

Catalan Castaway

A SAIL-AND-OAR STORY

Ben Crawshaw

Lodestar



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71 Boveney Road
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United Kingdom

www.lodestarbooks.com

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Introduction

AT SOMETIME DURING A THICK NIGHT of screaming wind, strafing hail, sky-rending lightning and skull-cleaving thunder, at a time when I might have been put off the sea altogether, forever, I decided I needed my own boat. A 42ft aluminium cutter, like the one we were sailing, which had rounded Cape Horn and which had just demonstrated that it could take all the violence of a Mediterranean summer storm on the ear without flinching would suit me fine.

Almost all of my nautical reading, from Hiscock to Moitessier, had pointed me towards solid cruising boats with cabins and chart tables, galleys and heads, spacious cockpits and Bermuda rigs. The sort of thing you could cross an ocean with in relative safety and comfort. But back on dry land a more realistic appraisal of my spending power rapidly set me on a different path and I found a whole new boating world opening up before me. The world of small, home-built boats that could be rowed and sailed as day boats and, with a few additions, cruised. You couldn't call these simple vessels ocean-going craft, though it was evident that some sailors had achieved

prodigious feats in boats that would, conventionally, be considered piddling. All this, however, was by the by. What I really needed was simply to get on the water.

In my search for the right craft I found many beautiful boats. From the beginner's point of view some looked difficult to build, others were just too heavy, small or boxy but there was one I kept coming back to: Gavin Atkin's *Light Trow*.

This boat appeared to have everything. First it appealed aesthetically, the fine-lined hull, the neatly tucked-in transom, the two-masted rig and, of course, the sweet sheer. Secondly I felt in tune with the attitude and premise behind the design. Recreational boating shouldn't be elitist and in this world of small boats I could see that there were many designers who really were drawing boats for everybody and anybody, Gavin Atkin among them. My boat, for I was quick to feel a sense of ownership, possessed a quiet humbleness, a down to earth simplicity, that only heightened its beauty and appeal. And instinctively I felt it would be a good boat, reliable and efficient under sail and oar but also fun, versatile and forgiving.

After months of research only one question remained: did I have the skills to do the design justice? Could I build a boat with structural integrity or work with expensive materials like epoxy resins, or might my boat be loose, wobbly and skew-whiff, like so much of the shelving in my house?

Taking the first steps on what might prove to be a slippery learning curve I thought it would be worth recording my experience on the Internet. Not that I thought anybody could learn from my bumbling but at least, I reasoned, there might be a few laughs.

I called my blog *The Invisible Workshop* simply because I had no 'visible' workshop. My boat would be built wherever my tools and I happened to be. More often than not this was a communal garden that backed onto my house, but I also took a small workbench and tools with me in the van, and several items were built in car parks as I waited for my children.

The Light Trow had never been built before and I was grateful to have the designer's full support and guidance. After six months, and rather to my surprise, I launched *Onawind Blue*. Here I had planned to wrap up the blog but the Light Trow's performance on the water seemed to beg recording. As I learnt about my boat I happily

discovered that although she'd been designed for lakes and rivers she was, to my mind, also suited to cruising on the sea. And so the writing continued. The *Invisible Workshop* weblog grew and grew.

Then, after my life had taken a few unexpected turns, Richard Wynne of Lodestar Books asked if he might publish *The Invisible Workshop*. I wasn't sure if a blog could be turned into a book but Dick took the reams of material and sifted out the chaff to produce a simple sea story. Those faithful souls who followed the build and the subsequent sailing on *The Invisible Workshop* will find much of the following familiar. Those who come new to the story may find a plethora of nautical terms and jargon that flooded from my pen as I strove to prove, as much in my writing as on the water, that *Onawind Blue* was a worthy sea boat and that I, despite evidence to the contrary, was a sailor. However, it is not necessary to grasp every tack and wind shift to follow the story.

Above all I hope that those who recognise the material as well as those that come new to *Catalan Castaway* will find a simple, enjoyable sea story of the sort that at one time might have inspired me to seek out a design, build a boat and go to sea.

A wide-angle photograph of a calm ocean under a clear, light blue sky. The horizon line is straight and divides the image into two equal halves. The water is a deep blue with gentle, rhythmic ripples. The sky is a pale, uniform blue. Centered over the horizon is the text 'Catalan Castaway' in a white, elegant script font.

