

THE CROSSING

ANTOINE ALBEAU AND GUY CRIBB WINDSURFED for six hours on one tack, in gusts of 30 knots of wind, mast high swells and across some of the world's busiest shipping lanes to make the crossing from Cherbourg to Poole.

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The English support boat was sinking. As a result, the usually nimble RIB was a blustering fool and romped either only at full speed, or no speed. I cursed at it endlessly as it took my wind just when I needed it, or wiped me out with a frustratingly large and side swiping wake. This was not to fault of the skippers, it was the fact the boat was full of water. By the time we reached the UK we'd lost £6,000 of camera/video kit to the swamped decks. Waterproof bags within waterproofs bags were even penetrated by the endless waves into the cockpit.



It wasn't until I wrote this feature that I realised filling up my water bottles from a French tap was the cause of my stomach cramps. Within an hour of leaving the beach, some three hours after my first tap water drink, I was in pain. It continued for the next five hours!

"AT ONE STAGE I LAY IN THE WATER FOR ABOUT FIVE MINUTES, FORGETTING HOW DEEP IT WAS OR WHAT LAY BENEATH, DOING SOME KIND OF SHARK ATTRACTING YOGA SESSION"



THE BEGINNING

"It's er 25 knots eur forecast er, I will take my 7.2m er" the man with the world's largest hands told me, our current windsurfing world champion, and world's fastest sailor. "And I'll take a 5m thanks Antoine, it's 25 knots right, 5.0 weather." "Non, 25 knots is 7.2m for sure?"

I had to remind Antoine time and again that whilst I merely had legs, he had giant columns between his waist and board that would not crumble.

We both compromised, he took a 6.7m and I took a 5.8m. We were both on full on slalom boards: 111 and 110 litres respectively, but designed for sprinting not for iron mans... I took a 30cm fin, because in my experience doing hell downwinders, when you loose control sailing overpowered really broad, you tend to harden up to the wind with the fin's lift burning into your back leg. So to soften this I used a smaller fin that would just give a little when gusts hit. However mine was too small, giving so much it frequently spun out in the chop, draining me to the core. Antoine used his trusty 40cm fin, which would have broken most peoples' legs, but like I said, Antoine has stone columns instead of legs.

We were escorted by two 8.5m RIBs with 250 and 300 BHP engines. The French RIB was much wider and more seaworthy with six lunatics on board including Antoine's dad at the helm. The English RIB with four on board was half sunk and lost about £6000 of camera gear as waves washed right over it.

SWEAT AND TEARS

The sky was low, wide and grey. The sea rough, slate and bowl shaped that hid us from each other for most of the journey. It felt dangerous and lonesome.

I hoped for a big rolling sea; large waves I could traverse, sliding downhill on, taking the wind from my sail so I could just surf and relax my arms. And we got large waves, massive ocean swells but on them were two metre moguls blocking our path, and the surf was a tartan patchwork rather than corduroy lines, creating some of the choppiest water I've ever seen.

The big problem was that far out to sea, the swell lines travel directly downwind, making it very hard to stay in them. Closer to the shore the swell wraps in, ultimately crashing parallel with the beach, making it much easier to stay on them. Since I have never windsurfed more than about four miles from land, I had never had the misfortune of having to sail such awful conditions. The wind was much lighter in the pit too, so my general sailing routine for some hours seemed to become this: Accelerate madly in massive gust at peak of wave, muscle the kit onto hell downwind course peaking at around 30 knots for a second or two, fly down hill into a gnarly dungeon of broken chop, slam uncontrollably into the back of one and loose all speed, just as the wind vanishes from my sail. Stall, get washed to the peak and find the 30 knot gust again!

At the half way stage I needed to get on board as after windsurfing on the same tack for about three hours, I was in pieces! I left my kit and swam for the boat. With a rising wave I was virtually washed on board.

GUY CRIBB TECHNIQUE

Antoine joined me. The French boat stuck with our kit and we all sat adrift, at some speed, thirty miles from land. To rub salt into our wounds we were informed that we were about ten miles to windward of the direct route. There's a rule in sailing that you should always sail the course that takes you closest to your next mark first. And this route would mean another 30 miles of windsurfing on the same tack as we had just done for the last thirty miles!

