

European destinations

Sailing the English Channel, 18th-century style

It's all hands on deck for tourists aboard a cargo vessel plying the route from Brittany and doing trade the old-fashioned way



The Grayhound, a replica of a three-masted 18th-century customs lugger © Becky Treneer

MAY 6, 2016 3:39 PM

by: **Andrew Eames**

Lying in my berth in the bows, I'd been lulled asleep by the undulant waters of the Chenal du Four, sheltered between the Brittany coast and the outlying Ushant isles. But the change in conditions brought me back awake to find myself wedged onto one side of the berth, on the verge of being thrown out. The rigging was souging above my head, and the Grayhound was bludgeoning northwards like a tractor ploughing a field of rocks.

I could hear footsteps on deck as the other watch brought down one of the sails to reduce the power. With the heeling eased, I had the luxury of lying there for a while, enjoying the surging rollercoaster ride as 64ft and 60 tonnes of boatbuilder beef took on 30 knots of wind and a rising sea.

Eventually my watch was called and I surfaced into the starry night just as the Grayhound, a replica of a three-masted customs lugger from the 18th century, was emerging into the shipping lanes of the English Channel. There

we joined cargo-carrying colleagues many thousands of tonnes heavier, and far more polluting, than us; a sail-clothed David venturing out among smokestack Goliaths. In the dark, it felt a bit like a cat trying to cross a motorway.

We had our own cargo on board, albeit a paltry one: just five tonnes of beer and wine. And yet we probably had more personnel than many of the big ships, with a skipper and mate, a watch leader, two deckhands and a handful of paying passengers. This description makes it sound like some kind of re-enactment, and in a sense it was — a re-enactment of how trade was once done. But it also represented a new initiative, the intersection between two trends: the surge in hands-on classic boat-sailing holidays, and the revival of carrying cargo under sail. The Grayhound was just embarking on its first season of “eco-fair-trade tourism”, where cargo and passengers coexist on the same boat and merchandise is delivered on the fairest of winds and with the ultimate in goodwill.

The cargo side of the deal is driven by Guillaume Le Grand, whose organisation TransOceanic Wind Transport (TOWT) sources the merchandise for cargo-minded sailing boats, as well as finding buyers for that merchandise in a handful of destinations. Although he has a team of five, Guillaume is on the quayside at Douarnenez to help load the Grayhound.



Its steep lanes barnacled with houses and offering glimpses of sea, this Breton port is reminiscent of a Cornish fishing village, but with a bit more sun and a lot more sardines. It is here, too, that TOWT has its distribution warehouse. Inside, Guillaume shows me the wine, beer, tea and chocolate that have so far been the staples of his business.

Sail cargo, he says, only suits certain products: “Wine, for example, is a philosophical purchase, where a lot of factors affect the decision to buy.” The fact that an organic wine may also be sail-carried can add to its marketability, he believes. “Mostly, until now, people haven’t cared about the transport element,” he says. “And even if they do care, the decision is taken away from them. You may want to buy wine in the most fair-trade way but still it gets carried by

high-polluting planes or ships. We are just saying there is a choice.” TOWT’s products are labelled with a consignment number, allowing the end consumer to track the ship’s journey, with details of route, weather and speed.

All this raw information is logged by the skipper, who in the Grayhound’s case is the charismatic Marcus Pomeroy-Rowden. With a whole season of cargo-carrying voyages planned, there is no doubting his commitment to the concept; he and his wife Freya also built Grayhound themselves.

From the perspective of the paying-participant, signing up for a Grayhound voyage amounts to a sailing holiday with soul. “I’ve been surprised how big an attraction it is,” says Marcus. “This is our first year of advertising cargo voyages, and we’re full.” Nor are his passengers the sort of people who want to loll on deck in swimwear. “I think it gives them a good feeling to be involved.”

There’s plenty of chance to do that. The Grayhound’s three masts carry a lot of sail, and all the hemp has to be hauled by hand. The first couple of days of our journey were in the comparatively sheltered waters of the Bay of Douarnenez and the Avant-Goulet de Brest, creating a perfect opportunity to learn the ropes.



On deck © Becky Treneer

We spent a first night anchored in the shelter of the Crozon peninsula, under the winking lights of the beach holiday village of Morgat. Our second night was to be in Camaret, a port that was once the beginning of a long pilgrimage trail to Santiago de Compostela. However the five land-miles that separated the two were hard-earned: the wind was in the north-west,

so we ended up doing 24 roundabout miles in messy seas tacking around the Crozon peninsula.

And the obduracy of the weather hadn't quite finished with us yet. On the third day the wind dropped and the tide held us in its grip, forcing us to grind back and forth across the entrance to the big enclosed sea of the Rade de Brest. This huge port, and its sheltered waters, has played a big part in the revival of classic boat sailing, and will do so again this year with Brest's International Maritime Festival (July 13-19), probably the largest gathering of classic sailing boats on the planet.

On the last occasion, the Brest roll-call featured more than 560 gaff and lug-rigged boats, 117 ketches and schooners, and at least 25 three-masted tall ships. On the final day some 3,000 barques, brigs, pilot-cutters and luggers took part in the grand parade around the bay.

As for us, it wasn't until early afternoon that the tide finally loosened its grip. It took another couple of hours before we rounded the point, through what Marcus called "badass rocks with sticky-out bits", to set the sails for Plymouth.



A meal on board © Becky Treneer

That crossing of the Channel by night had its anxieties, too, with a close encounter with several tugs towing a cruise liner lit up like a Christmas

tree. Eventually it was a pleasure to greet the dawn, despite a Turneresque sea flecked with ocean spittle and squalls of hail. I grumbled momentarily about the weather but Marcus wasn't having it. We compromised by agreeing that it was both horrible, and horribly lovely.

Slowly, land came into sight, and mobile phones pinged back into life. Plymouth's Eddystone lighthouse appeared, along with navy ships practising what Marcus called "Saturday war". We finally entered Sutton Harbour and tied up alongside the Hidden Olive, the restaurant that was to be the delivery destination of some of the cargo. But first there were ropes to tidy, and the luxury of hot showers, before unloading began.

Sadly, I never got to taste any of the wine we carried, although I was assured it was very good. But I have a message to anyone who might find themselves looking at a wine list in a coastal port this summer. Look for organic, sail-delivered wine on the menu. And, as you sip, reflect for a moment not just on the terroir where it grew, with its moisture, soil and sun, but also on the folk that delivered it, with all their sweat, salt and spray.

Details

Grayhound Lugger's sailing schedule is on its website, [grayhoundluggersailing.co.uk](http://www.grayhoundluggersailing.co.uk) (<http://www.grayhoundluggersailing.co.uk>), or at [classic-sailing.co.uk](http://www.classic-sailing.co.uk) (<http://www.classic-sailing.co.uk>), where there's a large choice of other traditional sailing experiences. A seven-day cargo voyage linking the UK and Brittany costs from £525. For more information, go to [towt.eu](http://www.towt.eu) (<http://www.towt.eu>)

The International Maritime Festival of classic sailing ships takes place in Brest this July ([brest2016.fr](http://www.brest2016.fr) (<http://www.brest2016.fr>))

Andrew Eames travelled with the help of the Brittany Tourist Board, [brittanytourism.com](http://www.brittanytourism.com) (<http://www.brittanytourism.com>)

Photographs: Becky Treneer

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