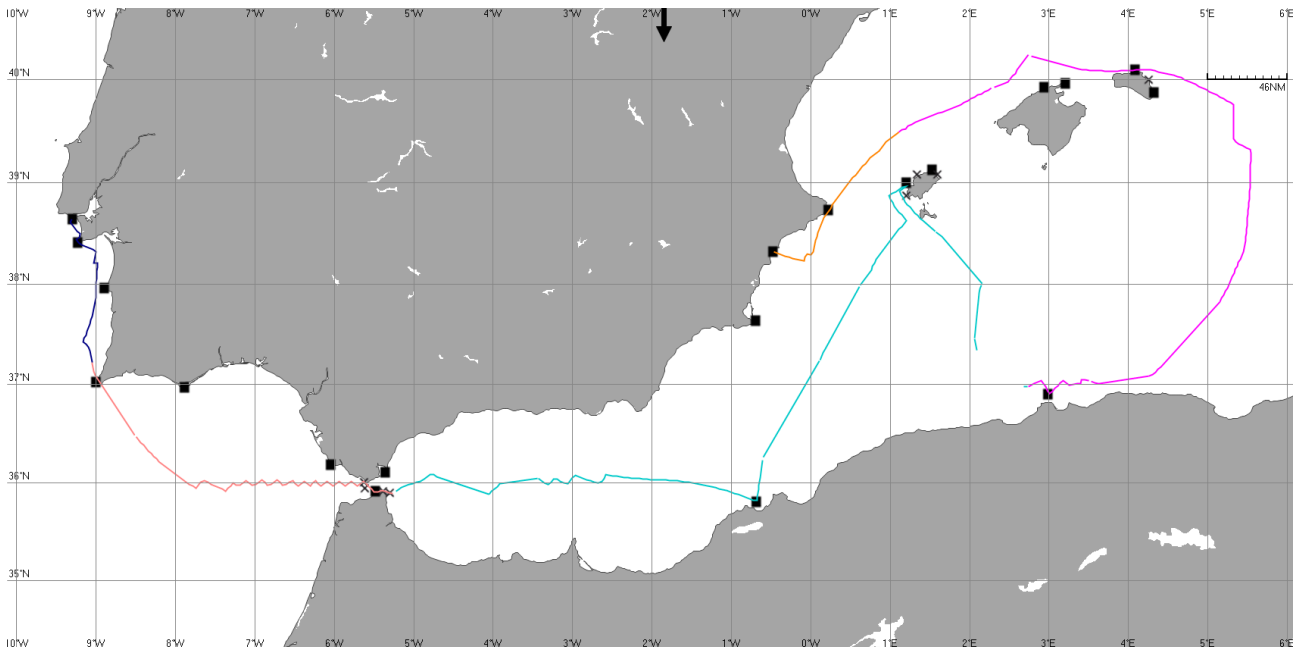


SWR 17/18 Leg 1 Alicante to Lisbon

As a part of a round the world race series I had expected the course would lead more or less directly from Alicante to Lisbon. Therefore I was surprised to find out that it started with a tour of the Balearic islands instead.



The fleet got under way on Sunday after noon in a reasonable 10 to 15 knot north-easterly breeze close hauled on port tack. Because the area south of Ibiza and Mallorca promised large regions of low wind speed, most boats tacked over to starboard as soon as they could fetch the Cabo de la Nao to enter the Gulf of Valencia and leave the Balearic island to starboard on their way to the first mark on Menorca.

But that course was not free from any pitfalls, either. Already in the first night I had to deal with the first calm and an accompanying wind shift north of Ibiza. In order to get some sleep, I used lots of DCs, but nevertheless my boat got too close to the danger zone and the wind speed dropped substantially below 2 knots. Before noon the same happened again, north of Mallorca, this time during working hours, so I had to make do with DCs again. Quite a few boats, notably the eventual winner kenza, had positioned themselves much better further to the north and consequently I had lost contact to the front row when I reached Menorca in the evening of the second day. I have not taken any notes, and hnm's site is regrettably not available any more to find out the exact positions. From my memory I was ranked somewhere between 10 and 20, trailing by about half an hour.

