

June 14, 2005

We finally pushed off from Lagos, Portugal, on Saturday afternoon, April 16. We never dreamt when we departed Lagos that it would take us almost two months to reach the Balearic Islands.

We day-hopped down along the coast to Cadiz, Spain, making terrific time. We sailed either on a broad reach or beam reach with winds NW or W 20-25 knots, with gusts a few times to 30 knots. Our first night we anchored in Portimao, 8 nautical miles east of Lagos. The next day we sailed 40 nautical miles to the Faro/Olhao tidal lagoons, anchoring for the evening off of Isla Culatra. Monday we traveled 50 nautical miles to Huelva/Mazagon, Spain, anchoring near where Columbus set out on his first voyage to the New World. That evening with our arrival in Spain, we moved our clocks ahead one hour. Tuesday, April 19, we traveled the last 40 nautical miles to Cadiz, taking a berth at Puerto America Marina just outside the historic town.

The old town of Cadiz, situated at the tip of the narrow peninsula, was considered to be one of Spain’s oldest towns. Because of its strategic maritime location, it was highly coveted by early seafaring civilizations: first the Phoenicians, then the Carthaginians, and last the Romans. During the 17th and 18th centuries, most of the treasures from the New World arrived in Cadiz, especially after the Customs House was moved from Seville to Cadiz in 1717. During this period as Spain’s principal trade port, Cadiz flourished into a beautiful 18th century Spanish town with lovely architecture, narrow streets, and many plazas. As we had sailed almost the same exact route in our boat as that taken by Spain’s Fleet of Galleons returning from the New World with their treasures in the 17th and 18th centuries, we were excited to be in Cadiz.

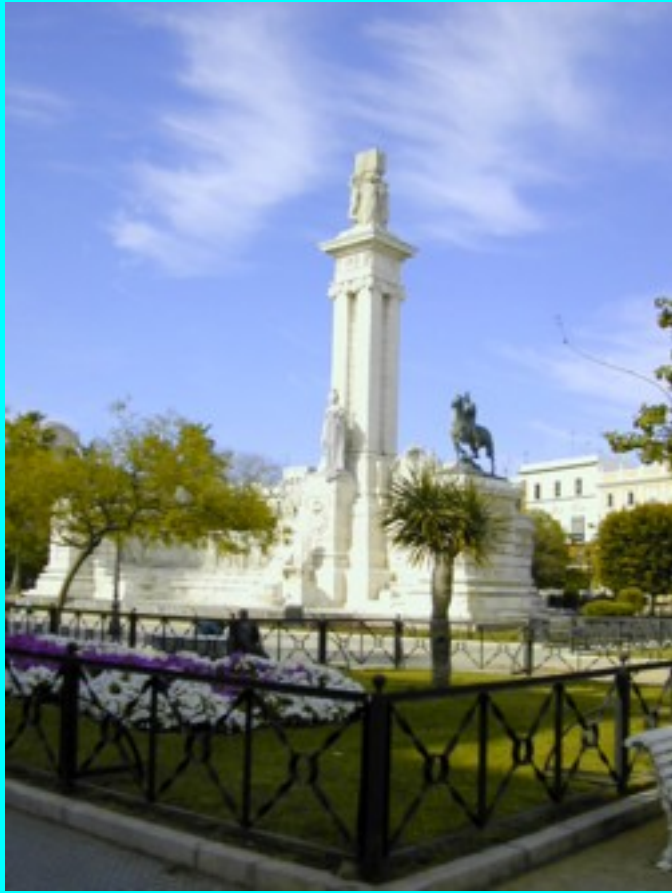


While in Cadiz we enjoyed walking its streets admiring the beautiful architecture and lingering in a few of its plazas. We visited the Cadiz Museum housing Phoenician and Roman artifacts, a variety of art paintings, and the marionette collection of Tia Norica, a well-known puppet company that settled in Cadiz in the 18th century; the Museum of Las Cortes of Cadiz displaying the historic events of the city during the 18th and 19th centuries; and the Oratory of Santa Cueva where Goya painted three murals on the chapel’s high walls. On Thursday we took the bus to Jerez to see the “dancing horse” show at the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art



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We also climbed to the top of two towers in Cadiz. The first one was the west tower of the beautiful Cathedral of Cadiz where we enjoyed a panoramic view of the city. The second one was the Tavira Tower. During the 18th century, Cadiz was known for its many watchtowers. There were 160 watchtowers in all. The Tavira Tower, being the highest, was the official watchtower of the town and port during this period. At the top of the tower we observed in a darkened room a “camera obscura” which had been used to observe the town and surrounding waters. With the use of a mirror and a magnifying lens, the images of the surrounding area were projected onto a white screen inside the darkened room.



