

Raz de Sein

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We left Audierne at 12.30, having hung around all morning waiting for the right time to leave. I figured it would take up to three hours sailing to get to the Raz, where the pilot book told me that the north going stream started at 3.05pm, six hours before high water at Brest. The wind was quite light through the morning, but backing round from northeast to north and promising to get stronger. With the route to the Raz just north of due west, our passage toward and through it would be against the wind.

The peninsular which ends in the Pointe du Raz reaches out westward for 10 miles, between the Baie d'Audierne to the south and the Bay de Douanenez to the north. It ends in the Pointe itself, a narrow peninsular with a sharp and high rocky ridge, which drops down to the sea at the passage we know as the Raz de Sein. The rocks continue under the water so that the passage of the Raz itself is shallow and the sea bottom uneven; and they surface again less than two miles to the west to form the Ile de Sein and the surrounding rocks of the Chaussée de Sein, stretching another 30 miles out into the Atlantic. The Pointe is not the most western point of mainland France, although probably the most dramatic. However, is as part of the peninsular of Finistère, where France reaches out west into the Atlantic, and past which huge quantities of water surge in and out of the Bay of Biscay and the English Channel. The Raz itself is marked by lighthouses and beacons: La Vielle lighthouse and La Platte west cardinal beacon on the east side; Le Chat south cardinal beacon and Tèvennec lighthouse to the west.

A sailing yacht needs to go through the Raz de Sein on a passage north or south, in order to avoid the much longer passage outside the Chaussée de Sein to the south and further north the Île de Oussant. But the geographical characteristics described above mean that the Raz is potentially a hazardous place for a small yacht: the tidal streams are complex; they change rapidly from south going to north going, so there is little slack water between tides when the flow actually ceases; the shallow depth and uneven bottom mean that the water surface is rarely calm, kicked into short sharp waves by the movement over the rocky bottom; all made potentially worse at spring tide when the streams are fiercer; and when the wind blows against the tide, as today with a north wind against the north going stream we intended to pick up. So the Raz is a critical 'tidal gate'—one has to carefully pick one's time to go round, arriving just at the point that the stream changes to get the best chance of calm water.

So I always feel a slight anxiety when approaching a passage round the Raz, and feel relieved when I have done so. Five of the times I had taken a yacht round as skipper, I had got the timing just right, so the passage itself had been smooth and uneventful, almost an anti-climax. Only once, when sailing with my son Ben, we left Camaret in the North just a little too late, so that even sailing fast in a fresh westerly breeze we had arrived at the Raz after the North going stream had set well in and was running fast and turbulent, so that the surface covered in the white water of overfalls. We chose to press on, since the west wind gave Coral

plenty of power and speed and judging the water was not dangerously rough. As we approached, Coral bounced around in the rough water, hitting the waves and sending up showers of spray in all directions. Holding on tight, we pressed on, roaring through the water at some 6 knots, but looking out at the La Vielle and La Platte markers moving so slowly past each other we could see we were making scarcely any progress past the land itself. But we made it in the end, inching out the southern side into the relative calm of the Baie d'Audierne, and making our way on South. It was dramatic, maybe a little foolish, yet enormous fun.

Today the weather was fine and the winds moderate, although promising to freshen during the afternoon, as they had done for the past three days. We sailed close-hauled along the coast, keeping far enough out so as not to be in the wind shadow of the cliffs, but not losing too much windward advantage. I also carefully studied the detailed French '*carte de courants de mer*', which showed me the direction and speed of the tidal flow hour by hour and told me that I needed to keep close to the coast in order to take advantage of the west going tide, because further out to sea the last of the south going tide would take the boat in the wrong direction. We were joined by three or four other yachts making for the Raz, some sailing, some more cautiously motoring; and as we got within a mile or so we could see the sails of more yachts travelling south to catch the last of the south going stream.

As we sailed west, reaching the Pointe itself, the mainland coast dropped away back into the Baie des Trépassés just to the North of the Pointe, and beyond that the Pointe du Van and the larger Baie de Douarnenez, leaving us feeling more exposed to the open sea. La Vielle and La Platte stood out clearly to the north, and far out to the west we could see the Île de Sein, the sunlight catching on the houses so that they appeared to float just above the horizon, and its Men Brial lighthouse floating in a mist. We could now see the open water of the Raz itself flecked with white and the south going yachts pitching in the waves as they came through the narrows, and then setting off more calmly to the south west, many of them setting their spinnakers for the passage across the Baie d'Audierne to the Pointe de Penmarc'h. As expected, coming away from the shelter of the land the wind increased to a fresh breeze from a little west of north, so our first tack north took us too close to the La Platte; but after another short leg east, we were all set clear to pass through the centre of the Raz.

