

Cross Channel Passage Tips

Based on a brief prepared by John Kibble (Chairman Northney Berth Holder's Association)

Managing the Channel crossing from [say] Chichester harbour to Cherbourg is a straight forward navigation plan and there is little to fear if thorough planning is done before undertaking the passage. Here are a few tips which you might not find in the usual training book for those who may be making their first Channel crossing passage.

1. Check that fuel tanks are full as well as the spare can and that the engine[s] has been carefully checked and serviced. Carry some tools, some basic spare parts and some spare engine oil.
2. Make sure that the skipper and each crew member has a VALID passport.
3. Make sure that the correct [up to date] boat documents are on board. [Registration details such as Part 1 registration, Small Ship Registration, plus vessel insurance details and a vessel VAT receipt are sometimes required for French Customs if asked]
4. Make sure that the correct paper charts are on board. Don't rely on electronic charts. Have a current almanac on board.
5. Make sure that each person has a life jacket and harness! [Mandatory under "Division 240" in France]
6. Make sure you have your VHF licence certificate on board. [You may be asked by French customs]
7. If you have a DSC VHF, input to the memory the MMSI numbers of the UK and French Coastguard.
8. Check that crew members know how to operate the VHF.
9. Make sure you have told someone ON LAND your passage plan and ETA.
10. Make sure that there is an inflatable and/or a life-raft on board. Also check that the life-raft service is in date. [Mandatory under Division 240 in France]
11. Make sure that all flares are in date and **do not carry** out of date flares. [Mandatory under Division 240 in France]
12. Make sure that a detailed written LOG is maintained of the passage. [French customs sometimes ask to see it!]
13. Make sure there is sufficient fresh water on board for the duration of the passage.
14. Make certain that there is a FRENCH COURTESY FLAG on board and hoist it well before entering French waters at the top of the starboard flag halyard. It is proper and professional to use the red ensign when out of UK water, not a defaced blue ensign, although the French officials usually turn a blind eye to blue ensigns.
15. Carry a first aid kit. Make sure that any crew member requiring regular medication has a supply. Take the European Health Insurance Card, one for each person to obtain reciprocal medical aid if required when in any EU state.
16. Have a good Channel tidal atlas on board to plan the best use of tides.
17. Make certain that there are the correct number and up to date fire extinguishers on board. [Mandatory under Division 240 in France]

The passage plan is not difficult to set up, but again some tips that may be helpful.

1. Waypoints.

Many sailors enter the waypoints of Chichester Bar beacon, then the EC2 mid channel and finally the East entrance of Cherbourg. That is fine, but often the biggest hazard can be the local sea fog along the French or UK coast and onto the land behind. It is wise to add waypoints from your home marina and along appropriate key positions out of [or into] Chichester harbour to lead you to the exit of Chichester harbour (or wherever you leave from). The same applies to your arrival at either the east or west entrance of the Grand Rade of Cherbourg. Remember, it is at least another 2 miles to cross the Grand Rade to enter Chantereyne marina. Do not mistake the entrance and go into the French navy port next to the marina!

[Several times, I have had to lead other yachtsmen into the Cherbourg marina during foggy conditions from the outer Rade as they had no waypoint marks to cross the often busy Cherbourg outer harbour in poor visibility and they could not see or identify the marina entrance.]

It is no problem in good visibility as you can easily navigate by sight. But a nice dense coastal mist will leave you groping around completely lost inside Cherbourg's big harbour!
It is better not to use the cardinal or can buoy positions as waypoints. Fix a waypoint close to each buoy as everyone else will have probably used the actual marks with the likelihood that all vessels are too close at the obvious waypoints.

At night time, these extra inner harbour waypoints will be really useful. The navigation lights entering Cherbourg are not very visible from seaward. But the real problem is the massive intensity of the land lighting which makes it nearly impossible to pick out the red and green entrance channel marker lights.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Useful waypoints could be the:-

1. NE. Hayling red can buoy or Emsworth channel buoy.
2. Marker green can buoy
3. NW Pilsey green can buoy
4. A waypoint at the narrow entrance into Chichester Harbour.
5. Chichester Bar beacon

For Cherbourg East entrance:-

1. East Entrance to Cherbourg
2. La Vache red can buoy
3. The end of the Petit Rade wall
4. The actual entrance into the Chantereyne marina.

