



Fulfilling a dream! – Al Crisp

As the board glided into the sand of the beach, I stepped from the bindings and my legs collapsed with the strange sensation of walking. After seven hours of light wind sailing we made land! The Welsh coast.

It seems a lifetime ago I was lying in bed unable to move, both arms and my left leg in plaster. 17 fractures to my body, the majority of which were in my spine. Initial thoughts were that I might well be paralysed, however as I could move my legs and feel my toes I somehow doubted this would be the case, but yet so incredibly close.

For as long as I can remember I have loved the outdoors, so much so I chose a career in exactly that and have enjoyed every minute of it since. So to be lying in bed unable to move was a great shock, counting away the days that the doctor had said I would be lying there it was difficult not to dream. The countless friends and family that visited me eased my time. Some of the best memories being my dad smuggling steak sandwiches and the Sunday visits of my best friends. It was here whilst dreaming of the sports I missed and wanted to get back to that I came up with the idea of the crossing.

It took a long time for me to rebuild my strength, not being a fan of the gym I would walk on the beach for as long as my leg could handle. I would walk until few people were around and then swim in the sea and march against the rush of the tide, determined to get back to full strength. If I could see people kiteboarding I would walk up until I'd found them. Helping launch and drop kites and watching from the water's edge was my only fix. For now!

It was a cold December morning the first time I got back on the water and what a feeling! The pull of the kite and the feel of the board rush through the water. I had missed this so much. I choose my sessions carefully from then on, only on the most stable of winds would I venture onto the water, with no worries of wanting to jump or pull tricks just happy sailing backwards and forwards.

I had planted the seed of the crossing in the minds of a few friends during my days of summer wandering and all took to the idea with enthusiasm. Originally with a team of maybe ten kites the idea was starting to formulate. As we got more involved with the planning the logistical nightmare of having more than two riders on the water became clear, and then came the first task of letting friends down who were so keen for such an adventure. Rupert Tildesley took on the job of project manager and without his determination and vision the

whole thing may still be a dream. It took a long time over the summer organising practice trips, support crews, boats and fuel - usually all at the last minute as soon as the wind was good. It's not easy planning something that relies so heavily on the weather!

Training mainly involved getting out kiting as much as possible, we have been lucky this year with the winds. Having lots of northerly's we've been able to do countless downwind trips. The majority of which would be un supported. Some of the bigger trips entailed a Barmouth to Aberystwyth trip with the cover of a powerboat to support us for the last stretch to Aberystwyth. The biggest trip was a 32 mile crossing over cardigan bay. This was the first time we practiced with the official support boat and it turned out to be a great success. We learned some important knowledge on this trip that would inevitably help us on the crossing.

We had picked September as the month to go due to daylight hours and the most predictable winds, it also gave us the whole summer to train and ready ourselves for such a marathon. All of a sudden September arrived and the time was upon us. It was an exciting month swapping text messages and phone calls every time the wind looked feasible. Then finally it happened. Rupert spotted the perfect forecast a few days out and that was it, every remaining daylight hour was spent organising the logistics and readying the final stages. 1300hr. Thursday 13th September. A RIB headed out for Wicklow, Ireland, with our support crew onboard.

That Thursday is almost a blur of trying to juggle work, organising the boat and trying to make sure we didn't forget anything or anyone. Typically, and just to add to the chaos, about ten minutes before we wanted to leave the BBC phoned and wanted to have a chat on the radio!

The trip across on the Hollyhead-Dublin ferry was a calm one for Rupert and myself giving us time to get our heads together and focus ourselves for the following day, crossing our fingers every minute that the forecast would hold. We landed in Ireland, picked up my dad from the airport (who had kindly offered to drive the car back across to Wales) and set off for Wicklow. We had heard from the boat crew who had arrived safely and were just mooring the boat.

