowded, continued to the smaller lie de Port Cros. The Anse de Port-Man was our goal as it is sheltered from the mistral, which blows from the north west here.

Anchoring in about 2m near the head of the inlet, we made sure we were well away from the submerged wall near the disused landing stage. It took a little while to anchor as the holding was not good, at least for our CQR, but the effort was well worthwhile as this proved to be an idyllic spot. There were only a couple of other boats in the anchorage. We were visited by a patrol vessel, ensuring that the local prohibitions on fishing, hunting and camping were being adhered to.



The Anse de Port-Man proved an idyllic anchorage

Our next stop, Port Frejus, was a complete contrast. Close to St Raphael, this modern port is the usual mix of marina and apartment blocks, but the main reason for stopping here was to visit the Roman town of Frejus, which although about 4km from the marina, is well served by bus.

The weather was getting very hot, much to the discomfort of the dogs, for Darius, with her enclosed wheelhouse, is not a Med-type boat - oh for air conditioning! However, we were not to be deterred from visiting Frejus, touring its ancient streets, buying fresh herbes de Provence in the market and visiting the amphitheatre and the remains of the Roman aqueduct.

From Frejus, we followed the beautiful red cliffs of L'Esterel Massif, continuing eastward past Cannes and the lies de Lerins.

We made for La Gallice, close to Juan Les Pins, on the west side of Cap d'Antibes, and found it to be expensive and not that pleasant. As in many marinas there is but a fender width between one boat and the next, but here we seemed to be hemmed in even more than usual, probably because we were flanked by boats much bigger than Darius. Although it was May, well out of the high season, the night's mooring was £18; I was told that in August it would be almost double.

Alluring Alassio

In perfect weather we passed the Baie des Anges, the city of Nice, the Principality of Monaco and the town of Menton. Crossing the border into Italy, we slowed to a steady eight knots and cut in close to the shore.

This was the Italian Riviera and we noticed immediately the difference from its French counterpart. It is more picturesque, with mountain scenery that is much wilder, although near San Remo some of the slopes are covered by greenhouses.

At Capo Mele we headed for the harbour at Alassio, lying round the corner from Capo Santa Croce, on which a small chapel acts as a good landmark. No-one responded to our VHF call and the whole harbour seemed deserted, another change from France.

It was lunchtime and, with the harbourmaster's office closed, we were momentarily at a loss to know what to do. I have come to learn that the best idea, where there is nowhere obvious to go, is to moor by the fuel pumps; then for certain someone will appear to say you cannot stop there and tell you where you can. Sure enough, soon after 1400 the harbour awoke and we were quickly shown to a vacant berth.

Although Alassio is very much a tourist resort, with mostly private beaches, it is clean and the people are very friendly. We spent several days here, during which we visited nearby Toirano and its remarkable caves, with the 8ft tall skeleton of a prehistoric cave bear at its entrance, and took the boat out to nearby Gallinara island, which has a small harbour, although it is forbidden to explore the island on foot.

It was just an eight-mile hop along the coast to our next port, Loano, a lovely old town. It had a comparatively small marina, but that was about to change as work was underway to extend the number of berths by 1100, making it one of the largest marinas on the Italian Riviera.

A spot of bother

From Loano, we crossed the Golfo di Genova, heading for Punta di Portofino, where we turned hard to port into the Golfo Marconi. What a contrast from the tranquillity of Alassio and Loano! This was jet-set country, with large, high-powered motor yachts buzzing us at great speed, many bizarrely sporting red ensigns.

Thinking, mistakenly, that it would be quieter in Santa Margherita Ligure than Portofino, and less expensive, we headed for that old port. Karen likened entering the harbour to driving in the centre of London during the rush hour, with boats of all shapes and sizes manoeuvring in the confined space, and it was worst in the area surrounding the fuel berth, where we were to have the most embarrassing experience of the whole trip.

Approaching the fuel pontoon the gear control cable on the port engine decided, unbeknown to me, to part from its holding clip. Passing close to a superyacht, I put the engines astern to nudge up to the pontoon. The port engine did not react so I increased the revs but instead of slowing Darius, the boat slewed round, hitting the superyacht before striking the quay with some force.