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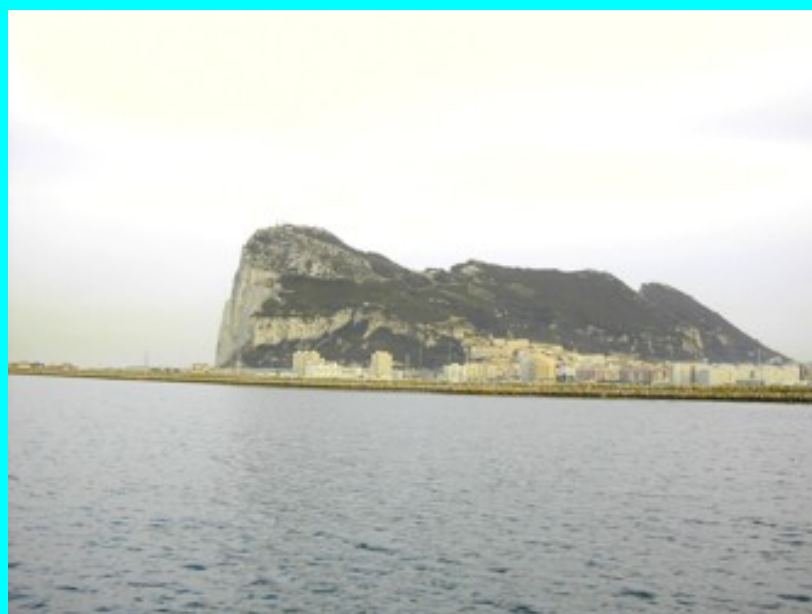
Monday, April 25, we departed Cadiz for Barbate, 33 nautical miles away. We first motored, then sailed, encountering sloppy seas much of the way. With our arrival in the Spanish fishing town of Barbate, we saw for the first time the coastline of Africa. From Barbate we were only 18 nautical miles from Tarifa, the narrowest point of the Straits, just 8 miles from North Africa.

The marina at Barbate was considered to be the best place to wait for the right winds and time to travel through the Straits of Gibraltar. As the Straits were narrow and surrounded on both sides by mountains, a wind funnel effect was often created. Winds could be two to four times stronger in the Straits than elsewhere, with gale force winds half the time. Upon our arrival in Barbate, the winds changed to gale force easterlies. We ended up staying seven days in the Barbate marina waiting for the winds to come again from the west. Each day we looked forward to receiving our daily e-mail weather forecast from Phil's brother, Roger, in Boerne, Texas, to determine when to transit the Straits of Gibraltar.



While waiting for the weather to change, we spent many enjoyable afternoons and/or evenings socializing with other cruisers. One of the joys of cruising was meeting new people and sharing information, plus running into cruising friends from previous ports. This scene took place at the marina in Barbate, and it repeated itself over and over again throughout our transit to the Balearic Islands.

Finally on Monday, May 2, the wind changed back to the west, and we were able to travel through the Straits of Gibraltar. As it was 35 nautical miles from Barbate to Gibraltar, we wished to maximize our speed through the Straits. To do so, we needed to take into account the tidal flow. As we were traveling east we didn't need to worry about the current as there was always an easterly flow due to water lost in the Mediterranean through evaporation. But, to take advantage of the tidal flow, the best time to leave Barbate was 3 hours before high tide at Gibraltar. For us that meant departing Barbate at 8:30 am. With little wind, we first motored, then motorsailed our way through the Straits of Gibraltar, enjoying a 3 knot favorable current. During our transit, we saw 10 to 15 ships traveling the Straits.



What a joy it was to finally see the Rock of Gibraltar and know that we had arrived in the Mediterranean. Around 3 pm we cleared customs in Gibraltar; about 5 pm we obtained a berth at Marina Bay. That evening we opened a bottle of champagne to celebrate our arrival in the Mediterranean. As the sun was setting, the red sunset reflected onto the white Rock causing the Rock to glow a beautiful red. This red glow occurred only on this first night during our stay, making our welcome even more special.