Catalan Castaway

Ebro Delta Cruise

I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM A TRIP to the Ebro Delta. Exciting, challenging and ultimately successful, considering that OB and I have returned intact.

Onawind Blue's birthday. A fitting day to leave but despite my best intentions I didn't get going until 11am, the family waving from the beach as OB, under full sail, bore off south-southwest beneath grey skies in a light, easterly breeze. Blessed with a favourable wind we ran quickly down to Tarragona and then, as the wind increased, almost certainly due to the un-forecast deep, dark clouds grumbling on the western horizon, even more quickly.

To windward the gunmetal waters were flecked with white and I knew that I should stop and reef but instead I dithered, dreading turning OB broadside to the wind in order to heave-to. I got my weight to the back of the boat and concentrated on holding our course though OB seemed intent on luffing up. Our speed increased 4, 5, 6, 7 knots and still the wind rose, on a wave I saw the GPS mark 8 knots and made to reef. But then there was a lull and no gust followed. The wind was dying.

Looking around and taking stock I noticed that a distant tanker was bearing down on us. Only just hull up, I reckoned I had time to pass in front of it and began to row. But although I rowed hard I couldn't bring the starboard side of the ship into view. The tanker was turning and OB was too close by far. We spun 180° and pointed back the way we had come. While involved in these shenanigans a small white fender floated by and I hauled it aboard. I threw its few marine inhabitants back overboard and the fender was to prove a valuable addition to OB's kit over the following days.

I once more turned southwest, only to find another tanker pointing its frothing bows at us as well as two pilot boats foaming out of the harbour. Like an elderly pedestrian I hung back looking each way and making absolutely sure there was nothing as far as the horizon before rowing the mile across to Cape Salou.

I thought about stopping here, at Crab Cove where I'd stayed in March, but as the clouds dispersed I had hopes that the wind would return and rowed on. And then I rowed on, and on.

Maintaining a course that kept me in the shade of the mainsail I continued southwest until I closed with the coast south of Cambrils at Montroig Playa – one of the places I had selected to camp, based on studies of the coast using Google Earth, but what Google Earth doesn't tell you, or the chart for that matter, is how steep the beach is, or how rocky. Staying close I scanned the shore for a suitable landing place; the beach, sandy with a line of pebbles just above the low water mark, was prohibitively steep. I looked for somewhere with a shallow gradient and few stones but judging by the disjointed lurching of bathers leaving the water, rocks and stones lurked under the surface too.

South and south, and there was a stony spit. In my experience the sand around spits shelves gradually and this seemed to be the case as small waves were also breaking here. I rowed in small circles just behind them studying the water and the beach. Two rocks showed their tips as the waves sucked back, the shore was more shingle than sand, but anchoring off with no protection didn't appeal. Timing my moment I rowed in till the bows ground into the stones. The boat was extremely heavy with all my gear, another tea bag aboard and I wouldn't have been able to

shift it at all, but it was much easier to lift the bows onto my new small fender than hefting it onto the larger diameter ones.

I noticed a tourist playing with his children, casting glances in my direction. Eventually he detached himself from his family and came over with a big, rounded 'Hi.'

'Hello.' I returned.

'You travelling down the coast then?'

'Well, just as far as the Delta.'

'All on your own?'

'Well yes, but the family's at home.'

'Oh that's the life.'

His wife came over and he explained, 'He's travelling down the coast on his own, he's left his family at home.'

'Well don't you go getting any ideas.' She warned.

I got on with my dinner, nothing special but as this was the first anniversary of *Onawind Blue's* launch, I roused out some wine. Darkness fell as I prepared the boat for the night and huge orange lights lit up the beach spotlighting OB there on the shore. I settled down to sleep in a light as bright as day. Then it started to rain. It rained on and off all night and above the rain the rending crash of growing waves on shingle. With the orange-tinted, grey dawn sky came

the east wind. Damp and uncomfortable, I decided to get to sea as quickly as possible – better to be on the water than stuck on a stony tourist beach with the waves rolling in.

As I was making ready I noticed a woman approaching in her dressing gown. This was Irene, ‘I’ve been watching you from my camper van. I’m an early riser too, and when I saw you with your hood up I thought I’ll take him a mug of hot chocolate, so here’s your chocolate and here’s a packet of biscuits and a Mars bar to keep you going. My husband said, “Oh leave him alone, he’s probably totally self sufficient.” But I thought well that could be my son out there so here you are. I admire what you’re doing so much but I’ll let you get on. Oh if I was 30 years younger...’