Feeling quite calm and collected on arrival in Wicklow I was not ready for the carnage that met us, with the support crew having found the local Guinness there were far too many chiefs and not enough sober Indians, so ignoring all the phone calls suggesting 'best plans of action' Rupert and I hurriedly fuelled the RIB in anticipation of our first pint. What a day this was turning out to be! Finally the time arrived for our well-earned Guinness and in a last ditch effort to carbo load we sat down to eat. What a feeling it was sitting around the table knowing that such a quality team of people had come together for one reason. Before long we were ready for sleep and the morning's adventure!

After a sleepy start, a bowl of cereal stuffed with bananas and a chat with the team we were on the beach. It was a beautiful morning, with a breeze that was blowing almost directly off shore. There something about an offshore breeze, it usually makes me nervous the way it looks on the water, but for some reason not today. It was a strange feeling looking out to sea - that was the way home. All the pain, all the training, all the planning and organising, and here we were, it was all about this day! We put a kite up just to see what the wind was like, and as we thought it was still too light. We would have to wait. We kitted up and got ourselves ready to sail but still we had to wait.

The safety boat drove a mile off shore to check the wind and then the call came over the radio. Only six knots of wind on the shore but out to sea it was blowing 18 – 19 knots! Perfect! It was time to sail, all we had to do was run the gauntlet of light airs on the beach and the further offshore we got the more wind we would have. This was great for the mind - the excitement was immense! So we ran up the beach with kites ready in order to escape some of the shelter of the land and off we set. Rupert sailed first and frustratingly struggled to keep

his kite flying as he battled out to sea in search of stronger wind. I was still setting up but could see him flying well and couldn't wait to catch up with him. I launched my kite and cautiously walked to the waters edge, this was it - time to go, a hasty goodbye to my dad and the gang on the beach, no time to chat – all focus concentrated on keeping the kite in the sky! One swoop of the kite and I was off. Only for the inevitable to happen, a lull in the wind and bang my kite fell out of the sky! After a great struggle my kite flew again and this was it - lighter than expected but we were off.

The first hour and a half sailing was probably some of the hardest, I knew from training trips that the first section is always pretty tough as the muscles scream whilst they settle into the rhythm, even tougher now due to the light winds but still we were going and every swoop of the kite left Ireland and the bemused onlookers on the beach a little further away. Finally the boat stopped us and tossed us a fresh energy drink, and I took the opportunity to gulp down one of the energy gels I had stuffed up the sleeve of my rash vest. Feeling pretty low already was unexpected, light winds, unexpected. This was going to be tough! Then I remembered tunes. I was wearing my ipod for a reason. Cranking up the volume to send favoured tunes to my ears inspired and revitalised me, with the music driving me along, I set off again. Then it came. We got wind and I could feel the acceleration; suddenly I no longer had to think about working the kite hard in order just to stay afloat.

Throwing a fist in the air and hearing the cheer from the safety boat this was it, we were finally flying away from Ireland. Every time the wind increased it was easy for Rupert and I to sail closer together. Close enough to yell encouragement and realise this is what we had been dreaming about for so many months. Unfortunately we were not to be blessed with a perfect breeze for the whole crossing, when the wind was light it was hard to stay so close, which left a very lonely feeling, struggling with the kite and struggling to stay afloat at times it felt like I was dragging a sack of potatoes behind me.

These moments came and went and looking back I only really remember the high points; the support crew on the rib passing us drinks and energy food in a little plastic fishing net (a great idea of Sarah's to avoid us getting too close to the rib in the rolling seas); the feeling of being so close to the wind, we could feel every increase and every lull perfectly. It surprised me that even when working the kite hard it was possible to switch in to a sort of calm autopilot mood, sometimes with music sometimes without.

I took several moments of just sitting in the water and looking around, I wasn't scared or nervous in the slightest when we lost sight of land; this was what I had been dreaming about for a year and a half. I was strong again, it was happening and all I could see was Rupert and I under sail surrounded by nothing but water, and some very good friends in the powerboat cheering us on. I'd always thought the hardest thing would be the mental challenge, staying focused for so long, but once in the rhythm the time seemed to ebb away. It became a blur of hours, underpowered hours, perfectly powered hours; they all seemed to have their own personality. Porpoises jumped not far from Rupert who was just below me - maybe this wasn't time for a break, lets sail on a bit to be sure we're passed them before dangling our feet in the water.

