



Rupe's Blog – Ireland to Wales.

Just making it to the start line on a challenge like this is a major operation. There is lots to organise and much of it happens at the last minute when the forecast looks good, so it was gripping stuff to finally find ourselves on the beach in Wicklow. Not a spot normally known for kitesurfing, it raised a few eyebrows to see two guys blowing up kites in 2 knots of wind and then setting off with apparently no intention of coming back....

Having watched a favourable forecast like a hawk all week, I was really worried that there was so little wind when we set off. Obviously we were sheltered by the land and it was going to take a while before we hit the steady breeze a couple of miles out, but just getting to that point proved really tricky and kites were tumbling out of the sky in the incredibly light and fickle winds. I got away before Al and managed to get out into the steadier breeze, but by the time Al launched the wind had completely deserted him and it took a while before he made it out. I was already pretty cold having sat in the water for about 45 minutes and although that in itself was not a problem, I wondered whether this might get worse as the Crossing went on.

Fortunately we did get going and started tacking downwind on a course for Aberdovey, but the wind just was not strong enough to hold this course. The navigators on the support boat decided it was best to do a long tack out to try and pick up more breeze further out before attempting to tack again and make the course for Aberdovey. At this point the breeze backed about 30 degrees into the west and our course was pointing us at Liverpool, but we continued on this tack for some time just happy to be going at all.

A few miles out the wind dropped again, with a mere 6 knots being recorded at one point. My kite fell out of the sky purely because there was not enough wind to keep it flying, and it was a big effort to get it going again. At the same time Al crashed into the water getting over some seriously rough tidal overfalls and things were generally looking pretty gloomy. Although we didn't realise it the boat was communicating to people on land that things were not going well and that it was starting to look unlikely that we were going to succeed. That thought was going through my mind anyway, but I am glad we never got round to discussing it.

Frustrated by the wind and working the kite so hard to get going at all, I called for my strapless surfboard and decided to give that a go since its extra volume and surface area should make it easier. Sod's law dictates that as soon as you go for a light wind board the wind will pick up and no sooner was I up and running on the strapless board than the wind began to pick up and finally we were blasting our way across the Irish Sea all smiles. My legs were aching from the extra effort required to keep the board on the water through the waves

to avoid losing it, but I was determined to let the session continue since we were on a roll. An hour and a half passed and we were called to stop by the boat for a drink. Passed across to us in the water by a fishing net, these carbohydrate drinks and gel hydration packs were life-savers. I grabbed the twin-tip board again, but it was only about another 45 minutes before the wind dropped again and I was back on the strapless which I then decided to stick with for the rest of the trip.

By this time the guys on the support boat had decided that making Aberdovey was a lost cause due to the angle of the wind and that heading for Angelsey and Rhosneigr was the only option. An hour or so after making this decision, I was about half a mile ahead of the boat and Al when I saw Holyhead looming on the horizon. Once you can see the other side it gives you a real boost and we had a great hour or so of positive sailing in the sunshine messing about in the wake of the boat and grinning at the cameras on the boat. Things seemed to be going well and we were reeling in the beach at Rhosneigr.

Then just off my starboard side there was a massive splash and a big dark shape out of the corner of my eye. I thought it was the tail of a whale since I had encountered whales in the Irish Sea when doing yacht passages, and the thought of something massive swimming around underneath me had me pretty gripped. Al had seen it too, but it turned out to be a dolphin, so I breathed easier. It sounds romantic to be sailing with dolphins, but try it when you are in the middle of nowhere and it feels like you are invading someone else's playground.

We could see the Welsh coast really clearly by now and it seemed like the rest of the trip was a formality. Then guess what....the wind dropped again. This was the most agonising of all the lulls we had experienced since by now it was late afternoon and I was sure that we had now seen the last of the wind for the day and all this just a couple of miles short. It seemed like all the effort we had put in would come to nothing and we would end up getting in the boat after all. I was about half a mile ahead of Al and was talking to the guys on the support boat about where to try and land. I said that I was going to have a go at the skinny patch of beach amongst miles of cliffs at Trearddur Bay. We had just sailed through some evil tidal races where the water was swirling all over the place and the guys on the boat were concerned that crashing at this point would mean losing the board so they went back to check on Al while I went for the beach. No sooner had I got back up and running than I benefitted from a lovely lift in the breeze round the Holy Island headland in the flat water I was going 20kts plus on my strapless surfboard on a perfect course for the beach. I yelled into my radio that I had picked up some wind to let Al know that once he got to this lift he would be away. The radio had ceased to work some time before so this fell on deaf ears but Al picked up the breeze soon enough anyway.

On approaching the cliffs, I was not sure whether I would experience some serious wind shadow which may drop my kite and leave me floundering on the rocks at the entrance of the bay, but it held and I screamed down the swimmers channel and hit the beach at about 5pm. I tried to step coolly off the board in front of some bemused onlookers, but fell flat on my face as I stepped off, which made me realise how tired my legs had become. Having landed for all of a minute I got back in the water and started to drag back out of the bay to get to Al to let him know the score. I had to beat out of the bay lying on the board because of the wind shadow, and I could see Al's kite approaching the cliffs but knew that he was too low to make the beach and I knew there was no chance he would be able to be able to beat back up to make the beach and was convinced he would be landing on the rocks. I watched in awe as I dragged out of the bay to see his kite disappear in amongst the cliffs and then amazingly it stopped which I knew meant he had landed. When I got round the corner, I got back on my board and followed him on the same path through the cliffs to a stretch of beach that was no more than fifty yards across and too much for the RIB to come in with us.

It was an amazing feeling to know that we had done it and that despite the extra time and effort required to complete the course we had actually set from Ireland and sailed all the way to Wales without needing the boat.

Big thanks to Al, the fantastic team on the support boat, David Crisp and Eoin Brown on the Irish shore and everyone who sent messages of support and money for the charities.

So we made it back to Aberdovey for 9.30pm on Friday night. Bet you can't guess what happened then.....