



From Gibraltar the cruising options are numerous

Gibraltar

PASSAGE PLANNER

Discover the cruising delights of southern Europe, and with Africa just a short hop away, the world is your cruising oyster REPORT BY MICHAEL HOWORTH

The Rock of Gibraltar stands guardian over a sea passage between Africa and Europe through which a quarter of the world's shipping travels. Around 300 ships pass through the Strait each day and because of this, passage planning takes on a new level of importance.

The Strait of Gibraltar is the nautical equivalent of the M1 and those on small boats must view it in much the same way as a rural hedgehog might contemplate crossing a motorway. It can be navigated, but great care must be taken. Here, it never pays to cruise shorthanded and the more crew on lookout duty, the safer any passage will be.

Heading to Africa

Across the Strait of Gibraltar another continent beckons and at just 14-miles-wide at its narrowest point, Africa is within reach of most motorboats.

1 Ceuta

Ceuta is a Spanish enclave, and is a good spot to head to when crossing the Strait as it is only a short passage. It's a good fuel stop and has a good market but as a ferry port it offers small boat crews very little.

Distance 15 miles

Position 35° 53N 5° 18W

Charts Admiralty charts: 3578, 142 & 2742 Spanish charts: 44C, 44S, 451 & 451I

Principle lights Starboard Hand (upon entering) breakwater lighthouse. There is also a Racon here.

Route This route passes through the main shipping route in and out of the Mediterranean Sea. At this point there is no Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS) but large ships will be shaping up their courses to enter the zone and transit the Strait. Be careful for rogue traffic not obeying the scheme, particularly at night.

Departure time Three hours before HW Gibraltar will ensure a slack water departure. Slower boats

will have to compensate for a westerly current, which gets stronger by the hour five hours after HW Gibraltar.

2 Marina Smir

If you'd rather skip Ceuta and enter Morocco directly from Gibraltar then just 32 miles from the mighty Rock, the modern marina facilities of Marina Smir await you. Surrounded by white sandy beaches and turquoise waters, the area has a five-star hotel, a thalassotherapy spa (a spa that uses warm seawater for treatments), shops, bars and restaurants. Set among palm trees right by the sea, just 10km from the port is an 18-hole golf course. There are many other attractions in the area: the old medina of Tetouan – declared a heritage city by UNESCO – and the original blue houses of the Chauen village.

Distance 32 miles

Position 35° 45.2N 6° 20.4W (three miles north of M'Diq)

Charts Admiralty charts: 3578, 142 & 2742

Spanish charts: 44C, 44S, 451 & 451I

Principle lights The 16-mile light at Punta Almina on the eastern edge of Ceuta flashes a white light twice every 10 seconds.

Route Head south for Punta Almina, ensuring you cross the TSS correctly. Once clear of the point it is a straight 10-mile trip into the marina.

Departure time Same as for the passage to Ceuta. The current, once past the point, is north going and therefore against you but fortunately it isn't significantly strong. Seldom will the tide help you on this passage.

Heading west

Go if you have to, or if you feel the need to, but remember that heading west out of the Mediterranean is like trying to get a cork back into a champagne bottle.

3 Tarifa

Visit Tarifa if you enjoy wind and sporting pastimes that rely on it as an energy source – think windsurfing and kitesurfing.

Distance 16 miles but it often feels a lot longer

Position 36° 16.9N 5° 16.5W

Charts Admiralty charts: 142

Spanish charts: 44S, 44SB & 4450

Principle lights The lights on Europa Point, Gibraltar, and those on the Spanish mainland at Pta Carero and Tarifa Point are all important and will dominate a night passage.

Route Remember the surface current flows from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean and if the wind is from the east this can make for a very rough passage. Leave Gibraltar heading towards Pta Carnero and hug the coast heading south west thereafter.

Departure time Leave at low water and if that coincides with dawn then so much the better.

4 Algeciras

Just two miles away and you are in Spain again. The currency is the Euro but little else has changed. Marina Alcaidesa only opened in the

Local navigation

Traffic Separation Scheme (TSS)

The TSS is aligned 090°/270° and 073°/253° in the middle of the Strait of Gibraltar. Boats going to and from Gibraltar in an east-west direction are best advised to use the Inshore Traffic Zone to the north of the main TSS.

Hazards

Tunny nets and tide rips are the main hazards to watch for, other than the busy commercial traffic eager to enter or leave the Atlantic. Technically, tunny nets should be marked at their extremities by a black flag on which a white A is displayed. At night this is replaced by two red lights in a vertical line. Mostly laid in the spring and summer, these nets often stretch for three miles when set and can cause no end of harm if they catch around your stern. Tide rips are common around headlands and can occur offshore when wind is against tide.

Whales

These large mammals do on occasion pose a risk to small boats and it pays to steer clear of them if at all possible. They are most frequently seen between April and August.

Tarifa VTS

Shipping in and around the area is controlled by a VTS (vessel tracking system) station at Tarifa. The radio station uses Channel 10 and mostly ignores small boats. It does, however, have the authority to challenge and interrogate vessels approaching the Strait and it would be unwise to respond to its radio call.

Wreck

There is a wreck half a mile southeast of Europa Point Lighthouse, which is marked with a quick flashing light and a Racon.



early part of 2010. It boasts 200 berths, is just a five-minute walk from Gibraltar Airport and only an hour away from Jerez or Malaga by car.

Distance Just two miles, but it is another country

Position 36° 07N 5° 26W

Charts Admiralty charts: 3578, 142, 1448 & 1455

Spanish charts: 44S, 44SA, 4451 & 4452

Principle lights Use the Fl (4) Y 10 s light on the end of the mole as somewhere to head for but be warned, there are a lot of other lights ashore and on buoys that make it difficult to discern.

Route Head across the bay slightly south of west. Wind your way through crowded commercial anchorages and watch out for shipping entering the area in search of bunker fuel.

Departure time Anytime really, it's a short hop but its best to go early morning, get across and complete the paperwork as soon as the officials open their offices. Avoid arriving during the siesta.

Heading east

Fill up with duty-free fuel, stock up with English sausages and fresh bacon at Morrisons supermarket and sail off east along Spain's Costa del Sol.

5 Sotogrande

Sotogrande is the first principle European port inside the Mediterranean. It is more suited to small craft than some of its near neighbours, such as Puerto Jose Banus and Estepona, but it is a great base from which to visit those ports even if just for the experience. From here the sky is the limit – the Mediterranean beckons and the Spanish Costa del Sol awaits your arrival. What are you waiting for? Buen Viaje.

Distance 10 miles

Position 36° 01N 5° 37W

Charts Admiralty charts: 3578, 142, 1448 & 1455 Spanish charts: 44S, 44SA, 4451 & 4452

Principle lights Europa Point, Gibraltar, and the lighthouse on the end of the breakwater are the important ones.

Route Head south to round Europa Point, watch out and stay clear of the wreck and the salvage work boats that surround her, then head north and east following the coast.

Departure time If you leave Gibraltar at high water the tide will stay with you for at least three hours, which should be plenty to do this short hop.



Sotogrande is an easy day's cruise away

Pilot books

Yacht Scene – a Sailors Guide to Gibraltar by Dr D M Sloma is useful and can be purchased for £5 by emailing orders@yachtscene.gi. Equally essential is the Reeds Nautical Almanac (Adlard Coles) but it stops at Gibraltar; for ports east of there you will need the Imray published Mediterranean Almanac. Pilot Books from the RCC Pilotage Foundation covering the Med, Spain and North Africa are recommended.