With mainsail and genoa both hauled in close and the wind on the port bow, the Aries self-steering held a steady course close to the wind. Coral heeled over well to starboard, pitching over the short and steep waves, the bows one moment raised high, and the next crashing through a wave. At this angle of sailing, the port bow is held high above the water, so only when the occasional bigger wave hits it does water shower over the decks, rattling on the spray hood and making us all duck out of the way. In contrast the starboard bow, low in the water, works its way through a solid bow wave, green water topped with white foam which from time to time rushes down the leeward side deck, threatens to spill into the cockpit, but drains away safely.

Gwen, Rupesh sit on the windward side of the cockpit, legs braced yet flexible to move with the motion of the boat. I stand in the middle, booted feet wide apart and knees flexed, watching the motion of the bows over the spray hood and ducking below it when the spray threatened to hit me in the face. From time to time I would go down to the chart table down below, checking the tidal charts and the GPS—which shows that while the boat speed through the water is some 4.5 knots our speed over the ground, hastened by the tidal stream, has increased to well over six knots.

This is now gorgeous. The afternoon sun behind us lights up the blue sea and white foam. A line of white horses to starboard marks some change in the stream as it rushes round past the beacons. As we move now quickly north the view constantly changes: La Vielle and La Platte move relative to the land and each other and our view of the Pointe de Raz changes rapidly; our track from Audierne disappears; the Baie de Trépassés opens up fully, and then round the Pointe du Van we can see the land slip back directly East into the Baie de Douanenez. This is an ideal passage: fast, dramatic, exciting yet completely safe. As we leave the Raz behind and the water quietens somewhat we settle down for the long beat northwards toward Camaret.

This is a very special passage to make, a great privilege to be one of a relatively few people in Europe to go past this dramatic headland. We can see people standing on the Pointe de Raz, outlined against the sky like Gormley sculptures. They too must have a dramatic view, but it is the landsman's, not the seaman's view. The experience of the Raz is open to those who are prepared, who have the boat and equipment, who study the weather and the tides. If you get it right, it can be awesome; but if you get it wrong it would be very frightening and maybe deadly. Getting it right means being with the conditions, not trying to fight them: even when Ben and I were late for the tide and found ourselves creeping slowly past the headland, conditions were still 'right' (although closer to 'wrong' than one might wish!). Today we are storming through the water and taken on fast by the tide on a sunny day with sparkling sea and scudding clouds. We are entirely with the conditions and are treated to a dramatic view of land, sea and sky. It is very special.

It is this sense of witness I am trying to reach for. I want to say that passing the Raz safely means participating with tide and weather, not going against it. In contrast to the '*vedettes*' that take tourists out for *gastronomique* experience of *fruits de mer* on the Île de Sein, which force their way through the water with brute force of huge diesel engines, a small yacht can only work with the conditions, not against them. This 'witness' includes the work of generations of shipwrights, sailors, marine scientists and meteorologists who have studied the tidal flows and the weather conditions, and provide me as skipper with a boat capable of making the passage with the information I need to make the right decisions. With my almanac telling me the time of high tide at Brest; with my charts of *courants de mer* showing how the tidal streams change hour by hour; with my pilot book telling me that the north going stream starts 'about' 6 hours before high water at Brest; and with my electronic navigation equipment telling me exactly where I am moment to moment, I am part of a community of seagoing

people, professional and amateur, who have studied the coast and sea and created the capacity for me to participate with conditions in the way I have described.

Yet there is still a frisson of anxiety as I anticipate and plan the passage past the Raz, a slight relief when approaching one sees other yachts on the same course, confirming that one's calculations of time and tide are correct, and a sense of delight tinged with relief once it is clear that the passage will be successful. Imagination can run riot: we might be swept onto the rocks at La Vielle, or pounded to pieces in the overfalls. Anxiety lies in the anticipation, for the actual practice of the passage itself, once everything is set up correctly, and the boat is working well with wind and tide, is straightforward