PAIN IN THE NECK

Now that I've experienced sailing for over five hours on one tack, I would say it was as hard, or harder, than sailing for twelve hours sharing tacks. I'll be very surprised if I can ever walk straight again. Even after a week recovering I still feel pains in my left side.

At one stage I lay in the water for about five minutes, forgetting how deep it was or what lay beneath, doing some kind of shark attracting yoga session desperate to relieve the strain of being twisted in one direction for so long. Whilst I was in pain, I just told myself that if ten year old kids can recover from serious illness with the Ellen MacArthur Trust, I'm sure must be able to battle on today. And I had to really believe that a few times to keep going.

TANKERS

Amidst the jagged grey horizon a darker shape sometimes appeared and Antoine or I would be pointing with fear and excitement at what would become a large ship.

Our paths crossed a few times at right angles to super tankers pushing into the eye of the storm at over twenty knots. Not a soul on deck. Engines roaring and their steep wake fighting with the swell. They would charge into a colourful view and then fade to grey in minutes; much faster and more dangerous than I imagined. We would not show up on their radar so like flies we buzzed them.

FINAL GROAN

Suddenly I saw land! I was so thrilled! I didn't look for it or expect it, it was just suddenly there! And with it all fear and pain vanished, we upped our pace big time and had boundless energy.

Coinciding with the sighting, the swell began to drag along the English coast and wrap in towards the shore. In doing so it finally gave us the long down hill rides we'd been desperate for. Antoine and I both clocked over 30 knots now (Antoine hitting 32.4) and we covered ten miles in no time. I could see a busy shore ahead. We rocketed passed the other windsurfers out there and shot into the beach at full tilt trying to give the media a great impression of what we can do. I'd thought to myself earlier in the day "there must be easier ways of getting windsurfing on TV" as this had been a seriously tough day at the office!

Within an hour of arriving the wind dropped and swung offshore and local windsurfers were rescued by the RNLI. We sailed from one country to another in a storm, never had to change sails and battled 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 ever imagined.

30 miles from land we were on a collision course with a hundred metre super tanker cranking at 25 knots straight into the wind. Until you've seen these ships on their motorways you might think they just manoeuvre slowly and only pussy foot around. Wrong!



A few miles off the French coast I signaled I was OK to the crew on the UK RIB. So far so good. Within a few miles of this shot though, I was in pieces.



