



CLOSE TO BOAT HEAVEN

During travels in America, ROB AYELIJE joined Bruce Kirby, designer of the Norwalk Islands Sharpie, for a sail on the prototype, Exit 12.

When I arrived, the tide was out, and at the Kirby wharf little more than a trickle of water and a couple of muskrats remained. Hence, as Bruce pointed out, the rationale behind the ultra-shallow-draft Norwalk Islands Sharpies.

Exit 12, the prototype Norwalk Islands Sharpie, looked magnificent with her red bottom, black topides and white and varnished cabin trim. She sat on what had to be the most simple trailer design I've seen for a long time — a legacy of her that (on section) underscores. She was more handsome than I had imagined, even on the trailer.

We hitched up Bruce's slightly tennery AWD Chevy and backed the rig down a rather steep launching ramp to the side of the garden. Exit 12 floated off effortlessly, and the little dog Tobatsu, conveniently silenced in its stern compartment, burst into life and drove

us round to the wharf.

Exit 12 had been laid up for the winter, so we had to step the masts and organise the boat for sailing. Originally Exit 12 had had tapered alloy masts. These have been replaced with somewhat lighter carbon-fibre ones. (My own feeling is that well-constructed Oregon or spruce masts might be more economic and lighter for the required strength. Bruce has since provided us with appropriate plans for both Oregon and spruce masts.) Putting the mainmast into its socket in the bow was a bit of a chore. It seemed too slippery, too long and awkward, and worse, the deck area right up there on the bow made us feel like high-wire walkers. Bruce reckons he's going to organise a simple bipped arrangement in future.

The mizzen, however, couldn't have been easier. I'm always amazed at how

Bruce Kirby's home is fairly close to boat heaven. It sprawls up a cliffside at the end on a winding inlet off Long Island Sound, a few hours' train ride north of New York.

On my arrival I noticed in the long grass at the bottom of the yard a rather scrubby-looking Laser dinghy. To many Australian sailors this would have been the Holy Grail. This was no ordinary Laser — this was the Laser Numero uno! (It seems that Kirby's adopted countrymen feel similarly. Number One left for its new and permanent home at Mystic Sea Port Museum a month or two ago.)

Top: Sailing in smoggy Long Island Sound.

Left: Exit 12 carries untwisted carbon-fibre masts.

Far Left: Sails fall easily into their lazy jakes.



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little support a free-standing mast requires. In Australia and New Zealand we are so accustomed to having our masts supported by a spaghetti of wires, spreaders and bottleneck screws that it seems inconceivable, at first, that unstayed masts don't fall over on the mooring, let alone with a press of sail in a high wind.

I don't think I'll ever forget seeing Philip Bolger's Moccassin, a beamy, heavily-ballasted 30-odd footer blasting along off the wind with an enormous spread of sail and no stays! Since then, I've been around the building of dozens of cat boats, dories and sharpies with free-standing (mostly) wooden masts. They simply don't seem to break. I wonder if sometimes it has to do with the almost complete absence of compressive forces in such a rig? A tree, when you think about it, is an interesting example of a free-standing rig carrying a lot of sail on a extremely stiff hull . . .

I had also wondered why this particular line of rig development seems to have oc-

"... A tree, when you think about it, is an interesting example of a free-standing rig ..."

curred to such a high degree in the US, until recently. An American friend told me that it was a practice born of necessity at a point in history when the competition in trade against the former colonial masters, the British, had reached a peak. It appears that at that time there was no steel industry in the US, while that of the British was highly developed. The British simply stopped the supply of rigging wire.

Consequently there was a shortage of standing rigging wire for the American trading vessels, and simply none for the smaller fishing and other work boats. Hence the development of another technology!

Bruce and Margot Kirby had their sharpie professionally built, mainly because of heavy design commitments. The vessel is constructed of mahogany plywood and epoxy over ply bulkheads and

Top Left: Bruce Kirby checks the outboard motor.

Left: Exit 12's interior: natural mahogany with white trim.

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mahogany chine and deck logs. Two accommodation plans are shown for the 26-foot boat: one has big quarter berths (convertible to doubles) and a spacious head and galley set-up. The other arrangement is more conventional (to this Antipodean, anyway), and includes a for'ard V-berth and two convertible quarter berths going under the cockpit. Bruce and Margot had opted for the former.

The interior is natural mahogany with white trim, and looks great. There is not quite full head room, but one can stand up and arrange one's attire in the companionway without too much difficulty.

The fully-battened sails ran up the tracks easily, and on the release of the halyard flopped like venetian blinds into the waiting lazy jacks.

A couple of six-pack, avocado dip and corn chips, and things were about perfect for an afternoon sail. The trusty Tohatsu fired up again and the tide in the estuary was so low that Exit 12 seemed to float over a dew.

Clearly, 6hp is enough, as the sharpie form is very easily driven. As we motored the kilometre or so along the channel, Bruce observed that flat-bottomed boats, while very easy to build, were notoriously subtle and difficult to design.