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Gibraltar was 2.3 square miles in area, and this huge limestone rock, 1398 feet in height, occupied most of the narrow peninsula. Because of its strategic location, the Rock was full of much history. The first Neanderthal Skull in 1848 was found in Gibraltar. In ancient Greek legend, the Rock was one of the “Pillars of Hercules”. In 711, the Muslim leader, Tarik ibn Zayid, crossed from Africa to the Rock beginning the Moorish conquest of Spain. His name for the Rock, “Djebel-Tarik” (meaning Tarik’s mountain) gave rise to the word Gibraltar. During the 300 years of British possession, the Rock became an impregnable fortress.

We spent 6 nights at Marina Bay. From the marina it was only a short walk into town. When the cruise ships were in, the main street was jammed with tourists. From our berth we enjoyed a spectacular view of the Rock, and each night the north face of the Rock near us was lit up with white lights. To be in Gibraltar was like enjoying a little bit of Great Britain. English was spoken, the pound was the currency, English foods were stocked on the grocery shelves, and there was a little bit of English pageantry. Unlike in Britain, cars drove on the right hand side of the road.



*A reminder for our British cousins*



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During our stay, we took the cable car up to the top of the Rock and then “walked the Rock”. On the Upper Rock we encountered the “Rock apes”, which were in fact not apes but tailless monkeys known as Barbary Macaques. As we walked down the Rock, we visited St. Michael’s Cave (where in the grotto we observed a fascinating cross-section of a huge stalagmite), the Apes’ Den, the Great Siege Tunnels (excavated during the Great Siege of 1779-83, the last of 14 sieges since Britain’s possession of the Rock in 1704), the Military Heritage Center, the City Under Siege Exhibition, and the entrance to the World War II tunnels (where the invasion of North Africa was planned by General Eisenhower). In all, there were now over 30 miles of tunnels inside the Rock as well as a potential underground city. We also took the bus to the lighthouse at Europa Point, the southernmost tip of Gibraltar, visited the Gibraltar Museum, and watched the weekly “Key Ceremony” pageantry involving the locking of Landport Gate, the only entrance to the town during the 18th century.



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Late Sunday afternoon we left the marina for the anchorage in La Linea, Spain, about a mile from Marina Bay. Winds were strange at times around the Rock, and that night we were awakened suddenly to 37 knot winds. For a half hour the gale force winds blew and a few boats dragged; then as quickly as the winds came, they left and all was calm again.

Monday morning we departed the anchorage and motored 35 nautical miles to Smir Marina in Morocco. While traversing the Strait, we saw lots of dolphins. Unfortunately for half the passage, we incurred a countercurrent of 1½ - 2 knots. With our arrival, we set our clocks back 2 hours as Morocco was on Portugal Standard Time.



We had an amazing stay in Morocco, especially as the Moroccan culture was so different from ours. The Moroccan people were genuinely friendly and gracious and at no time did we feel unsafe. We experienced Morocco with Uli and Imke, a German cruising couple whom we had met in Lagos. They spoke French, and with their love of new foods they introduced us to a Morocco that we would never have experienced on our own.

On Tuesday, we all took the taxi into M'diq, a short distance from Smir. Here we visited the local market and enjoyed a Moroccan meal at a local café. The next day the four of us rented a car. On Wednesday we made a quick visit to Tetouan before driving east along the back roads of the Rif Mountains to Ketama and then south to Fes for the night. Thursday morning we visited the Medina of Fes, and then in the afternoon we drove to Chefchaouen before returning to Smir.



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We have many wonderful memories of these days in Morocco. The Moroccan food was delicious, and we enjoyed the variety of mild spices they used in their cooking. Throughout our trip it became a tradition for the four of us to end each meal with a glass of hot Moroccan mint tea. The marketplaces were exciting to experience; all were full of beautiful vegetables and fruit, varieties of olives, figs, and spices, plus much, much more.