There was consternation all round, especially from the captain of the superyacht, although our rubbing strake had protected it from any damage more serious than a black rubber mark on its topsides. Soon an ormeggiatore (berthing attendant) arrived in an inflatable and between my good engine and his outboard we managed to manoeuvre into the visitors' quay, using our anchor to hold the bow out. Santa Margherita Ligure is a sophisticated marina, as one might expect with neighbours like Portofino and Rapallo. Its name is derived from the white flower growing here in abundance, but equally prolific are the number of 25m (85ft) plus superyachts lined up off the quay. We felt very insignificant. And the god of embarrassment had not finished with us yet.

I had repaired the gear linkage and, on a calm sunny morning, we cast off our stern lines and motored slowly out to raise the bow anchor, only to find it had snagged on the adjacent boat's anchor line. The diver we employed to free it told me what I already knew: we should have attached a trip line.

Maternity marina

We were now behind schedule and decided to run from Santa Margherita Ligure direct to Viareggio, a distance of some 57 miles.

We passed the dramatic Cinque Terre, five remote villages until recent times accessible only by sea or along mountain footpaths. Further south the coastline changed to a much flatter landscape, with long sandy beaches and holiday resorts. Arriving in the late afternoon at Viareggio, we refuelled before being squeezed into a berth in the marina.

Viareggio is a maternity hospital for superyachts, with famous builders such as Technomarine, Lusben and Benetti dominating the starboard side of the harbour. The likes of Darius lie modestly to port. Our berth was made uncomfortable by the swell entering the harbour and we toyed with moving into the Canale Burlamacca, which seemed to have a good wall especially beyond the pedestrian swing bridge. But there was very little room to moor and we would have been subject to the wash of passing fishing boats.

Reluctantly, we had to start the long voyage home to the UK. So, on a warm June morning, we headed back along the coast to La Spezia, which as a naval port with three marinas we thought might offer us engineering assistance. We entered the Golfo di La Spezia via the Eastern Passage; a breakwater, Diga Foranea, protects the bay with openings at both eastern and western ends, as in Plymouth Sound.

In the Porto Turistico di Benedetti, we enjoyed the luxury of berthing alongside a pontoon for the first and only time on this

cruise. But we had a problem: a horrible grating noise from the port shaft, which turned into some serious rattling and banging. It was clear that the cutless bearing was badly worn, but there were no available engineers in La Spezia to sort it out.

We were told that if we could get to Lavagna, 29 miles further up the coast, the marina there would help us. So we set off, pottering along on starboard engine only.

On the mend

Lavagna marina is huge and has a host of workshops encompassing boatbuilding, all facets of engineering, sailmaking, steel fabrication and GRP repairs. One company, Castagnino Andrea, deals solely with lifting and relaunching boats and it was to them that I went to inquire about replacing my cutless bearing. They said they could lift me out that afternoon onto the hard and another company, Nuova Simar, would replace the bearing.

True to their word they lifted Darius out and chocked her up, and half an hour later the engineers were at work replacing the bearing. When they saw it they realised they had a problem on their hands because the grub screws holding the bearing into the P-bracket were so badly worn they could not be unscrewed.

There was about a quarter of an inch play on the shaft and into this tiny space they inserted an electric hacksaw to saw through the bearing, and then knocked it out using a special tool and a lump hammer. When they fitted the new bearing they used stainless steel grub screws to hold it in place, so in future it will be easier to remove. The job, which it was thought would take about an hour and a half, continued well into the evening.

The following morning saw us back in the water and heading out of Lavagna for the old port of Savona, 42 miles away on the western side of the Golfo di Genova.

I thought Savona would be a purely commercial port with few facilities, so imagine our surprise when, after passing through the main dock area, we found ourselves entering the Darsena Vecchia (old dock) and finding a small and delightful marina, right in the town centre. The facilities were spotless, the receptionist spoke good English, and after paying £11.70 for each of the first two nights the third night was free and these were peak season rates!

Besides the bars and restaurants on the quayside, we found a baker which opened on Sundays and a supermarket, both within 100 yards of the marina. The only downside was that because the marina is surrounded by buildings it got very hot.

Sea festival

From Savona it was a 59-mile run across the border back into French waters. There was a choice of places to berth at Menton, in the old port or the marina at Menton Garavan about a mile from the old town. We opted for the marina.

Menton is a delightful place, nestling in the foothills of the Alpes Maritimes. It has been overshadowed by neighbouring Monaco, but that did not distract the English, who flocked here in the late 19th Century. It became a favourite winter resort, as evidenced by the fountain on the promenade, dedicated to Queen Victoria. It has good shops and a picturesque market, but they are not that convenient for Menton Garavan; fortunately, there's a well-stocked supermarket right next door to the marina.