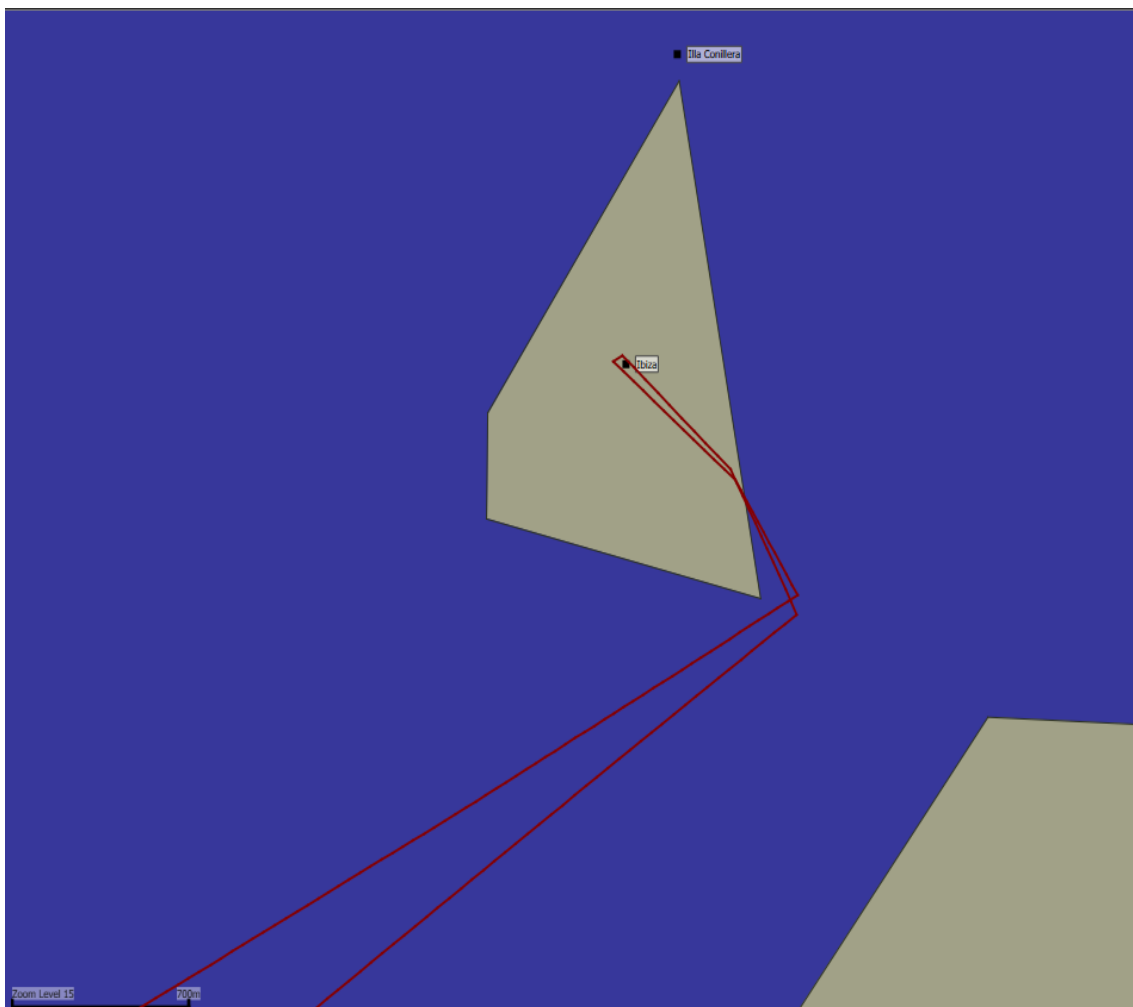
For the second leg from Menorca to Algiers it was advantageous not to turn south immediately, but to proceed in an east-south easterly direction until the line of grid points at 005°30'E was reached. That way it was possible to pick up the extension of the Mistral that was blowing out of the Gulf of Lions that allowed boat speeds up to 20 knots during the night, the highest for the whole race. But it did not last long, already at noon the next day the wind speed had dropped to below 5 knots as I was approaching the mark at Algiers from the east along the Algerian coast. In the evening hours I was

gybing to the west in a narrow band of about 5 knots wind at 37°N before dipping south to round the mark off Algiers shortly after the 22:30 WX.