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Morocco is a beautiful country. We enjoyed a variety of scenery on our drive to Fes from the cedars in the Rif Mountains to the rolling hills of olive trees and wheat fields further south. During our travels, we stopped often to ask Moroccan policemen for directions as the road signs weren't easy at times to follow. We saw more donkeys and mules during these two days than we had seen in our entire life as both were still widely used for both work and travel in the rural areas. On our drive through the small villages in the Rif Mountains it was common to see only men sitting at the coffee bars. As we were hungry we stopped at one of these restaurants for lunch, and yes, Imke and I were very aware that we were the only women. We will always remember our lunch there. It consisted of sardines, the only dish served. Butcher paper was our plate, and we ate with our fingers.



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In each of the towns, it was really the Medinas, (the old, walled Arabic towns) that we actually visited. In Morocco it wasn't necessary to visit museums or old buildings as the streets of the Medinas were the sights to see. To walk the streets was like being transported back in time. We used guides in both Tetouan and Fes as these very populated Medinas were full of a labyrinth of narrow streets and passages. We watched craftsmen work, visited a few carpet shops, and saw a Moroccan "herbal" pharmacy.



One of the highlights of our trip was our visit to the Medina of Fes, the most ancient of the imperial capitals in Morocco and considered to be the most complete medieval city in the Arab world. As such, the Medina of Fes was a world heritage site. The older part of the Medina dated back to the 9th century A.D., while the newer part was established during the 13th century. Quite a few of the old buildings were now supported by exterior structural wooden beams. We saw so much during our five hours in the Medina; it was definitely an "overload of the senses".



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We watched wool being cleaned in an old Berber inn which previously housed Berbers and their donkeys when they came into town. We heard children chanting in the Islamic schools and heard the call to prayer over loudspeakers from top the mosques. People still used community ovens to bake their bread, community fountains to gather their water, and “Turkish” baths for cleansing. Amazingly, the Medina was very clean, and even the donkeys and mules transporting supplies into the city along the narrow streets had “poop” bags attached.



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Mid-afternoon we left Fes and headed to Chefchaouen, 3 hours away. We couldn't have ended our trip in a more beautiful and pleasant Moroccan town. We were awe-struck by the beauty of this Medina with its white and blue buildings. We enjoyed our last Moroccan meal here watching the sun set on the hills and mosque with sounds from the loud speaker calling the men to prayer. After leaving Chefchaouen it took us two hours to drive back to Marina Smir. We had seen so much in such a short time. Morocco was a land of many contrasts, and it definitely exceeded all of our expectations.



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Friday we rested. Saturday morning we departed Morocco and enjoyed a great sail with west winds and a favorable current of 2 to 3 knots back across the Straits to Spain's Costa del Sol. This entire coastline was full of resorts and condos. It had become the "Florida" of Europe and was especially popular with the British. We spent our first three nights along the Costa del Sol at Duquesa Marina, 45.5 nautical miles from Marina Smir. We enjoyed this marina, and the International Food Fair Festival taking place during our stay added to its ambiance.

Tuesday, May 17, we departed Duquesa and sailed 40.5 nautical miles to Benalmadena Marina enjoying 20 knot west winds and a favorable current of 1 knot. By the time we arrived at the marina, though, the wind had picked up to 25 knots and the surge was coming straight into the harbor. In hindsight, we should never have gone into the marina. But, since there was no mention of problems at this marina in our pilot book, we thought things would be different once inside. It ended up being a very long two hours.

Although we had made a reservation, no one answered on VHF when we called. We circled and circled inside the breakwater, almost 30 minutes, waiting for a space to become available at the reception dock. Then, our engine suddenly quit. This had never happened before, causing us concern as the wind was quickly moving us into some moored boats. We started to drop our anchor when one of the marina boats came alongside to help us. Luckily, we were able to restart our engine. Somehow, the fuel pump had accidentally been turned off. Once alongside the reception dock, we were next startled when a "significant" surge came into the harbor lifting our boat and then smashing our teak caprail in two places against the dock's permanent fenders. To hear that crunching sound of wood was horrible; all we could do was watch in disbelief. Last, they assigned us a berth between two large powerboats. The heights of our boats were unequal making med-mooring difficult. With the wind blowing 25 knots, it was impossible to fend off one of the powerboats with our size fenders as the wind was pushing us directly into its side. Since his side curved out over our stanchions, a few of our stanchions were bent in the process. By the time we finished mooring, we were physically and mentally exhausted. The next day we purchased four large fenders in case we ever had to come alongside a large powerboat another time while in the Mediterranean.