The Norwalk Islands series is a logi-

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cal blend of the traditional working sharpie with modern sail-plan and accommodation considerations. The few controls that are required on this set-up lead back to the cockpit and are easily operated.

The mizzen went up first, and quick work on the main halyard meant that we

The boat's flat bottom makes trailing an easy matter.

were sailing within three or four minutes. The motor lifts up easily in its well and a fitted flap smoothes the underwater line of the outboard aperture, it is held in place by the weight of the motor lowered against it.

When sailing, the sense that the hull is easily driven is confirmed. To windward, the trick is to sail with the sails not quite hard-up, and not to attempt to out-point Australia II. The boat then moves along really well. Off the wind, the sharpie is a rocket machine!

Bruce told me he'd recently been doing some weekend racing with the local J24 fleet. They usually beat him on the windward legs, but off the wind or downwind he observes them clambering about with spinnaker poles, broaching like banshees while he sails past them with one hand on the tiller and the other attending to the avocado dip! Exit 12 has shown herself to be an excellent low-outlay cruising

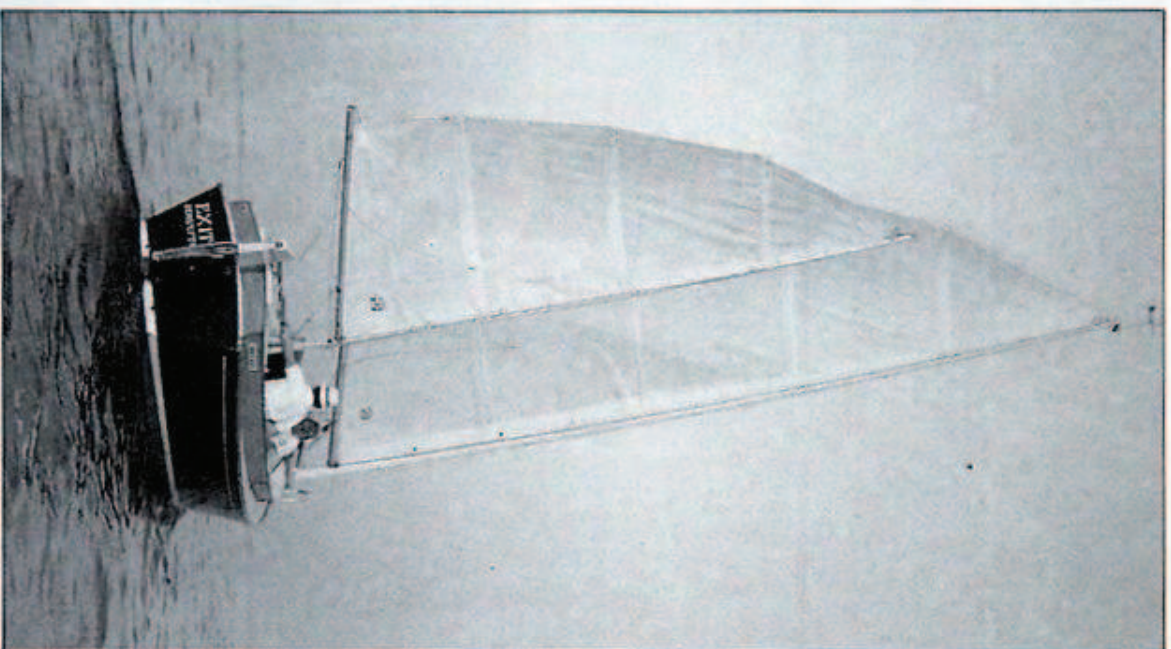
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boat that also wins races.

Going about is a dream. Put down the helm. Through the wind. Settle down for the next leg. No hassles, no fuss. Trim the sheets a little, and that's it.

The one serious reservation most of us have about the sharpie type is the potential for pounding. So it was with alarm that we noticed a giant Miami Vice-mobile conspicuously consuming at high speed across our bow. The wake looked like a left-over from Krakatoa! To my amazement, Exit 12 glided through it like a knife through butter. Bruce pointed out that it would have been a different matter under motor, when the boat "'stands up"' more. But the slight angle of heel under sail puts a sharp V to the water, easing her through the chop as well as, or better than, some more conventional hull shapes.

There is an old line about ill winds that blow no good. The smog and atmospheric grunge emanating from New Jersey and the Big Apple does no good at all for the natives of Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine and points northward, but it does make for some amazing sunsets in the middle of the afternoon on



Exit 12: quick down wind and simple to tack.

Long Island Sound! It is a weird thing, seeing the sun as a small orange ball, high in the sky, at three in the afternoon.

Since the avocado was now fully dipped, and I had to catch the Amtrak at 3am, we decided to head in. We winged out the sails for the run to the wharfside. Again, it was all so easy. A number of hot-looking yachts hailed us, and congratulated Bruce on Exit 12's good looks.

Entering the channel, we let go the hal-yards. The sails practically put themselves to bed, nesting along their respective booms, neatly held by the lazy jacks. From there it was a simple matter to fix the boom covers, tie up to the wharf and say good-bye and thanks to Exit 12 and the very hospitable Bruce and Margot Kirby.

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