At our next port of call, Cavalaire-sur-Mer, we were mistral-bound for a week, enlivened on the Sunday by the town's annual Festival of the Sea. As with many such festivals it commenced with a march through the town headed by a brass band which, having paraded around the marina, boarded boats and headed out into the bay.

In short, steep waves the accompanying service and blessing of the sea was a bit disjointed, but back on dry land, the band and the priest returned in procession to a small, grassed area where several barbecues had been set up. Sardines a plenty were sizzling on the griddles and, encased in a piece of baguette and washed down by local red wine, they were delicious.

French fireworks

Eventually the weather improved and we made the long haul to La Ciotat. Had we known the weather to come we would have continued all the way back to Port St Louis at the mouth of the River Rhone, because once again we were forced to stop longer than we wished; no sooner had one mistral ended than another began.

Our mooring, in Bassin Berouard, was intended for a boat smaller than Darius and the bow chain rose so steeply from the sea bed that in the strong wind she was moving backwards and forwards causing her to strike the concrete pontoon.

We had to place our large inflatable fender between the boat and the quay, but we still sustained some damage to our bathing platform

Whilst we were in La Ciotat, Bastille Day was celebrated with the usual firework display, set up the commercial dock opposite where we were moored, so we had a grandstand view.

At long last the weather abated and we were able to complete the final leg of our Mediterranean adventure. We travelled back past Marseille and across the Golfe Fos towards the entrance to the Canal St Louis, leading to Port St Louis, where with a sigh of relief we moored for the night.

From here to Calais, through the inland waterways, our progress would not be so dependent on the weather - or so we hoped!

Cruising notes.

Charts

Morvyn Phillips used British Admiralty charts in French waters and French Navicarte charts in Italy! Navicarte charts are widely available in France but can be bought in the UK from Imray

Further reading 'Mediterranean France & Corsica Pilot, Italian Waters and 'Mediterranean Almanac 2001-2'; both by Rod Heikell (Imray).

Paperwork

Essential: Pt 1 registration (or SSR). Insurance certificate, with an Italian translation, Passports, Ship radiolicense, Short range (VHF) certificate.

Advisable: International Certificate of Competence, E111 emergency medical treatment form, Personal health insurance document.

Also carried: RYA/DoT Coastal Skipper Certificate.

Fuel costs

In France diesel costs about FF5.90(60p). in Italy about L 1520 (50p) per litre,

Harbour/marina fees

In France, berthing fees (for an 11m boat) ranged from FF83 (£8), in Port du Frioul in May, to FF240 (£23). in Menton Garavan in July. In Italy, all in late May or June, they ranged from L18,000 (£6). in Santa Margherita Ligure, to L54,000 (£18). in Porto Turistico A di Benedetti in La Spezia,

Cost of living

On all but two occasions, Morvyn and Karen ate on board. Food in France proved to be a little cheaper than in the UK, particularly when buying locally-grown produce, In Italy it was cheaper still.

Weatherforecasts

In France, marina noticeboards proved to be the best source of up-to-date weather and sea state forecasts.

Amongst various VHF forecast services, Radio Monaco's continuous broadcasts cover from Cap d'Antibes to the Italian border in English on VHF Ch23. In Italy VHF Ch68 is a source of continuous forecasts in English and Italian.

Distances

Port Napoleon to Port du Frioul 24 miles. Port du Frioul to Toulon 39 miles. Toulon to 1113 de Port Cros 34 miles. Ile de Port Cros to Port Frejus 35 miles. Port Frejus to La Gallice 22 miles, La Gallice to Alassio 58 miles. Alassio to Loano 8 miles. Loano to St Margherita Ligure, 52 miles, St Margherita Ligure to Viareggio 57 miles.

Viareggio to La Spezia 23 miles, La Spezia to Lavagna 29 miles, Lavagna to Savona 42 miles, Savona to Menton Garavan 59 miles. Menton Garavan to La Cavalaire 69 miles. La Cavalaire to La Ciotat 50 miles, La Ciotat to Port St Louis 48 miles. Total 649 miles

Contacts

Hydrographic Office (Admiralty charts) Tel: 01823 337900. Imray Tel: 014804&2114. Radiocommunications Agency (radio licences Tel: 02072110215. Registry of Shipping & Seamen Tel: 029 2074 7333. Royal Yachting Association (training & certificates) Tel: 023 8062 7400.