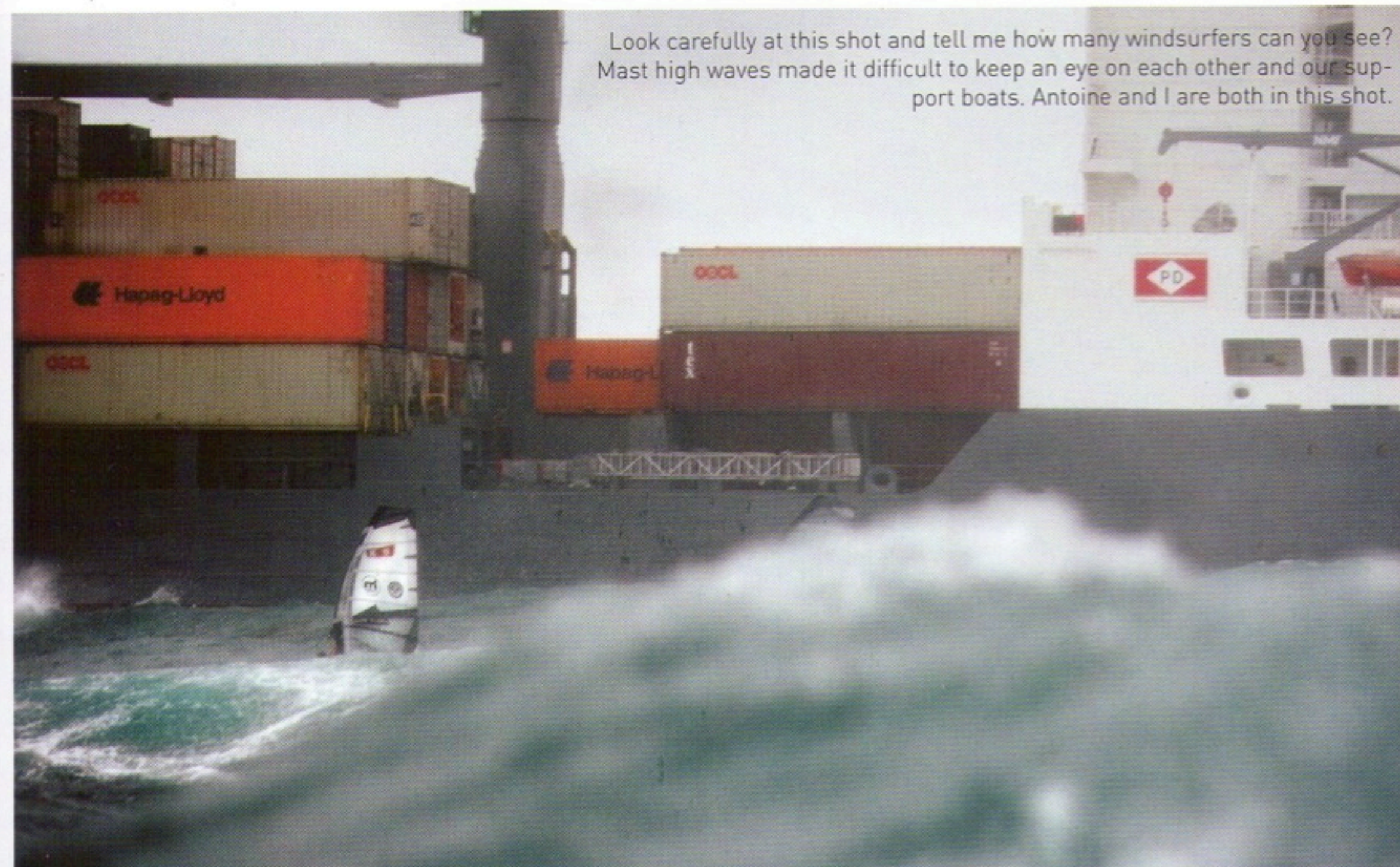
Quite remarkably, we'd sailed from one country to another in an October storm powered up on the same sail for nearly six hours. We arrived just west of the cliffs of Old Harry, seen here, that I know so well from decades of windsurfing in the Poole area. Sailing from Sandbanks to these Cliffs has always been quite a trek, until now. My perception of distance has been radically shortened!

Once we arrived in the UK at 'Old Harry Rocks' we played to the cameras for about 40 minutes before heading into a 'heros welcome on Sandbanks.' Our total sailing time on port tack had been nearly five hours. Sailing on starboard tack away from these cliffs was such a relief - we were literally jumping for joy!

"IF TEN YEAR OLD KIDS CAN RECOVER FROM SERIOUS ILLNESS WITH THE ELLEN MACARTHUR TRUST, I'M SURE MUST BE ABLE TO BATTLE ON TODAY"



GUY CRIBB TECHNIQUE



Look carefully at this shot and tell me how many windsurfers can you see? Most high waves made it difficult to keep an eye on each other and our support boats. Antoine and I are both in this shot.



Antoine was not sure where to come ashore, so it was inevitable that I would reach the beach first in my home town of Poole, much to the joy of the London press who thought I'd pipped the Frenchman to the post!



There were six crew on Antoine's RIB and four on mine. With the sea sickness in the chop and rolling swells, if we had needed to re rig on board mid channel, it would have been disastrous and virtually impossible! Antoine and I had it tough, but these guys had it tough too!

THANKS

I have received so many texts and emails offering congratulations and showing support that I can not answer them individually, but they are all very welcomed, so to all you "massive thanks for that support."

Also to everyone who has donated to the Ellen MacArthur Trust at www.justgiving.com/windsurf, we have raised £10,000 so far and your help is going to personally change the lives of a number of children and their families next year. We will take them from a low point most of us could not imagine, to a place that I can only think is an even greater high than the elation we feel when everything comes together in a perfect storm. Also 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 it's associated fundraising simply would not have happened, so a big hand to him! Also 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 hair-brained schemes.

Merci beaucoup to Antoine Albeau, Wind magazine and the French team for their assistance throughout and their hospitality in France, and to FJB Hotels in the UK for generously putting all the French team up in the Sandbanks Hotel.

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Mumm Champagne on the beach - infinitely better than French tap water! What you can't see in this image is the wall of media lined up from all over the UK. It was sooo good to get windsurfing on the telly and fantastic to be greeted by my son Rocco.