The tourist development at Benalmadena was very impressive. Unfortunately, the winds had now changed back to the east. Surprisingly, west winds were no longer even mentioned in any long term forecast; only easterlies. This meant that the only way to continue our travels was to wait for the winds to become variable and then motor east. Finally on Saturday, May 21, after 4 nights in Benalmadena, we were able to motor 50.2 nautical miles to Motril, anchoring for the night just inside the harbor breakwater. Sunday we motored 37 more nautical miles to Almerimar, arriving just before the winds picked up to 20 knots out of the east. Once leaving Motril, the landscape changed. Now instead of big tourist developments, the coastline was covered with white plastic-covered greenhouses. Most of all northern Europe's winter crops were grown inside these greenhouses. As this region was covered with miles and miles of white plastic covering, it was referred to often as "Costa de Plastica".



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We spent 6 nights at Almerimar waiting for weather. Early Saturday morning, May 28, we departed Almerimar. From our weather report the winds were variable, and it looked like we had a window of about 3 days before another NE storm was to hit our area. We felt we could make it to Cartagena, Spain before then.

The most southeastern point of Spain was Cabo de Gata. At times it was difficult to round this cape as two different weather patterns converged here. We motored the 20 nautical miles to Cabo de Gata, but as soon as we rounded the point we were hit with strong northeasterly winds and swell. Even though motoring hard, we couldn't make any headway and so retreated to the lee of Cabo de Gata and anchored for the night. Late Sunday afternoon we attempted to go around Cabo de Gata a second time. With no wind we made it around the cape, but once on the other side encountered the northeasterly swell. Even though we were able to make headway, it wasn't much, and so returned to our anchorage in the lee of Cabo de Gata.

With our return to this anchorage, we knew that we were here until after the storm passed. Monday afternoon through Thursday morning gale force winds blew, with one gust maxing out our wind indicator at 60 knots. Lots of sand and salt water blew horizontally across the water onto our boat, and this yellowish sand became embedded everywhere, sticking like cement.

Friday morning, June 3, we finally departed this anchorage and traveled successfully around the cape. With no wind, we motored 55 nautical miles to Aguilas and anchored for the night. Early Saturday morning we motored the rest of the way to Cartagena, 31.5 nautical miles.



We really liked Cartagena, Spain. It was a beautiful old Spanish city, full of much history. During our stay we med-moored at the marina in front of the of the old town. In the early evening it was fun to watch the locals strolling along the waterfront esplanade, many dressed in their best Sunday clothes. As the Spanish navy had its Mediterranean naval base here, we had fun putting up and taking down our flag each day in time with the Spanish navy bugle. Also, we were finally able to get our passports “officially” stamped back into the European Union by the port immigration police in Cartagena. As we were a non-EU boat cruising in the European Union, we were allowed to be in the EU for 18 months before having to pay a huge tax (around 18%) on the value of our boat. To restart our EU-clock, we needed to exit the European Union. We did this by going to Morocco. Since our return to Spain from Morocco, this was the first port we could find to get our passports stamped.

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In Cartagena, besides cleaning sand off the boat, we visited the 13th century castle on top the hill with a beautiful view of the harbor and ancient Roman theater, plus also some of the archaeological sites left by the Carthaginians and Romans. We were impressed with how the city of Cartagena displayed these discoveries. We visited a Punic Rampart, a Roman religious building, a Roman road, and an old Roman house. Interestingly, it was from Cartagena that the Carthaginian general Hannibal started his famous expedition across the Alps with about 40,000 troops and a force of elephants to fight the Romans in the Second Punic War.



Sunday morning, June 12, we departed Cartagena for the Balearic Islands, 137 nautical miles away. The weather report predicted light southerlies. Instead, we had variable winds and crazy seas and so mostly motored with just a little motorsailing. By early evening the seas calmed down making for a more comfortable passage. That evening we crossed the Greenwich Meridian, officially marking our transfer from west to east longitude. At noon on Monday, June 13, almost two months after our departure from Lagos, we arrived in the Balearic Islands. We anchored in Cala Sabina on the northern end of Formentera, glad to finally be in these islands.

We plan to spend almost two months enjoying the Balearic Islands before sailing to Barcelona, Spain. Our present intention is to spend a couple of weeks in Barcelona before heading to Sardinia and Corsica. We will be in Rome, Italy, around the first of October.

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