

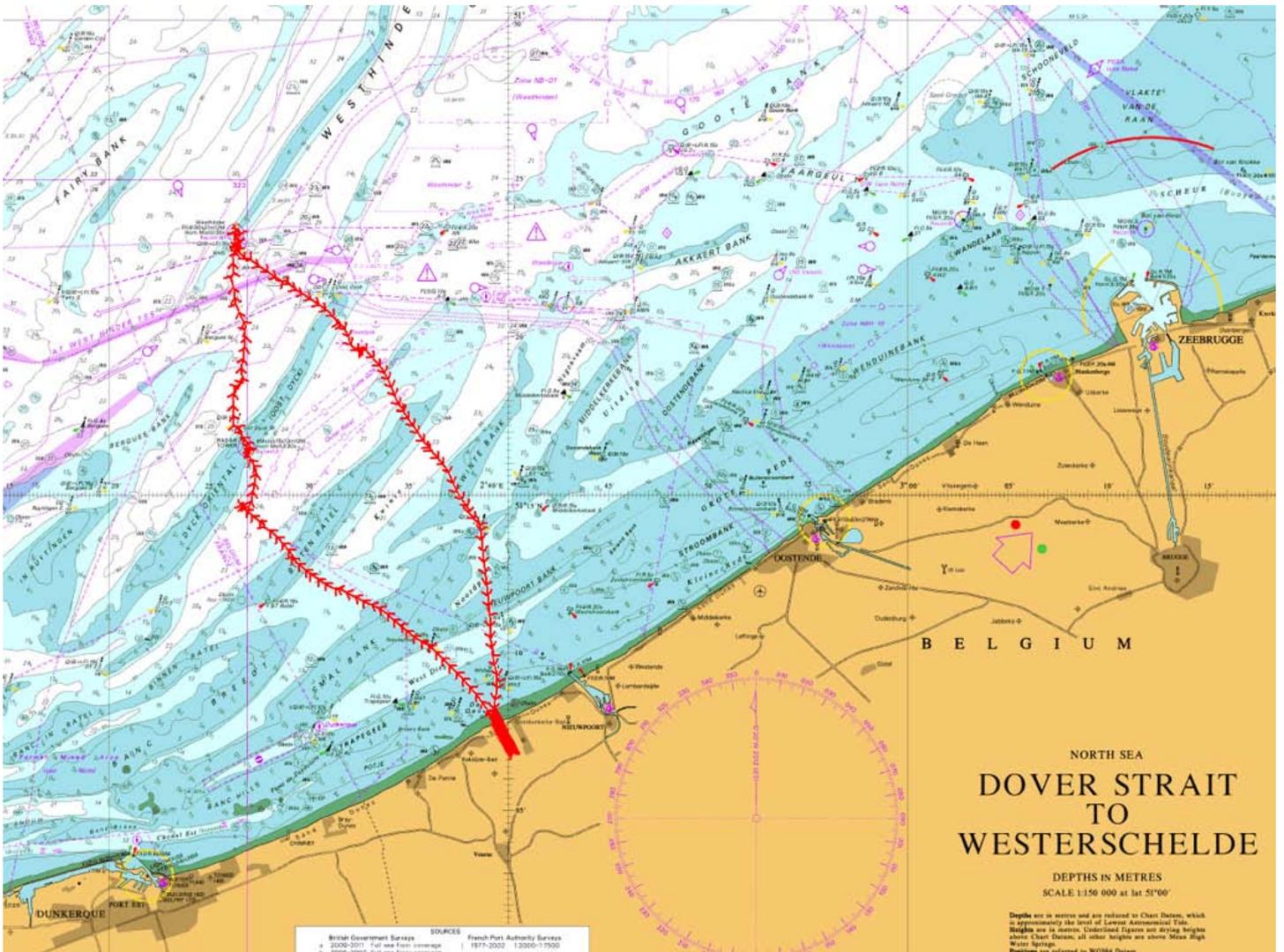
The Westhinder Challenge



We are always looking for a good challenge, preferably one that takes us offshore. If you look at the Belgian part of the North Sea, there are no islands that you can paddle to (with the exception of the North Sea crossing to the UK). We have to do it with our buoys, navigation marks and towers. Yes, there are towers located in the Southern part of the North Sea. Two of them are drawing our attention. The first, and closest one, is the Oostdyck radar tower. When visibility is extremely well, it can be seen from the beach without binoculars. The radar sends all shipping movements to the Traffic Centre for monitoring. This tower is located some 21 kilometres offshore.

What cannot be seen from ashore is the second tower located at the Westhinder sandbank. This one lies just behind the international shipping lane, one of the busiest in the world. The Westhinder beacon warns ships for the danger of the sandbank beneath. It also monitors the force of the wind and direction, which is important for the weather forecasts for this area. This tower is located some 32 kilometres offshore.

To take on this challenge you're not only need a good physical condition and stamina, you also have to know more than basic navigation. There is always a strong tidal stream that pushes you constantly off track, the stream is never in your favour. Taking a break, even a short one, relentlessly pushes you off track. Also the strength of the tidal stream changes every hour, so you have to keep a good eye to your bearings. During the most of the challenge, you will not have any reference to paddle to. When you reach the first tower, you still have to cross the international shipping lane, which is one of the busiest in the world. Keep in mind that those very large ocean ships probably want to see you, or change their course or speed for a sea kayaker. When you crossed the shipping lane and finally reach the Westhinder beacon, then you just completed the first half of the challenge. The second half, and the most important one, is to get yourself and your team back to shore safely. If you're tired, you can't just quit. There is no support boat to help you. There is only you and your team.



I'm proud to say that we were able to put together a small international team to take on this challenge. Two very experienced and well trained Spanish sea kayakers were eager to take on this challenge. They travelled all from Spain to Belgium, we spend some days paddling together, before heading out. On Saturday 7 July 2017 we started from the Oostduinkerke beach, at 07:40 am (local time). As an extra difficulty we chose to navigate on compass, with a sea chart. We carried also a GPS, just for registration and safety precautions, not for navigation. We stated our intentions to the Coast Guard by radio before the start. We paddled at a high pace, in order to compensate a bit lesser for the sideways tidal stream. In the video you can see the buoys that we have passed, the way we have taken on this challenge. It took us seven hours to reach the Westhinder beacon.





When we got there we established radio contact with the Coast Guard again, to tell them our position and that we were still in good shape to commence the way back to shore. It was 14:30 pm (local time) and we were at the farthest offshore point, being 32 kilometres. When arriving there, perhaps euphoric, we just did half the challenge. The second part, also the hardest, was to get back with the team.



It's also a psychological battle because you have absolutely nothing to look to, there are no references, and you cannot see the land for hours. The visibility was limited to ten kilometres, which is normal for us. You have to trust your navigation skills, simple as that. Even when tired, we still kept the same high pace to counter the current. We arrived back at Oostduinkerke beach at 20:55 pm (local time).



In the video you can see our GPS track log. The GPS was not turned off during our short breaks. It registered all of our movements during the challenge.

To all other sea kayakers out there who are looking for a tough challenge, this could be what you are looking for. Be well prepared for this one, both physically, mentally and be sure of your navigation skills.

I got extremely lucky to do this one with such experienced sea kayakers! Big thanks to Carlos GARCIA and Santi DOMINGUEZ for joining! It was an honour to be part of this team, and to beat this challenge together!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06aPdjRVuJs>

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July 2017

