

## **Around the Isle of Wight in a Wayfarer**

For the last two years I have joined the Wayfarer Association's annual cruise round the Isle of Wight. This is the story of this year's trip, told to encourage others to try it.

To take part you need to have a suitably equipped boat and crew. The boat needs at least to be able to be reefed on the water, and to have either oars or an outboard motor as an alternative means of propulsion. A crew of 2 or 3 is allowed. This year I sailed with a neighbour, Phil, who is more of a yachty than a dinghy sailor. You need to be comfortable sailing in a Force 5-6 wind, probably reefed, and you need to be confident you can right a capsized boat without the aid of a safety boat. There are other things you need like a compass, First Aid kit, an anchor, and flares, not to mention food and clothing. Also a mobile phone is required to check in at each corner of the island. The organisers provide a full list of requirements.

One thing you have to do is to prepare a passage plan. For dinghy sailors used to sailing round the cans this can seem daunting, but it really consists of no more than working out your route, working out an estimated average speed, and then deciding what time to start in order to make best use of the tide. I estimate based on 4 Knots through the water, and 1 Knot of tide. For the 55 mile passage, this gives about 12 hours (range 9-16 hours).

55 miles and 12 hours might seem as if it will be very tiring, if you think in racing terms, but when you are cruising, you take things more gently, reducing sail so that you are sitting comfortably rather than hiking hard.

One thing you do have to do is to decide which way round to go. This will depend on the state of the tide. This year on the day of the trip, 6<sup>th</sup> July, high tide at Portsmouth was at 09:00hrs. So the options were to go anti-clockwise (Needles first) and set off at about 09:00 (and perhaps return as late as 22:00) or to go clockwise (Bembridge first) and set off at about 07:00. We opted for the latter.

Navigation on the day is relatively simple: keep the island to starboard! However, I confess to having a portable GPS that I plug hourly waypoints into, so that I can keep track of progress, and see what sort of speed we are doing. It's fun, but not strictly necessary. Whilst I take charts and a compass, I have not needed to use them.

The official start and end of the cruise is Calshot, and there is a safety briefing the evening before there, but we started and finished at Hill Head, and this is no problem.

The evening before we pre-rigged the boat as far as practicable and went off to the briefing at Calshot. There we met up with some of the 6 other crews taking part. The forecast was for a NE Force 3 in the early morning, followed by a SW Force 4 from late morning onwards.

We arrived at Hill Head the next morning at 06:30 for an 07:00 start. Even though we had partially pre-rigged our Wayfarer, Salsa, the night before, there was still a lot to do in the morning, mounting the outboard, and loading the boat, making sure everything was tied down, launching the boat (there was just enough water) and replacing the launching trolley.

We were off! The breeze was lighter than we had hoped for, N-NE force 1-2, and even with the spinnaker set for a beam reach we were only able to make 3 to 3.5 Knots across the slack water prevailing on our route at that time.

We did not see any of the other Wayfarers for some time. After half an hour though we could see that they were mostly a quarter to half a mile ahead of us, and had sailed across to the Isle of Wight, and then followed the coast a little off shore. We were able to catch up with the last of these, having a better angle on the wind to make use of the spinnaker.

As a result of the slow speed we had been making by the time we arrived at Bembridge we were about 2 hours behind our plan. The main concern here was that if we did not get to the Needles within an hour or so of low tide, we would have to fight against a strong tide to get round the Needles. Bembridge is also a key decision point. If you are going to abort, this is the time to do it. Once past here you are more or less committed to going round the island. We considered the situation and decided that we would continue, and use the motor if necessary in order not to lose more time.

No sooner had we done this than the wind died away altogether. We were still moving, because of the tide, and we were able to double our speed from 1 Knot to 2 Knots by turning the boat sideways to the tide and fully lowering the centreboard. However, this was not adequate progress, so we started the motor (I had really been wanting to try it out anyway) and motored across Sandown Bay at 6 Knots. In the bay we found two of the other Wayfarers making very slow progress. Just after we passed them, around Dunose, a W-SW force 3 breeze set in, so we got ourselves back into sailing mode and beat our way towards St Catherine's Point. We were still well behind time, but were now making 6-7 Knots over the ground.

From St Catherine's Point we were just able to fetch the Needles, and as the breeze strengthened to a Force 4 we found ourselves moving along swiftly at 7-7.5 Knots (with tidal assistance). However, the tide was starting to turn, and for the last hour to the Needles we were only making 3.5 Knots over the ground.

When we got to the Needles we found some very confused seas (over-falls) more like mountains than waves (with a point rather than a ridge). There are a number of places where these can occur round the island, depending on the state of the tide and other conditions. Last year we found them off St Catherine's Point. Sometimes you get similar conditions off the clubhouse when waves are reflected off the sea wall. They look scary, but the Wayfarer is very sea-worthy, and we just sailed straight through them. As we rounded the Needles we started to see a lot of boats, we had been almost alone on the water up to then. With the wind behind us, we put the spinnaker up and set off towards Hurst Narrows. Quite quickly we found more confused seas, but we were able just to keep ploughing through them. By now we were doing 8-9 Knots with both wind and tide behind us. We visibly surprised quite a few yachts out for a cruise by overtaking them.

As we crossed Southampton Water, the wind was getting up to a force 5, and so we took the spinnaker down for the final reach back to Hill Head, where we arrived 12 hours after we had set off. There was just one problem, not enough water to get into the harbour or up the slip. So we went for a blast for half an hour, after which there was enough tide for us to get in. This turned out to be quite convenient, because by the time we had put the boat away, the bar was open for a well-earned drink!

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