Cruising
SPECIAL REPORT

HAPPY TO CROSS TO THE DARK SIDE

Yacht designer Steve Dashew on why he's given up fast sailing for an ocean crossing motorboat—one that can put in a 265-mile day

Warbled warning from the B&G wind instruments announces a gust of over 40 knots. The sea around us turns white as another squall approaches.

We're on the second day of a passage between Bay of Islands, New Zealand, and Fiji. A quick glance at the radar shows that the 60-mile long squall line, which has been bearing down on us the past hour, is about to make life interesting... At least, that would be the case if we were on one of our sailboats.

But this is a new era for us. We're aboard something that two years ago would have been heresy. Having spent our entire lives under sail—with over 200,000 offshore miles

rack up in the last 30 years—we find ourselves on a, well, non-yacht.

How have we fallen so far? Beowulf, our 78' ketch, was the ultimate cruising machine. With just two of us aboard she'd average 300-plus miles per day on tradewind passages. But time marches on and it became evident some years ago that it was no longer prudent for two of us, grandparents now, to light such a rocket on our own. The choices were stark: take crew, use smaller sails and go slower, or try something new.

For many years we've noted that our cruising sailboats powered better than trawler yachts. What about adapting this concept of high-performance ocean crossing to a power-only design? With no rig forces to offset the hull, it could be even more slippery.

Reduced hull stability would mean a softer motion in beam seas. VMG dead up and downwind could be really fast and very comfortable with the fine-ended design possible in this configuration. And we'd even have the ability to self-right in the event of a wave-induced capsize, something sailors take for granted but which is unheard of in motor yachts. The result is Wind Horse, 83' (25.4m) of swift ocean voyager.

Our 1,000 miles of sea trials have gone well, except that the autumn weather has been exceedingly pleasant for New Zealand's North Island. Which is why we're sitting
300 miles north of Opua with swells from three directions and significant wind waves of 6m (averaging 3m). This washing machine effect is what we’ve been looking for to really put this new design to the test.

Even though Wind Horse is dynamically stable at speed, she still responds to the waves. So we have a pair of active stabilisers to keep us comfortable. These look like huge spade rudders sticking out of the middle of the hull on each side. A solid state gyro senses motion and the stabilisers generate a lifting force to counteract roll. They work amazingly well. Our motion-recording instruments show average roll of just four degrees in these confused seas – significantly less motion than we’d be experiencing under sail.

We’re broad reaching at present, with the wind just aft of the beam. Wind waves are at an angle of 120°, far enough aft to allow occasional surfing. The engines are ticking over at 2,000 rpm, boat speed is averaging a hair over 11 knots. Beowulf would be faster power-reaching under sail, but then someone would have to go outside and drop the mizzen, or pull in reefs before the full force of this squall line reaches us.

Under sail, we’d be worrying about the coming windshift, trying to hold our present angle as tight as possible in these south-west winds. But Wind Horse loves running angles, so we head 10° to leeward of the thumb line.

Day three dawns and we have turned the corner on the high pressure system. The breeze is now embedded in the south-east – tradewinds have arrived. With the true wind angle at 165°, now at 15 knots, Wind Horse is surfing on almost every wave. Speed is up to 12 knots while exhaust gas temperature, which correlates to fuel burn, is down.

Setting the boat up for these conditions is totally different from what we’re used to with sail. On

Under sail it is often necessary to head up and build speed so as to be able to get the bow to drop down the wave and initiate surfing. With Wind Horse we just kick up the rpm’s a hair.

If Beowulf were alongside us now, carrying both spinnakers, she’d be giving us a wonderful ride. She would also be faster. But as the angle is very deep, Beowulf would be gybing downwind. On this course Wind Horse’s VMG is significantly faster.

One of the surprising things we notice is that Wind Horse is quieter running at her 265-mile-a-day clip than was the case with any of our sailboats. The engines can barely be heard – the sound level reads just 5dB at this speed.

The weather forecast is still showing a convergence over Fiji late tomorrow. At our present speed we will be entering Suva harbour sometime around noon. We need to keep in mind that we can adjust our arrival time, up or down, by pushing or pulling the throttles, regardless of what the weather does.

At 1227 local time, the lighthouse marking the western side of the pass into Suva harbour is off Wind Horse’s beam, three days and 22 hours after departing Bay of Islands, eight hours faster than Beowulf’s best on this trip.

Fast forward with us now two-and-a-half months. We’re 5,000 miles of upwind passagemaking removed from Fiji, finishing off the last leg of this cruise as we close with the coastline of Southern California. If this were one of our sailboats, we’d have taken a totally different route, limiting our upwind work.

Since New Zealand our average speed over the bottom has been 10.65 knots. We’re more comfortable and obviously the work load is less. But something is missing. Voyaging on Wind Horse is just not the same as sailing. The satisfaction from a passage well made is missing. Is this a worthwhile trade? Only time will tell.