



# THE CHANNEL

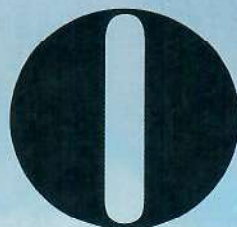
## + HOW TO CROSS IT

*Make the trip over to the Channel Islands or France a rewarding experience. Peter Cumberland shares his extensive knowledge of this open-sea passage*

WORDS: Peter Cumberland







ur mission this month is to encourage more boats to cross the English Channel to the magical harbours and anchorages of the Channel Islands area and its adjacent French coasts. While local weekend jaunts are enjoyable, there's something about an open-sea passage abroad that feels like proper cruising. Yet there's a crucial difference between coast-hopping and being out of sight of land even for a few

hours, especially for inexperienced navigators.

The main anxiety is being caught offshore by worsening weather. All skippers worry about this, but first-timers can't help wondering whether the gods are just waiting for a chance to pounce with a freshening wind or creeping fog. You may also be nervous about crossing the shipping lanes.

Passage planning helps put these fears in perspective, not necessarily military style planning but clearly assessing the complications that could arise at sea and devising strategies to deal with them. For a stress-free trip you need a carefully prepared boat, a well-briefed crew and a route plan detailed enough that it almost seems as if you've made the passage already. Ideally, you want a quiet day with good visibility.

### OUR PLANNING 'PLAN'

The first schematic chart (see page 44) shows cross-Channel tracks and distances from different departure points, with waypoints at either end. The second chart (see page 45) recommends onward routes for exploring the Channel Islands area. Important strategic questions include weather constraints, forecast sources, sea state and making best use of tides. Shipping lanes require focused attention but are rarely as difficult in practice as they are in prospect. You also need some contingency tactics ready in case of deteriorating weather.

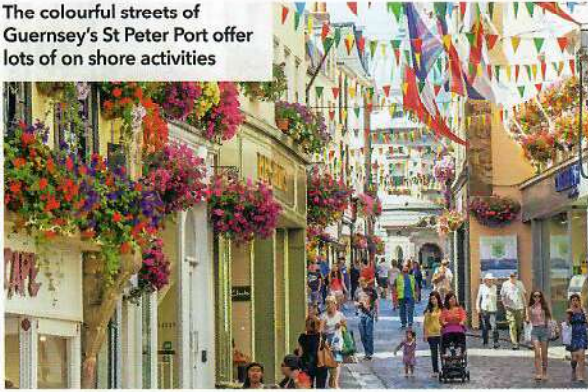
Apprehension before departure is quite normal, but if the forecast looks OK the great thing about passages is to set off! After a while, if conditions are fair, any nervousness will ease as you settle into the routine of monitoring your position and avoiding ships and fishing boats. When you spot a smudge of foreign land, you can savour the satisfaction of mariners through the ages who have braved the elements, been edgy along the way but finally reached a strange exotic shore. And to be moored in a French or Channel Island harbour at the end of the day is a sensation which never palls. ►



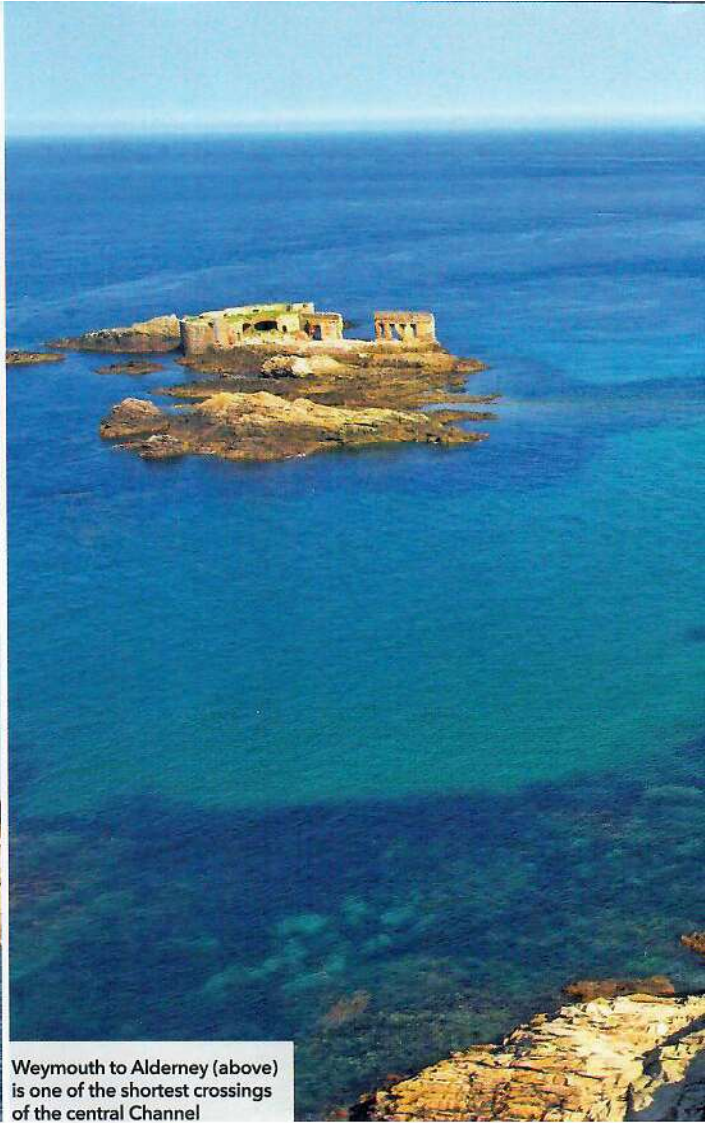
The unmistakable Needles - a departure point for so many Channel crossings



