



Cross Channel Capers

"We were constantly on the edge of catapulting, but couldn't slow down as the French authorities were in hot pursuit..."

The amazing story of **Guy Cribb** and **Antoine Albeau's** windsurf from Cherbourg to Poole. Pix by **Steve Doidge**...

Plenty of people have windsurfed across the English Channel. It's only 20 miles or so at its narrowest point; no big deal. However, no one has tried to sail from Cherbourg right across to the centre of the UK's south coast - that's an entirely different sort of challenge. Here's Guy's story, along with that of photographer Steve Doidge.

"There must be easier ways to get windsurfing on the TV", I thought as I was bounced high out of the water and twisted round in midair off the hellish chop, on the verge of a catapult for about five hours, with cramps almost everywhere!

We left Cherbourg at 10.00am (9.00am UK time) in a south-westerly wind with Antoine Albeau on a 6.7m NP RS Racing and I on Starboard iSonic, and me on a 5.8m North Sails Ram and IOL Mistral Slalom board. By the time we hit the wind line we also hit confused chop in the notorious currents around the Cherbourg Peninsula. In the first hour both Antoine and I stacked it a few times, losing control while overpowered and sailing really broad - the sign of things to come. We couldn't slow down though as the French authorities were in hot pursuit. We didn't have permission to leave their shores, so we needed to cover the first 15 miles or so as fast as possible. Needless to say, they

didn't catch us! As the waves got bigger we began to lose sight of each other and the boats. If one of us had fallen and hadn't been able to lift the rig, we may well have had to use our flares to attract the boat's attention, even though we were never more than about 100m apart.

Tough in the Troughs

It was incredibly difficult sailing, as down in the troughs the wind would die away to nothing and you'd drop right off the plane, only to rise to the crest of another wave and suddenly be totally overpowered, accelerating wildly out of control down a mountain into a pit filled with snarling chop.

The chop was insane - massive triangles of pain that constantly caught us out. Slamming into it stopped our acceleration so suddenly that our sails became instantly and totally overpowered, forcing us to really put the muscles into overtime. I often found myself bounced into midair and slowly twisting before a jolting flat landing, and all I could do was hang on for grim death through the spin-out with arms burning, or just accept my fate and flop into the ocean.

Then came the supertankers... Silently appearing out of the murk, firstly just as huge grey shapes, then as colourful giants churning through the Channel with engines groaning (even in that wind), absolutely trucking along, relentlessly steamrollering through the swell.

We had to take several stops, and there was one time I really thought I couldn't go

on. Antoine and I sat on board the English rescue boat whilst the French boat kept an eye on our kit, which was adrift for about 30 minutes. We were both feeling very seasick, as was pretty much everyone on the boats. I was weak and uncomfortable having been stuck on port tack for so long - when it came to jumping off a relatively safe boat for my kit, with Antoine already up and running on his, I could barely bring myself to do it. By now I was cold, sick, in pain and with zero energy. Oh, and lots of cramp too. Everywhere. Indeed, I was experiencing what was possibly a world first - I even had had cramp in my thumb...

Home Run

At one stage the GPS was indicating we were about 10 miles to windward of the direct route, but despite the agony of being

frozen on one tack, we had to get close to England before we made any decisions to change tacks so we powered on. As it was, after a slight change in the swell and probably wind direction, we arrived in UK waters just off Durlston Head west of Swanage Bay - only a mile or two upwind of Poole, so almost a direct hit. Knowing we only had a few miles to go and nothing could stop us, we then spent about 45 minutes playing for the cameras off old Harry Rocks and Swanage, full of renewed energy.

We landed at speed onto Sandbanks Beach to a mass of media - more press in fact than windsurfing has had in the UK for maybe 15 years, after six hours of being at sea and probably nearly five hours of serious blasting. We were totally oked; so much so the pains seemed insignificant.

We'd tried to do it high-tech, but



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unfortunately the live online progress tracking system malfunctioned in the brutal conditions (it worked perfectly on Ellen's yacht sailing around the world - shows how rough it was on the RIB!), and my phone died in France, hence the lack of photo/text updates. Nevertheless, thanks so much to everyone who e-mailed, called and texted their support. Also to everyone who has donated to the Ellen MacArthur Trust at www.justgiving.com/windsurf. Your help is going to change the lives of lots of children and their families next year, taking them from an unimaginably low point to a place that I can only think is an even greater high than the elation we feel when everything comes together windsurfing in a perfect storm.

