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HOW TO GET A JOB IN BOATIN Five readers who turned their hobby into their career
Contents

June 2009

Boats

19 NEW BOATS
Menorquin 120; Morgan 33 Dinghy; Hunton 1004 RIB; Pégova Eclipse; Premier 43 HT; Solemar Oceanic 44; Armor Range Boat 39.

46 BOAT REPORT
Bénéteau Monte Carlo 47
Bénéteau often pull off the trick of delivering a huge amount of boat for a surprisingly modest amount of money. We take their bank-manager-friendly Monte Carlo 47 on test in France.

88 HEAD TO HEAD
Pearl 60 vs Sealine T60 Aura
An aft-cabin contender up against a Conran-inspired aft-cockpit Sealine in this battle of the British 60-footers.

Adventures in Boating

38 Me and My Boat: Wind Horse
We meet the owners who built a wave-piercing aluminium-hulled 80-footer to get them to any corner of the blue planet that they fancy.

84 I Made Boating My Career
The experiences of five MBY readers who woke up one morning, walked out of the day job, and went in search of a life working on the water. Is it possible to live the dream?

58 Exploring the Frisian Islands
Discover the idyllic harbours, colourful towns and isolated beauty of this unique chain of islands. Perfect for a relaxed summer cruise.

Cruising

34 Cumberlidge on Cruising
This classic MV has been cruising the rivers and canals of the South West for over 40 years, and she’s still going strong.

Boatmaster

96 KNOWLEDGE
Trim Tabs
Struggling to make it on the plane? A touch port-side down? Everything you need to know about these little transom helpers in our Q&A series.

103 OUR BOATS
A wooden launch and beloved family heirloom gets a makeover.

106 TRIED & TESTED
Evinrude E-Tec 300hp; rope work DVD; Swobbit cleaning kit; Canal du Midi cruising guide DVD.

108 WHAT NOW, SKIP?
A snagged prop brings your summer cruise to a grinding halt. What should you do?
Silver surfer: the amazing Wind Horse makes mincemeat of any sort of sea.
Precious mettle

Every inch of this aluminium beast has been designed and customised by its world-girdling owners, the Dashews (inset). Four years after launch, they’ve already logged the number of sea miles that a nuclear submarine would be proud of, and their design has proved so successful that Berthon are now offering a limited run of production replicas. We caught up with them on a rare moment when they weren’t mid ocean

Text: Jack Haines Photos: Steve Dashew & Lester McCarthy
Wind Horse is a boat founded on mind-boggling statistics, but one in particular stands out — 37,000 nautical miles logged. Even more incredible is the fact that Steve and Linda Dashew have racked up this staggering mileage in a mere four years. They are an intrepid couple who take their cruising very seriously, but the total has only been possible because of Wind Horse, their go-anywhere-through-anything aluminium motor boat.

Created from top to bottom by Steve and Linda, Wind Horse — or FPB (Fast Pilot Boat) 83, to use the boat’s official designation — is a one-off, custom-built, globe-trotting cruiser, and a hugely impressive sight to boot. Moored amongst the glittering GRP at Berthon’s Lymington Marina on a sunny but very windy day, Wind Horse looked like it had come from a different planet. The 83ft-long (25m) wave-piercer weighs in at 41 tonnes, and could easily be mistaken for the spawn of the Royal Navy with its unpainted battleship grey, all-aluminium body. But that day, in those conditions, it was the only boat that I would have wanted to climb aboard to face the English Channel.

The Dashews have spent most of their adult life on the water and they are bluewater cruisers of distinction, while Steve has been a keen designer and developer of practical long-distance sailing boats. Perhaps the most famous of these is the 80ft aluminium ketch Beowulf — the hull of which bears more than a passing resemblance to Wind Horse.

Bitten by the bluewater bug more than 20 years ago, they took their two children out of school with the intention of spending a year circumnavigating the world. They ended up staying on the water for six, cruising aboard a number of different yachts that they had developed. The children were home schooled on board. “It was a great way for the children to grow up. As a trained teacher, I felt confident in being able to educate them, and they were introduced to the 10 most wonderful places and people,” says Linda. She is obviously a very good tutor as both children were top of their respective classes upon return to mainstream school life.

Today, the Dashews spend half the year at their home in Tucson, Arizona, and half cruising aboard Wind Horse. Thus far, their playgrounds have ranged from the Arctic to the Southern Ocean and almost everywhere in between.