John told me from the boat they had seen land and I was excited to get going again to scan the horizon and see if I could see it for myself, and sure enough there it was. I knew as the boat had told me that we were headed further north due to the wind shift; but surly not this far north. I knew this land and I knew it well. The coast I was seeing was Gogarth cliffs! Having done a lot of kayaking and climbing in previous years I knew Gogarth for the climbing on steep cliffs and sea kayaking in the huge tidal races, an awesome place. But to kitesurf around! Maybe not. Where would we land? How big would the tidal races be? Did the support crew know what I knew was out there?

It was an interesting time heading for the long anticipated land. Another hour of good wind and my troubles of landing were forgotten. We passed some large cargo ships on the way in, some of which I'm sure held off from us, this was unexpected hearing stories of sea farers nearly being run down by cargo ships.

Finally we approached land, I knew where we were headed, and having spent time practicing night navigation by kayak around here I was hopeful for Treader bay. The late hour was making me nervous, my watch reported that it was five o'clock and worse still the wind was starting to die, surely not now? I was so close, the gap between Rupert and I seemed to grow and I knew what he was thinking; "Never mind waiting, the wind's dying we're so close I must make land!" I could see the safety boat was unsure what to do, should they follow Rupert who was headed for the cliffs or hang back for me in case I drop my board or worse my kite?! They stopped to give me a Twix and gave me the knowledge it was only six miles to the shore. Not the mile that I had thought it looked like and then they were off. Rightly so they tore after Rupert to watch him in safely and see that he landed ok. Rupert seemed to disappear into the distance and I was alone with the dying winds. I'd love to know how many times I prayed to the wind gods in those last miles. I quite literally begged them to keep the wind blowing and see me in. I was no longer worried about cliffs and tidal races all I wanted was to make land. Blow wind blow!

Unbelievably someone was listening! The closer I got, the more the wind blew! This was it; I was going to make it! Finally I got enough wind to edge hard against the water using all my energy to climb back up towards where I could see Rupert had landed. Thankful for the wind, I became less worried at the mouth of the bay. I knew that Rupert was waiting on close in front of me. I was too far downwind and realised I wouldn't make the same stretch of beach as Rupert. But the wind was blowing! What a feeling. I allowed myself to ride close to the cliffs, it felt good being well powered. I'd seen a bay below me, it would be a dangerous entrance with around fifteen moored boats in a tiny bay, their masts sticking up waiting to snare my kite. One more tack out to sea. Maybe I could make the bay Rupert was in? I tacked all the way back out to sea trying to stay hard on the wind, turned and headed back in, could I make Rupert's beach? No chance, still too low. So I headed down wind again for the moored boats, ducked through a tiny gap between the rocks and went in. To my surprise there was a perfect little beach a few meters south of the moorings, my private landing spot! If only I could keep the kite high and avoid the shelter of the cliffs I could make it! With a bump I felt the board hit the sand. I had arrived!

Taking a moment to myself on the beach I looked back to the boat and could see the elation in the gestures of the crew. We had done it! Then I saw Rupert back on the water, the legend that he is, he body dragged back out of the bay and rode in through the maze of rocks to meet me on my beach. Dropping each other's kites we congratulated each other overjoyed at our achievement! Quickly we thought about the team and wanted to thank them so we dashed over the cliff to the next bay where we saw them moored. No way out to them but to swim! What a feeling swimming across the bay here we were a year and half later, in Wales having kitesurfed across the Irish Sea!

So here we are, the crossing complete and a dream fulfilled! It's been a long road getting to this point. All this would not have been possible with out the help and support of so many friends and family, all the guys on the support crew for their un limited encouragement and reassurance, and finally Rupert for all the effort and work he has put into making this happen. Nice one guys! See you on the water.....