The colourful streets of Guernsey's St Peter Port offer lots of on shore activities



The St Malo breakwater with its distinctive lighthouse. It is 54 miles from St Peter Port



Weymouth to Alderney (above) is one of the shortest crossings of the central Channel

### WAYPOINT AND ROUTE PLANNING

Waypoints and routes should be set up well in advance. Your departure point can be some handy outer buoy easily reached by eye, but for arriving it makes sense to enter waypoints virtually to your visitor's pontoon, in case of murky visibility on the day.

For a crossing to Guernsey, for example, arrival waypoints should continue right down the Little Russel to St Peter Port pierheads. The Channel Islands are notorious for summer fogs, but with a detailed route set up it's not difficult to approach Guernsey in thick conditions. For a Cherbourg landfall, set waypoints inside the main breakwater, to take you across the Grande Rade and into the marina.

Neaps are generally best for Channel crossings, to reduce the risk of steep wind-over-tide seas. For the same reason, fast boats should time their passages either spanning slack water or with wind and tide in the same direction.

### CONTINGENCY PLANS

Think about fall-back routes in case weather forces you to switch destinations. For Poole to Alderney, for example, work out approach waypoints for Cherbourg as well, so that you can easily divert in a freshening south-westerly or poor visibility. On a crossing to Cherbourg, it's sometimes worth setting off towards a mid-Channel waypoint two or three miles upwind of the direct track, allowing scope to turn away from the seas if conditions should freshen in the second half of the passage. Always share your plans with your crew so that they understand your thinking. It makes for a more interesting passage and a sense of teamwork.

### PASSAGES

#### NEEDLES OR POOLE TO CHERBOURG

The 60-mile track from the Needles to Cherbourg west entrance crosses a 15-mile band of shipping at an acceptable angle. A similar crossing from Poole cuts the lanes almost exactly at right angles. Fairly simple navigationally, these familiar routes should never be taken for granted. The Channel can turn rough quickly in the wrong conditions, when a family cruising boat suddenly seems small and vulnerable.

In clear weather the bold north coast of the Cotentin Peninsula is an easy visual landfall and shows well on radar. From the Needles you come in a couple of miles east of Cherbourg fairway buoy and from Poole a little closer. My arrival waypoint is about 250m west of a circular stone fort at the west end of Cherbourg's central breakwater.

You need to be aware of shipping. Cruising south from the Needles or Poole you meet down-Channel shipping first. Although in open water you have notional right-of-way over ships crossing from port, try to alter course or speed in good time to show you intend passing under their sterns, unless you are obviously crossing well ahead. Up-Channel shipping has right-of-way as you cross from the north and will expect you to keep clear.

When you first see a large ship it hardly seems to be moving, but the rate at which a distant blob becomes a massive hull is staggering until you know that container ships can cruise at up to 25 knots, laden tankers about 14 knots and Channel ferries up to 27 knots. Fast ferries bat along at nearly 40!



**JERSEY TO ST MALO**

Most Jersey boats cruise down to St Malo east-about Les Minquiers, a 35-mile run nicely sheltered from westerly swell. Within two hours of high water you can head straight for the North Minquiers N-cardinal buoy before tracking south towards the SE Minquiers E-cardinal. This line leads east of Le Coq red-and-white beacon. From the SE Minquiers buoy, it's 12 miles down to La Conchéc fort and the most direct way into the St Malo estuary.

**ST PETER PORT TO ST HELIER**

This 25-mile passage is a pleasure in quiet clear weather. From St Peter Port, set off for a waypoint a mile west of La Corbière lighthouse on Jersey's south-west corner. This keeps you clear of drying heads off La Corbière and lines you up for the Western Passage along Jersey's south coast, inside more drying dangers.

**BRITTANY DESTINATIONS FROM GUERNSEY AND JERSEY**

St Cast has a soothing marina where you lie below a wonderful Riviera headland of soft pines and villa gardens, looking towards a crescent beach. Binic is an amiable seaside town with a cosy marina reached near high water across a mile of drying sand. At springs the gate opens for two hours before high and at neaps for only an hour.

With all-tides access, St Quay marina is ideal for family crews, with excellent bucket-and-spade beaches and bistros galore. Ten miles north of St Quay, Anse de Paimpol is a magnificent, quintessentially Breton inlet.

As you come in, the rocks to starboard are not hostile fangs but friendly breakwaters stretching towards Île de Bréhat. At the head of the bay, Paimpol town clusters round a sizeable harbour reached through a lock. From Paimpol outer