A special thanks to Martin Coward, one of Intuition's guests, who very kindly funded most of the expenses of this crossing AND has donated thousands to the Ellen MacArthur Trust through this challenge. Without his generosity, this Channel Crossing and its associated fundraising simply would not have happened, so a big hand to him! And of course thanks to Animal, who supplied my rescue support in the form of large RIB and two skippers, and helped look after all the press and the French team in the UK (and for all their years of supporting my various hair-brained schemes). And of course a major *merci beaucoup* to Antoine Albeau, Wind magazine and the French team for their assistance and hospitality.

We said we'd do it in the first storm this autumn, and we did it. We also got windsurfing on TV on four BBC and four ITV shows, plus lots of radio and local press coverage. And most importantly, we have raised nearly £9,000 so far for the Ellen MacArthur Trust.

What's Next?

As with Tony Hawk's and his series of ever more outlandish feats (*Round Ireland with a Fridge*, *Playing the Moldovans at Tennis*, etc), lots of people have been asking me what's next? But to be honest I can't believe we could achieve a tougher challenge than this one, as this was right on the limit. And we only just made it - within an hour of arriving the wind dropped and swung offshore and local windsurfers were being rescued by the RNLI. We sailed from one country to another in a storm, never had to change sails and bottled the whole journey in the harshest of conditions with a sinking boat. Even the world champion said it was extremely tough, and much harder than he'd ever imagined.

The Photographer's Story

"How do you fancy doing some photos?" Cribby asked, in his classically casual manner. "Antoine and I are going to windsurf across the Channel!" OK, sounds cool, I replied. Calais to Dover shouldn't take long...

Next call from Cribby: "Everything looks good for Monday and the ferry is booked Poole to Cherbourg..." CHERBOURG!? The penny drops. Six hours in the stormy seas of the Channel. Oh Shit!

The ferry journey over was very nice, so Neil the video man and I suggested to Guy that we could stand on the back of the ferry with coffee and croissants while filming and they could windsurf back behind it. Unfortunately they weren't having any of that, and I was fast running out of escape ideas.

The last supper in France was a very jovial affair, but the friendliness of the locals was slightly overshadowed by nervousness tinged with excitement. Next morning the beautiful French sunrise was no taster of

what was to come. An hour of flat-stick blasting to escape the coastguard saw us out into huge swell and chop, the boat being tossed around like a cork and trying to take to the air or fall over at every opportunity. Oh I so wanted to be at home in front of the telly with the fire on!

Three hours in and the trip had definitely lost its appeal. I seriously wanted to get off, and I think Guy did too. He came alongside and said he was knackered, cramped up and had back pains. It wasn't looking good since we were only half way! But he'd got us out into this mess so we threw him back over the side to carry on. Onwards we crashed, into huge waves and through the busy shipping lanes, coming across colossal ships that totally dwarfed us.

By the four-hour point I had totally lost my sense of humour, and wondered why anyone with a sound mind would go out in weather like this by choice. I was feeling really sick, despite taking three anti-nausea tablets (with the words 'Maximum one a day' on the box). We stopped again, and Guy and Antoine came aboard the horribly pitching boat, wanting to do some pictures. I refused, each time I bent down I wanted to throw up. Guy and Neil also couldn't look down, so the skipper had to get it for me and we just managed a shot without throwing up. Vincent, the photographer on the French boat, threw up three times!

Another hour passed (seemed like 10) and Captain Bligh and first mate said we should see land soon and I would feel better. Lies! We didn't because of the awful weather. And eventually, when we did, all I could think was never again. With land in sight Guy and Antoine played up to the cameras like school kids under the Dorset cliff faces before landing to a hero's welcome. We mere mortals were left to unload the boat and discover all our waterproof bags had leaked and all the cameras that we'd kept away from the weather were all trashed. Fortunately though, all the images survived bar those from the very beginning of the trip. Would I do it again? Only if I had it in writing (blood, preferably) that it would be the two-hour trip I expected when that phone first rang!

Steve Doldge