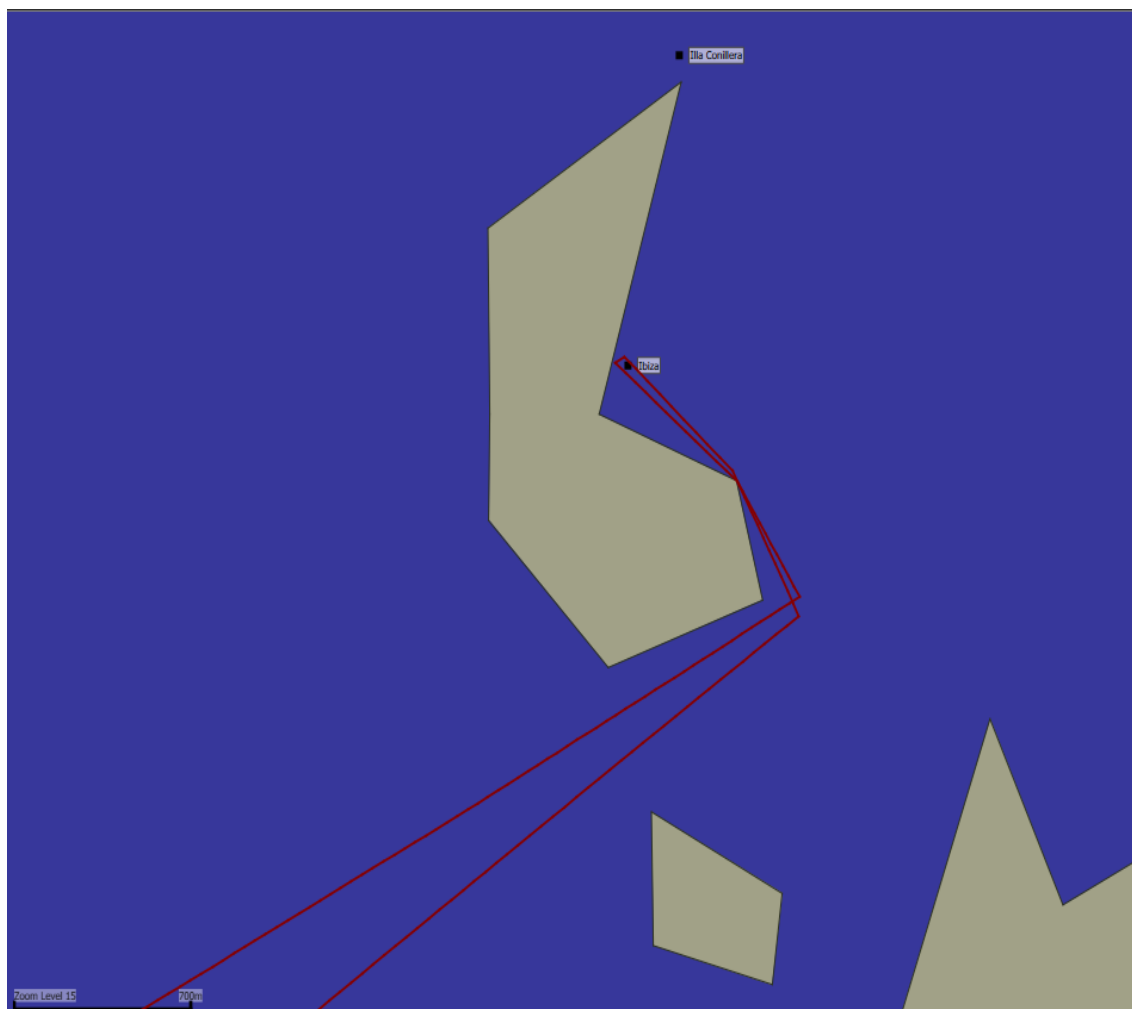
In order to avoid a high pressure cell and the accompanying calm zone that had developed between Algiers and Mallorca, I started the third leg to Ibiza by going back to the wind band at 37°N and continued the VMG run to the west with half a dozen DC gybes before turning north for a run with wind speed between 6 and 11 knots. I overslept the 04:30 WX (it happens too often), but luckily I had entered enough DCs until my lunch break and the next WX.

The extra distance to cover when leaving Ibiza to port was so much more that I never seriously considered that option. Whether Formentera was to be left to port or starboard was much less clear. Eventually I decided to seek the stronger wind in the west, despite of a shift of the wind direction to the right.

The next challenge was the Ibiza mark rounding. The actual mark was not on Ibiza, but close to an off-lying island called Illa Conillera. I have a theory regarding the placement of the mark. It starts with the consumption of large amounts of intoxicating beverages, and I will not elaborate any further. Of course, I have an other theory regarding the placement of the mark. Maybe, and this is pure speculation, the course designer was looking at the intermediate resolution coastline and placed the mark on the island itself with the intention to leave the entire island to port. Fair enough. This looks like in the figure below.



But for the race, the high resolution coastline was used, and then the island looks like in the second figure below. All over a sudden the mark is surrounded by navigable water. Well, at least it is navigable water for a determined SOL maniac who is prepared to wipe all spectators with his bow sprit off the beach and into the sea. The gap between the mark and the shoreline is approximately 60 metres wide.



