

Differences in Cross-Channel Passage Making

It struck me recently that there are marked differences between tackling a Channel passage from the Solent and striking out across the Straights of Dover.

Navigating the English Channel from the Solent has the same external considerations as crossing the Dover Straits or, I suppose, any sailing passage to anywhere; including wind; sea-state; visibility; tides and shipping.

In practice, you treat some of these factors differently according to distance, your experience and your attitude to risk.

For example, a forecast strong wind and deteriorating sea-state later (that is 12 or more hours later in Met Office lingo) wouldn't necessarily put you off a passage across the Dover Straights.

With a well-found boat, a deadline to meet and a strong and experienced skipper and crew, this forecast might not deter you from a passage to Cherbourg but it could give you pause for thought and extra preparation.

On the other hand, my own idea of an ideal 48 hour forecast for any cross-Channel passage would be a smooth or slight sea-state; force 3-4 winds and perfect visibility :-)

Solent to Cherbourg

Tides and shipping need to be traded-off in planning a passage across the Dover Straights but there is no such conflict on a passage from the Solent to Cherbourg; the odd jig through the shipping routes aside.

For Cherbourg, passage planning techniques vary from the simple: "*keep your chart plotter pointing at the destination and follow that course regardless of tide*". That's grossly inefficient for the distance involved but widely practiced I'd warrant.

The efficient approach sums up the effects of the tide hour-by-hour to arrive at a course to steer which, all being well, would describe a gentle tidal "S" shape course over the ground to drop you close to your chosen entrance to the Grande Rade with a favourable tide across the harbour entrance.

Dover to Calais

My view is that you have to pay extra attention to the following considerations for a Dover Straights passage:

Communications

In this section, I use the term VHF rather than DSC deliberately, but that's a subject for another day.

It's not wise to attempt entry to the port of Dover or cross the Channel without a receiving and transmitting VHF radio, preferably two sets; a ship's set and a portable set.

A bit of an aside, my last time into Calais was a little choppy. The portable VHF slipped off the cockpit locker, bounced around the cockpit sole and spilled its rechargeable batteries. I retrieved them a few days later when I was in Sovereign Harbour. After I replaced the batteries, I reasoned that I should attach the portable VHF to my harness using the radio's wrist strap, so that I didn't drop it in future. Bad move; as I climbed off the boat to prepare to cast off, the radio caught on a guard wire, the wrist strap snapped and the radio dropped into the marina. I replaced it at my next port of call (Newhaven - excellent chandlery) with a super-sturdy VHF that floats!

It's convenient to set your ship's VHF to SCAN if it's available. There are 4 essential channels (including Channel 16) and it's a bit of a fiddle to constantly switch channels when you have enough else to keep you occupied.

For the same reason, it's handy to use a portable set for communicating with port control (Dover and Calais).

Don't forget to switch off your ship's VHF radio when transmitting on your portable set to avoid feedback :-)

Keeping an ear on the following VHF channels can relieve a lot of potential stress.

- Channel 11 - Channel Navigation Information Service (CNIS)
 - Useful/interesting/essential safety broadcasts.
 - Reputedly, the channel on which you will be first contacted if you breach TSS regulations.
- Channel 74 - Dover Port Control
 - Contact for permission to enter
 - Contact for permission to leave

- All ships passing down the English side of the TSS report into (or are contacted by) Dover Port Control. It's useful to know what's about to appear from the east.
- Inbound and outbound ferry traffic reports into Dover port control.
- Channel 17 - Calais Port Control
 - Contact for permission to enter (they speak English and are very polite).
 - Contact for permission to leave; but there is generally a scrummage of local boats when the bridge opens and you can leave it to the locals to request permission to leave the port.
 - Useful to pick up VHF traffic from inbound and outbound ferries.

I shouldn't leave this section on communication without a mention of AIS. I don't intend to cover the subject in any detail; again that's a topic for another day.

It could be my imagination but I seem to have had a much easier time of it with Dover and Calais port operations since I fitted an AIS transponder.

Everything passing through the Dover Straights is tracked on multiple screens on both sides of the Channel. It may be that if the authorities can put a name to a dot on screen, it helps you just a little.

Tides (timing) and Ports

Tides run quickly up and down the Dover Straights, particularly around headlands, of which there are a few. Cap Griz Nez springs to mind on the French side.

Possibly, because of the regulatory restrictions imposed on your route across the TSS, you may have no choice but to put up with a period of adverse tide through one or other of the inshore traffic zones. With that in mind, neaps may be preferable to springs.

Dover has a reputation locally for confused seas outside the harbour walls, even in light winds. A few years ago, a friend told me of a yacht from his club (the Royal Temple) that foundered on the harbour walls and was lost. Recently, I was talking to one chap who preferred to add the extra few hours it took to reach his home port of Ramsgate rather than stop-off at Dover. He was annoyed that a recent visit to Dover had shaken off his TV antenna :-)

On the plus side, most of the commercial/ferry traffic uses the Eastern entrance and you'll be more than likely to be approaching the Western entrance. That being the case, you won't have to stand off the harbour's menacing walls for too long, if at all.

You may need to factor in, on the outward passage, the opening times of Dover's Granville Dock (where most visiting boats seem to be directed). This is not too great a restriction, as the gate opens for 60% of the tidal cycle. Current dock opening times are displayed on a screen in the marina office.

Calais marina is also part tidal. The marina basin lock closes around two hours after high water and opens around two hours before high water. There is the added barrier of a road bridge which bars access. Bridge opening times for the month are available from the marina office.

There is no need to be unduly anxious about your time of arrival. On entry, there are waiting buoys outside the marina basin. Timing is more important on the way back from Calais, when it can be a good idea to leave the marina on the first opening of the road bridge before high water.

The Dover Straights TSS

The Dover Straights TSS (Traffic Separation Scheme) comprises:

- An inshore traffic zone
- A south west shipping lane (Dover side)
- A traffic separation zone
- A north east shipping lane (French side)
- An inshore traffic zone

You are required to cross the shipping lanes "*on a heading as nearly as practicable at right angles to the general direction of traffic flow*".

Voluntary shipping route

There is an additional voluntary cross-Channel shipping route mostly used by ferries crossing between Dover and Calais or Dunkirk.

For reference, there's an insert on the latest Imray C12 chart which details the voluntary cross-Channel route.

This voluntary arrangement comprises:

- An inbound traffic route
- A traffic separation zone
- An outbound traffic route

The ferries, in keeping with the regulations, will travel at right angles to the TSS

If you are parallel with the ferries, it's a handy confirmation that all is well with your course through the TSS.

Dover to Calais Passage Plan

Again, this is a personal view; you have 3 options in your passage from Dover to Calais:

- Above the voluntary cross-Channel shipping route.
- Through the middle of the voluntary cross-Channel shipping route.
- Below the voluntary cross-Channel shipping route

I've used all three routes. The one I find least stressful is the third option.

I'm not going to specify any waypoints, just a broad directional indication.

Aim to enter the south west shipping lane midway between the outbound ferry route to port and the (pretend) Varne lightship to starboard.

Once through to the inshore traffic zone on the French side, head for the main buoyed approach channel into Calais. Keep a little to the shore side of the channel, but not too close in-shore, on your approach.

The only hazard of note off the coast, for the shallow draughted, is a drying patch on the Ridens de Calais, but anyway you should be approaching from lower down the coast.

In conclusion, passages to Calais or to Cherbourg have significant differences and challenges.

All the usual caveats apply. These notes are incomplete, subject to error and for entertainment purposes only.

David

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