Thank you again for your kindness Irene, your biscuits and Mars bar were just what I needed a few days later.

I rigged the sails with a single reef and pushed out. We had a difficult launch amongst rocks and steep waves but got away with nothing worse than a general dousing. We sailed off fast over a brooding, menacingly dark sea but the sky shone bright in the east and I trusted that no worse weather would come – at least there was none forecast.

Mooring, prawns and the Mestral. After a quick two-hour run past a tourist hell, a stretch of untouched coast and a nuclear power station we anchored for breakfast and a doze in a small man-made bay on the north side of Port Calafat. Then onwards with the east wind behind us, exploring every twist of the shore, nosing into small coves, taking the measure of the pretty coast. Due to the size of the waves, I didn’t attempt a landing but pressed on to Port l’Estany just south of l’Ametlla de Mar.

Port l’Estany is a beautiful natural harbour suitable only for small boats. The waves and the wind made the narrow entrance look fairly tricky but we negotiated it without mishap and ghosted down the narrow inlet, the water so shallow in parts that the oars scraped. I eventually dropped the anchor off the stern then waded ashore and tied a line from the bows to a large rock. Then, unhappy with how she lay, I did it all again securing the boat bows to the wind. With everything squared away and OB locked I walked the mile into town.

I spoke to a fisherman in the modern port who confirmed that there would be a strong north-westerly Mestral wind the next day. Then weaved through the narrow streets looking for somewhere to drink a quiet beer.



On the way back to the boat I bought some fresh prawns for supper as Pep was coming down for the night. Though in the event he arrived so late – and we, like a pair of uncoordinated apes, spent so much time in the dark and the rain erecting a tent on the shore and then, like Neanderthals in mud, groping for his flip-flop, which had been swallowed by the ooze – that we just drank beer and ate fruit.

I'd re-moored OB, fore and aft again but with the anchor off the bows, so that she would be head to Mestral if it arrived in the night. And arrive it did. The first prolonged gust waking me as surely as a trumpet blast in the ear, I leapt out of the tent to check the mooring lines. The moon was nearly full and ragged strips of cloud tore across the sky, the wind was raking the shallow water and OB, though moored fore and aft, was swinging. The small amount of Mediterranean tide was noticeable here and now that it was out OB was banging her starboard side on a large stone. It was easier to remove the stone than change moorings again so I waded in, wiggled the stone loose then heaved it out of the way. I checked the lines and returned, damp-footed, to bed only to spend the night waking with every gust and springing to the tent entrance to check that she wasn't dragging. In the end I got up again and, unable

to find a large rock on which to tie another line, took a large bight around the tent. If OB dragged the tent would go with her and I would be woken.

We woke at 7 – Pep had to be at work for 8 – and hurried to strike camp. I rowed him over to his car leaving the anchor buoyed with my small white fender. It was a tricky row with large stones in the shallows and the Mestral blowing hard on the starboard bow. Then I rowed back, picked up our moorings but decided to move somewhere more secure. Once again tied up fore and aft, but this time in deeper water and tucked in to a reedy bank, I went back to sleep in the boat. I awoke refreshed two hours later and still a solid wind blew, sometimes howling past at up to 30 knots.

I cooked the prawns for breakfast with garlic and chilli, then, sailing being out of the question, went for a long walk down the coast to reconnoitre the coves and inlets. This was a worthwhile exercise and having visited a few places that I'd marked on my map as possibles and found them unsuitable, tramped on until I discovered the perfect, private cove, so small and isolated that its name didn't feature on the map. I chose my landing place and cleared away the stones from the beach and a couple from underwater too.

Back at the boat by 3pm I prepared her for sea, double-reefing the sails and re-furling them for smooth hoisting. The Mestral was easing up and I reckoned that by keeping close in under the land I should stay out of the worst. There were no other boats out but this is common even on the most perfect sailing days. The wind pushed us fast down the narrow channel and as soon as we were out I hoisted the sails and stood in towards the land on a gust, we bore away as it eased and in this way made a passage south. Sooner than expected we passed the cove, it had seemed such a long walk but there it was flying by already. The sailing was good, though challenging at times and I decided to continue south to recce and make the most of being on the water.