My initial plan was to act as a prudent mariner and leave the mark and the island to port. But I changed my mind as I got closer. The wind was just under 10 knots from roughly 195°. That means, the northern cape of the island is approximately 0.55 nm dead downwind of the mark. The approach from the south was on a VMG run, and the next leg was upwind initially. Who ever has come to a bottom mark under gennaker and had to proceed further downwind for half a mile past the mark because the kite could not be dropped for some reason (a malfunctioning halyard lock comes to mind) surly remembers how much that hurts. I estimated, that it would cost about 9 to 9½ minutes to cover the extra distance. Therefore I chose the direct rounding of the mark along the red-brown track shown in the figure above. It includes a gybe, a change of course, the mark rounding, a tack immediately afterwards, and an other change of course tack.

It took about 7½ minutes from the first gybe to the last tack, and I gained a few places. Maybe practice racers do things like this on a daily basis, and it is certainly OK in the archipelago raid or maybe in a sprint race. But I feel strongly that such a mark should not be used in an offshore race,

because you can not round it competitively with DCs, not even with the help of kipper's DC checker. And that gives an unfair, if I may say so, advantage to those like myself that happened to be lucky enough and could hand steer around the mark.

After a few hours, the wind started to turn left, and the initial beat to Oran turned gradually into a run in weak to moderate winds up to 12 knots. I was lucky again to arrive at the Oran mark on Thursday evening in the hours after work and before bed time.

During the night, the best wind for the next leg was just north of the Isla de Alboran, initially from the north-east, turning east. I gybed along 36°N in order to stay in the breeze. Other boats deviated more to the north and south, and that allowed me to gain some more places. During the day, the strongest wind remained at 36°N, but it was decreasing in strength to less than 3 knots in the afternoon and early evening. During this time, race leader kenza was already several hours ahead and later extended his amazing lead to over 80 miles. Dingo was in a solid second place and I was trying to pass knockando60, while StIngFI, Billy and others were doing the same with me.

For the exit from the Mediterranean Sea through the Straits of Gibraltar I chose to closely follow the African coast in a sequence of a dozen or so gybes in order to take advantage of a wind shift of 30° to the left. For this I was again relying heavily on kipper's DC checker. I finally crossed the straits in the second half of the night in a light 5 to 6 knots breeze on a course that took me past Tarifa.

From there the routing programs suggested to head straight to the west along 36°N for over 100 nautical miles in a narrow band where the wind speed would eventually increase from 6 to 12 knots during the day and decrease on both sides. This is a feature that can be found quite often in SOL, where regions of slightly higher wind speed are running strictly in a north-south or east-west direction along a line of grid points of the GRIB file that we are using. The effect is more pronounced if low resolution GRIB files are used.

The strict alignment in a zonal or meridional direction is an artifact that comes into existence when the model results of the GFS numerical weather prediction model are interpolated on to grid points and distributed in the form of a GRIB file. Technically speaking there are no grid points at all in the GFS model, because it is what is called a spectral model, where all the meteorological variables are expressed in terms of sines and cosines or some other base functions. Therefore I would expect the strongest wind both in the actual model results and the real world maybe a little further to the south, more aligned with the centre of the Straits of Gibraltar.

That being said, what I do in a situation like this is to decide on the width of a stripe centred on the maximum wind speed line, say 3 or 5 miles, and then use kipper's DC checker to plan the gybes such that the boat stays inside the stripe. The width of the stripe takes account of the prevailing conditions, i.e. how fast the wind speed drops off to the sides and how expensive a gybe is. On occasion I have seen other boats gybe much more frequently. The QtVlm router in particular is prone to suggest a gybe after every routing step. I think that is way too much. In the 15 hours after passing Tarifa I gybed 24 times in total, until finally turning north-west towards the Cabo de São Vicente.

After DC rounding the Cape late in the night there remained one more obstacle, yet another calm zone where the wind speed dropped below 1,5 knots and the wind direction turned from east to north-west. The rest of the leg was a beat until the finish off the mouth of the Tejo river. During

mid-day I had not paid attention and the boat ended up too much east and too close to the lower wind speed near the Portuguese coast than I had intended. From there on I was more attentive to maintain the marginal lead I had over knockandoo60 and finish on the podium behind kenza and Dingo.

And that concludes my narrative of leg 1 of the SailOnline World race 2017/18. Led 2 starts in 3 hours, and I better turn my attention to the future, not the past.

rumskib