Changing tack

So why move from sail to power? “Unfortunately,” says Steve, “it was old age that made the decision for us. We just couldn’t handle a big yacht any more.” So power it was. Here, Steve had a problem: he had only ever spent an hour aboard a motor boat when he began creating Wind Horse. But his years as an ocean-crosser and liveaboard have clearly paid off.

Efficiency is the watchword on Wind Horse, and despite the yacht-like hull Steve says that the forefoot is the sharpest that you can get on a monohull. The very mention of bow thrusters provokes a furrowed brow from the skipper: “I work to make these boats as efficient as possible and for me a big hole in the hull works against that logic.” Then Steve adds words we don’t hear very often: “The most surprising thing for me has been how the motor boat has been cheaper to run than the yacht.” Amazingly, without maintenance of the sails and rigging to pay for, the super-efficient Wind Horse and her twin 125hp John Deere engines cost $2.20 a mile to run at 11 knots, whereas Beowulf cost $3.90.
Above: wave-piercing design and aluminium structure make Wind Horse comfortable and incredibly strong. Right: the flybridge is used more for relaxing in warmer climates than helming from.

Left: surfer's paradise - Wind Horse excels in a following sea.

Below: Steve and Linda have found themselves in seriously rough seas but Wind Horse has never let them down.
"I work to make these boats as efficient as possible. The most surprising thing for me has been finding out that the motor boat has been cheaper to run than the yacht!"
Despite aluminium being the material of choice for Steve’s yachts, his working life was built on fibreglass. When he was a teenager he split his time between school and running a boatyard where he built small fibreglass ski-boats. He later moved on to constructing huge fibreglass statues used as promotional tools, and then used it as building material, before he and Linda looked seriously into yacht design.

For a man who was on board the first sailing boat to crack the 30-knot barrier (31.65 knots on a D-class catamaran in 1970 – if you’re interested), the move to power must have been a shock to the system, but Steve has no regrets. “Sailing was great, but I love how smooth and quiet this boat is. Linda and I can easily handle her as a couple, and if I’m honest I wish I’d thought up Wind Horse ten years ago.”

Designing a thoroughbred
The design philosophy that underpins Wind Horse is impressive – corner cutting is not in Steve’s mentality, and the attention to detail on board would shame many a boatyard. The hull is constructed from 6mm aluminium plating, which means that logs and such debris just bounce off, the panes of glass in the wheelhouse are 18mm thick, and the ‘eyebrow’ above the windscreens is actually a set of pressure-release valves to allow wave energy to dissipate if Wind Horse takes a direct hit on its screens – the most vulnerable point. Steve tells me: “Over the 37,000 nautical miles those valves have only opened once. It was pitch black and in a serious storm, so we didn’t see the wave, but it must have been a big one!”

Even the fine details on board make Wind Horse a pinnacle of cruising dedication, like the sailing-boat winches on deck to help haul her considerable weight into the pontoon, the 4in fiddles on every flat surface in the salon and galley, and the fact that no matter where you are, a handhold or two will be close by.

I ask Linda whether they have ever felt out of their depth aboard Wind Horse. “No. Even when we did a sea trial from New Zealand to Fiji and had 30ft waves coming at us from all angles. We just strapped ourselves into the five-point seatbelts on either side of the saloon and sat it out. The boat did get popped a few times, though!”

Interestingly, Linda recalls how some of the scariest moments have been in the English Channel: “The sheer number of ships make us so nervous. It sounds strange, but a long passage is better than a short one. We feel most relaxed when we’re away from shipping and can get into our cruising routine. We stick to a rigid four-hours-on, four-hours-off watch cycle, interspersed with reading and cleaning the boat. If it’s very calm we’ll watch a film.”

On the water
Despite their history with the Channel, Steve suggests that we head ten or 20 miles out into it to find the biggest waves we can in order to show off Wind Horse’s talents. In fact, the area around the Needles Channel and Hurst Spit is rough enough, with the tide being funnelled into the Solent in the blow. We find plenty of big waves. Our photo boat – a Windy 42 Bora (and a very good sea boat) – is tossed around like a bath toy, but Wind Horse just brushes through the crests with laughable ease. In fact, there was more pitching fore and aft than I would have imagined, but in terms of roll, which is far more uncomfortable for those on board, the boat was reassuringly composed.

