

A day I'll never remember

Gilbert Park and his wife were en route from Douarnenez to Audierne when Gilbert succumbed to an episode of transient global amnesia...

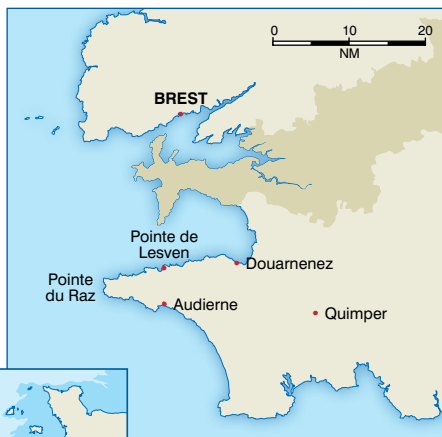
My wife and I decided to explore Brittany last summer while moving our new acquisition, a Sabreline 36, from Newark to Aigues-Mortes in France. We chickened out of the long trip from mid-Biscay around Gibraltar and up to Le Grau-du-Roi, so the last part from La Rochelle to Port Camargue was planned to be by lorry.

The weather that summer was awful most of the time, or so it seemed. After spending almost a week in the inner harbour in Douarnenez waiting for the Force 9 winds and heavy rains to stop, there was a window of almost calm weather (my definition – not the crew's) to leave and continue south.

The day before leaving, I carefully planned our trip to Audierne, round Pointe du Raz, marking the various waypoints on the chart. I had a long chat with the helpful female Welsh harbour master who told me where the deep water was in the harbour, and what areas to avoid, and I then fully apprised my wife of all the passage details.

The sun was shining when we left, and the sea was calm. As we progressed along the coast the sea state worsened, becoming a little rough but not too bad; and opposite Pointe de Lesven I took the opportunity to leave the flybridge and visit the heads below. I remember coming back up to the flybridge, and... that's it, until I found myself in an ambulance!

My wife tells me I behaved quite normally, cheering her up as the sea got



rougher around Pointe du Raz (which was a part of the trip I had always looked forward to). She didn't know anything was wrong

until we were outside the harbour entrance. There, I spent an hour going between the two cardinal markers and kept asking her where we were: she would reply, and I would immediately ask the same question. She quickly understood that something was wrong and tried to get me to let her helm the boat, with little success. She eventually succeeded by handing me the radio and letting me think I was having a stroke, and that we needed help.

My training kicked in and I realised that I needed to send a pan-pan, which I did – mostly in French. The coastguard wanted to know where we were, so I asked my wife: I couldn't remember the answer, so I couldn't tell him. He then asked me for my lat and long and, once again, my training kicked in and I read it off the chart plotter. He was surprised that we were in the harbour.

I told him I was having a stroke and that my wife couldn't dock the boat: in fact, she could, but not without worrying that she would damage either our boat or somebody else's – or both! Three customs officers in a RIB heard the pan-pan and



put the captain on board with another officer. The harbour master also heard it, was ready to take the warps from the boat and had a doctor on the telephone.

When the boat was secured I was taken off by the fire brigade and passed over to the paramedics, who took me – and my wife – to the hospital at Douarnenez. From there, I was later transferred to the regional neurological unit at Quimper.

The neurologist explained that my memory loss, and repeatedly asking the same question, were classic symptoms of

transient global amnesia. This is like a brain reset, although the cause is not known, and it results in an inability to form new memories – in my case, for about 12 hours. Fortunately, it happens only once and there are no long-term effects. In particular, there is no need to stop driving cars, let alone boats, and I can't even use it as an excuse to forget presents for birthdays and anniversaries. The only lasting effects are that I will never remember going around Pointe du Raz, and my wife will always be a bit worried when I forget things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gilbert Park has been sailing for more than 40 years and has worked his way through almost the entire Drascombe range. He now has a Seaward 25 motor cruiser and enjoys the tinkering and maintenance that goes with owning any sort of boat.

I kept asking my wife the same question, over and over again

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Yankee Lady moored safely in the sunshine at Audierne Harbour

Special thanks go to the staff at Audierne Harbour, who secured the boat and rang me to say it was all secure and safe. Thanks also to Alain Bossenac from the mayor's office, who collected my wife from the hospital at 2200 and brought her back to the boat for the night. Also, I shouldn't forget my wife - even though I did that for 12 hours - who told me what happened and looked after me.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 My wife has to learn to dock the boat without worrying that she will destroy it: next time there may not be any customs officers around. To help with this, we fitted a stern thruster (we already have a bow thruster).

2 Sending a pan-pan in French was the right thing to do: although the coastguard may have understood English, the customs officers didn't. I will in future have crib cards for Mayday and pan-pan in the language for the country I am in. If it's a language I don't speak, the last sentence will be 'please respond in English: I don't understand...'

3 Sending a pan-pan worked well. There is a strong case, however, for sending a Mayday. If I had been having a stroke, a Mayday would have been more appropriate, because there is a limited time to get the right treatment.

4 I was able to use my training, even though I couldn't remember new events. Fortunately, this is stored in a different part of my memory: every penny of the RYA radio course was worth it on that day.

5 We need to make sure we both have the ICC certificates, so if I am incapacitated my wife can 'legally' helm the boat.

6 Writing the passage plan and pilotage on the chart that then lives on the flybridge during passage meant that all the information was available to my wife when I couldn't remember it. The detailed briefing, especially of the harbour, was invaluable.

7 Passport, EEC cards and travel insurance documents need to be kept in a place known to all. We normally store all our documents near to the grab bag, but because we had been ashore so much they were all in my 'man bag'; a fact I hadn't mentioned. We now both carry copies of our own and each other's documents electronically.

*Send us your boating experience story and if it's published you'll receive the original Dick Everitt-signed watercolour which is printed with the article. You'll find PBO's contact details on page 5.