We passed la punta de l'Aliga and were heading towards Cap Roig when a freight train of a gust ambushed us, screaming through the pines and howling across the water laying us right over and, like a taunting playground bully, whipping my hat away to leeward. OB luffed and settled and, after a while, so did I. But I was annoyed at losing my hat, with many sunny days forecast I would need it, and I determined to find it.

I located the distant hat, soggily bobbing towards the horizon. Then, unwilling to sail broad in the strong



breeze, hove-to, tracking backwards at up to 2 knots until to leeward of the hat. I re-trimmed then sailed upwind towards it as another gust came on. Accelerating towards my hat I pinched at the last moment, hoicked it aboard and slung it in the bilges.

I sailed back up to our private cove, anchored and swam in idyllic solitude, pulled her ashore for a thorough clean and dry out and a meal of sausage with rice. Then finished the day sitting on a rock drinking wine and watching the stars rise up in the east.

No-name Cove to Riumar. Maybe finishing OB's birthday wine had something to do with it but I slept well and late, then, eager for the sea again, I immediately set to my daily tasks. A deal of time ashore involves stowing gear and rearranging lines, many of OB's ropes having one function at sea and another on land, and this morning was no different. At last with everything shipshape and after a quantity of fruit for breakfast, to offset a wine-thick head, we launched into flat water and a whispering southerly – forecast to strengthen throughout the day. Barely making 2 knots we took several long beats down to l'Ampolla, quickly looking into the harbour mouth before gybing and heading east for El Port del Fangar.

A large flat expanse of water protected by a great, low sandy spit on the north of the Ebro Delta, el Fangar was a place I'd been longing to visit with OB, considering it exactly the sort of sheltered water for which the Light Trow had been designed. And so it proved. We spent a fantastic few hours cruising about on all points of sail, going wherever we pleased, weaving among the mussel beds in the growing wind. I discovered that OB can take a lot more breeze if the water is flat, though when powered up and sailing off the wind the tiller becomes very heavy indicating that I might still have too large a rudder. At one point we ran aground, *Onawind Blue's* clearly defined shadow on the soft sandy bottom alerting me to the shallow depth just seconds before the daggerboard touched and OB turned head to wind in a mighty flap. I raised the board clear, the sand had been cotton-soft and we'd sustained no damage. Soon I got wise to the changing bottom and we sped on, occasionally at 6 or 7 knots and sometimes skidding diagonally in thin water with the daggerboard raised.

Then I spotted what I'd been looking for, one of the traditional boats that used to ply these waters. I'm convinced these craft are similar to the Fleet Trow, which inspired Gavin's Light Trow. I've only ever seen one close up and that after wading half an hour through mud and

weed without a camera to discover the boat in an advanced stage of decay. I remembered a slender, though heavily built craft, about 16 feet long, with a plumb bow, a narrow, raked transom, some half decking and a flat bottom with minimal rocker.

This present example was in shallow water and to windward. Daggerboard-less I sat hard on the stern hoping to dig the skeg in more deeply and gain some lateral resistance but then we ran into weed and slowed to a stop as the rudder became ensnared. I raised it and tried to row into clearer water but with the first pull the oar became impossibly tangled in long green locks of mermaid's hair.

There was nothing for it but to back the mainsail and let the wind push us round then glide away downwind, the old boat annoyingly out of reach. Of course the shallow draft boats of the Delta were propelled with quants and as such weed would not have been a problem. I put a reef in the sails, we'd been sailing over-powered for a while, and sped off to round el Fangar lighthouse and so on to Riumar.

I stopped for a quick lunch in inch-thick water and got going again on the increasing breeze. Soon dramatically over-pressed, I stopped to shorten sail, anxiously aware that even double-reefed the conditions would be

challenging. We were in flat water in the lee of low land – no more than desolate dunes, and the sand-laden breeze came brisker than we'd ever seen.

Our destination lay slightly upwind and I trimmed to pinch. At one point, after a particularly savage gust had pressed on us relentlessly until we luffed and sat with loosened sheets and the sails shrilly flapping, I considered striking the mainsail and rigging the mizzen on the fore mast. Had there been more of a sea running I would have taken this option but I saw that safe sailing lay in staying close to the land and beating, keeping as near to the wind as I could.