“The sea really isn’t big enough,” Steve complains, “She works best in much bigger waves. This wavelength is far too short for her.” And so begins the hunt for the worst the seas has to offer. I have never been on a boat before where you stand in
the wheelhouse directing the skipper to the place where you can see the most white horses and the biggest breakers, but this is clearly no ordinary boat.

In a typical motor boat and in these conditions you would be white-knuckled, clutching a handhold and making sure you didn’t bite your tongue off. On Wind Horse, however, things are so stable that Linda can brandish a chunky bread knife and calmly cuts the freshly prepared sandwiches in half.

Globe-trotting
While we are at sea Steve never steps away from the helm, leaving the autopilot in control, or steering using a small dial no larger than the knob on a cooker - there’s no wheel in sight. They always helm from the wheelhouse, and thanks to the huge expanse of glass you never feel claustrophobic. The flybridge helm is only used for close-quarters manoeuvres - and as somewhere to sit for a nightcap in a quiet bay.

Steve, or Skip as Linda calls him, is a quiet individual with a soft American lilt, but at one point during our cruise Wind Horse begins to surf down a wave. He breaks from answering my question in mid sentence releasing a “Wahoo!” before going back to explaining how the boat works best in a strong following sea. “This is where the boat really excels,” he explains. “We have had 22 knots out of her on a big surf. She is at her most efficient in this state and we can’t believe the buzz we get off catching a huge wave and staying with it for about 45 seconds.”

Of course, a couple with the Dasheux’s passion for long-range cruising are planning trips well into the future. Linda reveals: “We are addicted to the northern latitudes. Greenland is just magical, but we would also really like to go to Japan. When we circumnavigated the last time we didn’t reach the European Mediterranean, choosing to go via North Africa and the Red Sea instead. So we would also love to go there and see Italy especially.”

With so many highlights to choose from, Steve and Linda struggle when prompted to pinpoint their best ever moment on board. It’s left to Linda to recall one particularly memorable encounter. “We were cruising around Greenland when we caught sight of a man waving frantically at us from the shore. When we edged closer we noticed that in his other hand he had an enormous fish, and in broken English told us he would trade it for some coffee and sugar. I ground some Starbucks coffee beans up for him and found some organic sugar, then Steve transferred them across by tender. The man was thrilled and we got a giant fish for dinner!”

It was fortuitous that they ended up at Berthon’s Lymington Marina. “We needed to winter at an efficient yard and people had recommended Berthon to us and that’s how we ended up here,” explains Steve. The relationship has been fruitful because Berthon have now been granted the exclusive rights to market a 64ft (20m) production version of Wind Horse in the UK and Europe. Customers have been very impressed by sea trials on Wind Horse that three have put their names down for an FPB 64.

Wind Horse is, ultimately, a very impressive feat of engineering but I get the impression that Steve has plenty more in store and is still looking to perfect the boat.

I receive an email from him the day after the test requesting that I send him the images that our photographer Lester took on the sea trial day. He doesn’t want to frame them on his study wall, though - it’s so that he can observe how the hull works in “tight little waves”; his pursuit of the ultimate cruising boat continues. MBY

For more information on Steve’s yachts see www.setsail.com/dashew/dashoff.html
FPB 64: A TOUGH LITTLE SISTER

Apart from its 65ft (20m) LOA, there really is very little that separates the FPB 64 production boat from Wind Horse. The meticulous attention to detail will remain, as will super-tough construction in aluminium, the ocean-crossing range, and the near-unparalleled sea-going capabilities, all in a slightly scaled-down package. Naturally, Steve's approach to building production boats is as meticulous and precise as it was with Wind Horse, and with the FPB 64 he is drawing from all his experience and in-depth knowledge of the bigger craft.

"In building an FPB 64, we start with the 4,000 photos of the construction of Wind Horse. We sort through them and then create documents for each different area of work, with photos and captions detailing what will be similar and what is to be refined." It doesn’t stop here - Steve adds over a hundred pages of notes on observations aboard Wind Horse, detailing everything from structural issues to the pros and cons of the layout. The FPB 64’s builder – Circa Marine in New Zealand – certainly won’t be lacking in background material.

As with Wind Horse, the emphasis is on comfortable, practical cruising based around a ‘great room’ saloon/wheelhouse where cooking, lounging, laundry and watch-keeping can all take place with 360° views. With a single John Deere 6068 SFM engine the boat is expected to cruise at nine knots with an estimated range of 6,400nm, and with a price tag of $2.16 million. It is sold in the UK and Europe by Berthon.

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