Maybe it is best to time the arrival from an overnight passage when it is getting daylight which will make things much easier and more relaxing. [We are normally two on board our yacht, but we never set up a watch system for a 12 hour sail either during the day or night. There is a lot of traffic in the English Channel, so four eyes are better than two! You can always have a sleep once safely tied up in the marina.

It is wise to have waypoints set up for secondary ports in case there is a need to divert to another landing place. EG. Omonville, Dielette, Alderney, St Vaast, Barfleur.

2. The Channel tides.

It will probably take most yachts about 12-14 hours from Chichester bar to the entrance of Cherbourg harbour which is convenient as one gets about 6 hours of tide in either direction. However, strong spring tides run at 3 knots plus in mid Channel so it is important to keep this in mind when crossing the two lanes of shipping. The shipping lane on the UK side is heading west and that on the French side is heading east. At a distance, ships appear to be going quite slowly, but as they approach, their 20 knot plus speed means that they can be closing you very fast. It is wise never to cross in front of any large vessel if it means that you put your vessel on a heading into the tide. It will slow you down considerably and make it difficult to keep out of the way of fast commercial shipping. In most cases, I find that commercial shipping usually keep to the Col Regs, but never trust anyone! A hand bearing compass or a compass binocular can be very useful to check the bearing of large vessels. The best is to use the radar if fitted as one can track the speed and direction of any vessel using the EBL control. AIS is a very useful tool but radar is more important. Take lessons to fully understand radar or at least read a decent instruction book on small ship radar.

At night, it can sometimes be easier to monitor all shipping, their direction and position by their navigation lights as long as visibility is good. These lights can be really helpful to monitor shipping direction and speed; but obviously you must swot up your navigation lights and light signals. But night time brings another problem! Fishing boats, particularly purse seine vessels fishing in pairs can be a tricky hazard and will need a very wide berth to keep away from trailing nets. Best to know your lights for fishing vessels before you set off. Personally I recommend you take an experienced skipper for the first night time passage to point out the light signals and how best to identify these for safe navigation. It does not take too much time before you can easily spot the light navigation signals and use them efficiently and safely.

Lastly, the tides across the entrance to Cherbourg run up to five knots during spring tides. Calculate carefully the best track to arrive "up tide" at the entrance when your yacht is at least ten miles out of

Cherbourg to avoid the tide pulling your vessel across the entrance leaving you to enter the Grand Rade against the tide. In strong spring tides, an entry against the tide can be almost impossible unless you have a strong engine and strong wind across the sails to power against these incredibly powerful tides. Use them to your advantage and you will cut the sailing time down drastically and really enjoy the trip. The finger berths in Chantereyne are not long, around 8 to 10 metres max. Prepare your crew with good clear instructions for berthing having placed fenders and set up mooring lines well before finding an empty space. Report to the marina reception as soon as possible!

Eating Tips

We like to use empty plastic ice cream boxes for food consumed on longer passages. These are high sided so keep food warm and it cannot blow about in a windy cockpit; also it keeps hot food warmer for a longer time than on a plate. They are plastic so cannot break or do any damage if dropped. One can prepare food before the trip and keep these plastic boxes in a handy place ready to serve at short notice. We particularly enjoy some hot food on passage and can recommend a supermarket Quiche Lorraine for two persons. It is so easy to put into the oven and heat for 30 minutes before serving into the plastic boxes together with some salad perhaps. It makes a really tasty lunch and something hot and sustaining. Marks & Spencer or Waitrose ones are best in our opinion and in France the Carrefour ones are just as good or even better!

Happy and safe Channel crossing, John Kibble.

NB. In France, the requirements for sea going pleasure craft [more than 6 miles offshore] has been changed on 15th April 2008 under something called Division 240. The previous Division was number 224 and 225 dated around 1987.

If you want to see the full details, go to Google France and type in DIVISION 240.