It was a long sail down to Riumar and after a while I became more accustomed to the conditions. We weren't going to capsize on this point of sail, though at times it felt like it, and I was learning that OB could go further onto her beam before getting into trouble. As my confidence grew I bore away in the lulls until we were sailing close hauled and touching five knots. But it was a wet, wet sail despite the flat water, the short chop boarding with ease over the windward bow.

And so the afternoon wore on, the breeze holding steady and OB and I lapping up the challenging sailing until at last in the evening we reached Riumar soaked and



cold, but thirsting for beer all the same having covered 35 nautical miles at an average of 4.5 knots, and the first couple of hours spent trickling along at 2 knots.

The perilous shore. I used to windsurf at Riumar beach when I practiced the sport more actively and we would often go to the Tamariu restaurant for coffees, beers and sandwiches after sailing. In winter the restaurant would only open on windy days, windsurfers being the sole customers.

Finishing my chores about the boat I left it locked, clean and trim and walked across the sands to the restaurant. I ordered a beer and soon fell into conversation with the people at the bar.

One of the things I've discovered about cruising a small boat is that, not only do you feel good about yourself – you quickly become lean, fit and healthy and the necessarily Spartan lifestyle fosters your sense of independence – but once on shore you are occasionally treated as a rare and esteemed guest. People are fascinated by your journey, eager to hear your story and to buy you drinks.

I vainly succumbed to this, falling in with an animated trio who gave me the nickname of *El Naufrago* (the castaway) and invited me to go on with them for another beer.

And then, before I knew it, I was in the back seat of a rocket-powered car at full pelt on an uneven, dark, tree-lined road, my finger nails digging into the seat covers.

When cruising in a small open boat you spend so much time making provisions for the perils of the sea that you quite forget about the perils of the land. This short car journey was without doubt the most frightening part of my trip, and probably the most dangerous.

But the helter-skelter ride came to an end, I managed to extract my deeply buried finger nails from the upholstery, and soon we joined up with more revellers and settled into the night, Spanish style. I believe I did my wiggly dance at one point, but thankfully I didn't sing. On and on the night flowed while I wondered if I'd ever get back to the boat, if I could find another driver, or if I'd be forced to make my own way home, wading through the mosquito-infested rice fields.

Eventually I reached a dew-soaked OB in the grey dawn light. There was no point putting up the boat tent, instead I donned my foul weather gear, inflated the mattress and crashed out across the thwart.

I was vaguely aware of a tractor cleaning the beach as I slept and when I awoke at noon OB sat on a small untidy island in the middle of a neatly combed beach.

Feeling foolish for wasting the day, though the weather was grey and windless, I decided that the sea was the only cure.

I rowed towards the mouth of the River Ebro, people of the night before had said that sailing or rowing boats never entered the river but I felt that this was due to the almost complete lack of small sailing craft in the area rather than their inability to overcome the flow. I asked about the existence of counter currents near the banks but nobody seemed to know, being accustomed to belting in and out in motorboats – ‘try it and see’ I was advised.

I rowed on, going over the night before and smiling at the memory of a powerful monoglot German who, exasperated at his inability to participate in the lively conversation, assumed the bear hug as his sole means of communication. Repeatedly doing the rounds, crushing the members of our party, until one girl, presumably inspired by his messages of universal love, took him on to the dance floor.

The river mouth, though visible from the beach, was deceptively far away and as the waters turned a murky green I began to feel the current. A lot of rain has fallen in Spain since that fateful day in May when I opened a pot of varnish and the river, though not swollen, was flowing

vigorously. I continued to pull, noting the speed at which rafts of driftwood floated by.

In flat water and with no wind OB can make 3 knots under oars with relatively little effort but now, though making a fine wake, she was only doing one knot over the ground, and the moment I let up she slid off backwards. After an hour of getting nowhere the sun came out and a foul wind sprang up so I decided to quit. I brought OB to rest on a lovely strip of lonely sand right on the river mouth and spent the rest of the day reading and dozing in the meagre shade offered by her hull. Then in the cool evening I took some photos before the camera shut its shutter for good, then made myself a large pan of pasta in preparation for the morrow.

The long, long row. I woke at first light, breakfasted heartily, made ready and slid OB into the Limpopian waters. The forecast was for variable winds in the morning turning south and blowing 10 knots later. For now the breeze blew from the northeast, right on our nose. I row-sailed into it making the most of the favourable river current, but as the sea became bluer I had to row harder to maintain 3 knots, and eventually the wind dropped to nothing.

I rowed and rowed until the Delta sank below the horizon. The massive coast of Spain was 10 nautical miles west shrouded in thick cloud, and for a while I could see no land. It was just *Onawind Blue* and I rolling on a limp swell, the only life on a deep blue disc. I'd rowed myself into a sweat and so deployed the sea anchor and jumped overboard for a swim. Previously I've felt a slight straining on some sort of primitive umbilical cord when I've sailed a few miles offshore but now I felt no such thing until I swam a few strokes away from OB. I was back at her side and hauling myself over the gunwale in a flash.

Some ripples appeared on the water ahead of us and, refreshed, I pulled hard to reach them. Ripples of a feeble wind they turned out to be but at least the sails filled, moving us gently while I rested. A distant squawking and a pink cloud of flamingos passed overhead, I watched them while the gust expired. Willing the cloud to lift from over the land and the southerly breeze to kick in, I rowed and rowed through the oily lanes hoping to pick up the slightest waft.

In the early afternoon, with Cape Salou distant on the port bow, the wind filled in turning southerly and coming lightly but propelling us at 3 knots and promising more. I'd rowed 15 miles and was ready for my lunch. I tucked

into hard-boiled eggs and the nub end of a Catalan sausage with the last of the bread and dried apricots. Too much wind had been one of my worries, a southerly like that of two days ago would have seen a large rolling swell this far off shore, and the Mestral, at this distance from the land, would have kicked up the sort of short, hollow, evil sea that used to open the seams of the old fishing boats, but no wind had also been a worry and I was heartily glad to be moving under easy sail.

The wind held for most of the afternoon but didn't strengthen as I'd hoped. Cape Salou slid by and tankers came and went from Tarragona but we were lucky and far enough offshore not to be in their way. Lying back in the boat under the pure dome of Mediterranean sky, caressed by the languid breeze, I let my mind drift and body relax.

Ten miles from home the wind began to falter and I knew that I would have to row again. It was 6.30, and I decided to give myself until 7 before taking up the oars. I ate some of Irene's biscuits and the Mars bar then started to row in the lowering sunlight, the action now so mechanical that, like walking, I was barely aware of doing it. Slowly I closed with the shore and slowly the sun edged towards the horizon. Soon it became a race; determined to reach home before sunset, I pulled harder grunting and

sweating beneath OB's sagging sails. I knocked 3 miles off the 10 and the next 2 seemed interminable but then there were only 5 and we ate into them eagerly.

Still a way offshore I could make out figures on the beach, evening strollers and sunbathers reluctant to leave, but one group with a little dog looked familiar. I stood and waved randomly and the group waved back. I pulled hard towards the shore and was soon gambolling about the beach with my children as the sun kissed the horizon.

Food. I took enough food to last six days and emergency rations consisting of four dried pasta dishes, a tin of meatballs and some iso drinks. Though the pasta meals are unpalatable except in extremes, they are very light and the packaging is waterproof. I thought that six days' worth of food would be too heavy but actually there wasn't an enormous amount.

My larder contained: one fresh Catalan pork sausage long enough for three meals (here you can buy sausage by length, like rope.) 200 grams of bacon, six eggs, 400 grams of pasta, 400 grams of cooked brown rice, one rather dubious dried Catalan sausage, robust enough to take a soaking, a loaf of sliced brown bread, ten muesli bars, one bar of chocolate, four apples and four bananas.

I also had a small bottle of olive oil, two onions, one head of garlic, dried chillies, tea, coffee and sugar as well as nuts, dried apricots and prunes. The heaviest items were six beers and two bottles of wine, though the wine I decanted into a litre and a half plastic bottle, and finally 15 litres of water in five-litre containers, which I could unload on landing to lighten the boat. Oh, and there's always a bottle of whiskey on board in case I have to entertain.

My family is vegetarian, which practically makes me one, so I usually have a latent carnivorous lust to satisfy, hence the quantity of meat. However, having consumed a yard of sausage in the first two days as well as bacon for breakfast I was again happy to go without flesh. I usually have a craving for spicy food too but, having learned from experience, I managed to avoid the typical, first night gut searing, krakatoan curry.

I took no salt. I love salt and keep a box of Maldon by the cooker, extravagant though it may be, but on a small boat for days at a stretch on a salty sea like the Med there is inevitably enough of the stuff encrusted under the decks, about one's person or on one's lips to make even a bar of chocolate a tolerably savoury snack. I didn't need to resort to scraping salt crystals off the mast, where they

built up nicely, and was more than happy to season my victuals with garlic and chilli.

Outside the family dynamic I eat a lot less. On solitary excursions I know that two meals a day are sufficient. I wake to tea or coffee but am rarely hungry first thing, preferring to start the day and then have a meal around 10 or 11 o'clock. If hunger arrives before that I might eat fruit to tide me over. Then I can go on until the evening before having another meal. I took all this into account when buying my food and aimed to get by with a minimum.

I knew that I'd probably have the opportunity to restock, or that I could call a friend and have them bring me supplies, if I got the raving munchies and gnawed through my provisions in a couple of days. In the event, I bought some fresh prawns, six more beers and another bottle of wine. Pep left me a bag of fresh fruit and Irene gave me a packet of biscuits and a Mars bar. On the penultimate day I filled up two empty water containers from a garden hose.

I also supposed that I might eat out one evening and at Riumar I did ravenously wolf half a shared pizza though it hardly conformed to my idea of 'a meal out'.

In practice my two meals a day were often just one, and sometimes the time between waking and eating a proper

meal was excessively large. Though at times, in a lurching boat, it's just not practical to eat there was always fruit to hand and this was often a godsend. Occasionally sharp set, I was never so hungry as to be uncomfortable.

I brought back one unopened bottle of wine, four muesli bars, a quarter of a bar of chocolate, one egg, 200 grams of pasta, half Irene's packet of biscuits, nuts, apricots and prunes and half a bottle of whiskey; as well as the four pasta meals, the can of meatballs and the iso drinks.

I kept my food in a motley assortment of plastic containers, which I hoped would be more or less water resistant. At all events I felt secure that if I was called upon to hold an impromptu Tupperware party then OB might distinguish herself.

Navigation and cruising gear. I have a chart of the northern part of the western Mediterranean but the scale (1:645 000) is impossibly small for the area I sail in. From Santa Pola, Alicante in the south to Montpellier, France in the north and east beyond Minorca it gives a comprehensive view for passage making from the Catalan coast to the Balearic islands. The chart boasts (in English translation) 'water protected paper' and features 'harbour planes' and 'ampliated marine reserves'.

Striving to be a responsible sailor I felt that OB should have a chart aboard but apart from the issue of scale the chart cost me 24 euros and is far too expensive to get wet (despite its 'water protected paper'). Although I know the coast well – years exploring the windsurfing possibilities of the shore combined with the long term habit of stealing moments to visit new coves or bays – some sort of reference was necessary.

I took two 1:50,000 topographical maps that covered my route. Being maps of the land, the sea was simply represented as a uniform blue. Spanish maps are notoriously bad but I figured that their inaccuracies wouldn't extend to the physical geography of the coast. Using my chart and Google Earth I transposed all useful information (wrecks, lights and buoys) onto the road map. I used the map once or twice to remind myself of the usable coves I'd marked. The GPS also contains all the information regarding hazards but I use it mainly as a speedometer, keeping it switched on to record the complete journey on the trip computer. With good visibility, negligible tides and deep water local navigation doesn't present many problems.

I installed a compass aboard knowing that on the return journey from the Delta I'd be steering a course of

046°. I also carried a hand-bearing compass as a back up which I stowed with the other safety gear; the flares, the signal mirror, the spare mobile phone, torch, gas bottle and batteries.

I set the boat tent up every night and it served to keep off the rain and the dew. Indirectly we still got wet though, as rain or dew trickled in off the decks. A permanent state of damp is an unavoidable feature of small boat cruising and, if you've been dreaming for as long as I have, it's part of the fun. The problem I have with the tent is that it blots out the night sky. Lying in bed looking up at the stars is one of the treats of sleeping outside and although I will still carry a tent I think a bivvy bag would better serve me.

Amongst the other gear still needed to make OB an efficient cruising machine is a solar charger for the phone, a waterproof handheld VHF and a navigation light. Recently row sailing after sunset, the sea suddenly becoming more populated as lights flashed on, I wore a head torch. On a trip after dark last year I hoisted the torch on the main yard, but as the light's beam doesn't cover 360° its worth is debatable. While it's better than nothing it may be more use on my head than on the yard as, were we to get dangerously close to another craft, I could shine it on the sails, or into the eyes of the approaching skipper.