



a road less-sailed

■ by **CLAIRE DUPRE**

After 10 years in Noumea, New Caledonia, Olivier Schaller has won a solid reputation as a composites expert. Thousands of hours on the New Caledonian lagoon at the reins of his 'experimental' beach cat, have made him a local figure. Here is his road less-sailed.

HIS presence has not gone unnoticed amongst the New Caledonian sailing community. It's been a decade of zig zagging all over the lagoon, hiking from the racks of his aqua marine coloured *Enya 2*. This veritable rocket, capable of 23kts, generally passes everything in sight. If it's a lanky-tall blond behind shades and under a bushman's hat ... no mistake, it can only be Olivier Schaller. Though born and raised in the Mediterranean island of Corsica, his faded blue eyes belie a more Nordic ancestry. Forty years old today, Olivier remembers a quiet childhood. As a teenager, he never made waves. He just grew and grew, like a bamboo shoot. However, this is where the tranquil flow of his life ended.

A bomb altered its course. The Corsican separatists blew up his parent's

car rental agency. They were from Lorraine. After over a decade on the beautiful island it was a cruel disappointment. In Corsica, to be accepted as a local is almost impossible and a name ending in an 'o' or an 'i' is a prerequisite ... Soon after the explosion, the desire to be somewhere else drove his parents to weigh anchor. Olivier, aged 16, followed aboard *Philos* a Damien 2 steel monohull, designed to handle Antarctic ice. The family shot through for new horizons ... the Balearics, Spain, Morocco, Canaries, Senegal, Brazil ... Ooh la la! The girls were so beautiful ... but he was shy. "Yes, yes ..." he assures us.

At 18, he left the floating family nest, not to mention his overbearing father. He lost his roots but gained wings, taking off with the first boat in need of a crew. Continuing the voyage by hitching rides on boats, he joined Isabelle Autissier aboard a Chatham 9m bound to Guyana. From boat to boat and island to island, he ended up in the West Indies. Finally, Saint Barthelemy would become the second island of his life. There he met the explosive cocktail of the Sillem brothers, Bernard the racer and Marc the adventurer. They introduced him to catamarans aboard a Prindle 18 and it was love at first sail. Life became unbearable without his own toys ...

So he made his first faltering steps in the brand new world of composite materials and completed his beach cat apprenticeship, learning from the bottom up, fumbling with synthetic materials from a to z, from wet outs to wipe outs.



Soon epoxy, glass and carbon would not hold any secrets from him. Passionate and talented, he built himself a proa; and then another. The projects left the shed at the pace of one every other year, but were never alike. He carried on with a catamaran; and then a second, the famous *Enya*. The one with the 'ideal lines' the ones that would give him the most intense sensations. Flying a hull, the winged rocket brought him close to seventh heaven. Built for long distance expeditions, her extra raised wings prevent Olivier from being smashed and soaked by short seas. Staying dry is important when helming such a craft for 12 hour stretches, daily for nearly two months.

Leaving St Barts behind, he sailed 1200 miles to reach Havana, Cuba. For Olivier, who likes his comforts, it meant camping on a different beach every night, *Enya* by his side. With no fear of an anchor dragging, he could happily drift into a

left from top:
Bulbous bows to reduce the bow wave;
Two metre long curved foils to sail 50cm
over the waves; a T-shaped rudder, an
aviation concept, to avoid pitching;
Another of Olivier's crazy projects. A
wave piercing 60ft power catamaran,
already under construction.

As a true Frenchman would do ... Olivier
discussing hull design. (below)

deep peaceful sleep. However, after their long Caribbean honeymoon Olivier's eyes began to wander. Dreaming about the Pacific Ocean, he eventually left behind a five year relationship. Abandoning *Enya* though was not an option. Olivier found a ship to ship his ship. Transferred to Georgia, USA, *Enya* was carefully packaged, but not without being cut in half by her carbon wizard. Eager to save \$2000 on freight costs, Olivier didn't really think twice. Destination Tahiti. A month and a half later the sailor was reunited with his two better halves on a Papeete beach, just in time to celebrate his 30th birthday.

Never short of ideas, Olivier had a hell of a plan: towing the 19' beach cat across the South-West Pacific. In Raiatea, where he was joined by his old friend Marc for the mission, no one would bet a dollar on their success and his future with *Enya*. The risks of towing dinghies or small boats in the open ocean are well known. With *Enya* weighing in at 175kg and very capable of high speed surfing, there seemed to be a premeditated disaster brewing. The little cat could go faster than its tower ... and the tow boat, in this case a 29' trimaran, would be in constant risk of getting rear ended. At the 11th hour Marc's courage was shrinking to nothing. However the stubborn grown-up child refused to let go



of his toy. His friend eventually agreed to try it with the provision that a knife be lashed to the rail. "If the cat touches, I cut it loose" warned Marc.

Mast off, *Enya* was lashed and dragging 50 metres behind like a prisoner behind the chariot. Twice the ocean team narrowly averted disaster. Watch out! With 30-35kts of tail wind and 14' seas, *Enya* charged with each crest. Luckily Olivier's guardian star had followed him all the way. A dose of audacity was sometimes required though. Olivier didn't hesitate either when it was time to dive into the open ocean to grab a line that had just chaffed through. Never monotonous, their epic alternated between cold sweats and shivers of pleasure. Each time an island was in a 60 mile radius, Olivier re-rigged his plane and found his own wings once again. The 'Iles sous le vent' in French Polynesia, the Cooks, Fiji ... four months of sailing and discovery, and nothing less than ecstasy in the warmth of the trades.



Always further westward, eventually a silhouette, the third island of his life appeared on the horizon: New Caledonia. Freshly landed on the beach of the 'Catamaran Club', he opened his first aid kit of epoxy and carbon. *Enya* had suffered over the long journey. As the story of his voyage became known in the community he was warmly welcomed, and quickly found himself making repairs

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of all sorts. As one thing lead to the next, his knowledge and skills earned him a reputation for excellence. He went into composites repair business. After three months in New Caledonia, he felt more accepted than he had ever felt during his 16 years in Corsica.

He settled. Before long, the tall Olive (his local nickname) found his alter ego, Martin Fischer. Not just another multihull fanatic, but a brilliant naval architect working mostly in Europe for the ORMA *Groupama* trimaran. The connection between them was instant. Olivier, has the Hard Knocks Education, and Martin, the formal engineer training and the nicely framed diplomas. The two complement each other and soon they

gave birth to the concept of 'Capricorn'*. This new model for the burgeoning Formula 18 class would have hulls wider than normal with exceptional planing ability. Another peculiarity would be the bulbous bow, reducing the bow wave. An original idea that won Martin the chance to design the amas for the 60' tri *Groupama 2*. Before the prototype of the Capricorn left New Caledonia to go into production in Australia, Olivier took advantage of the moulds and popped out a couple of hulls.

Olivier had another fantasy in mind and this time *Enya* ended up cut in half cross-wise. He then replaced the bottom half of *Enya* with the lower halves of the Capricorn hulls. "A standard sort of

French boat building surgical manoeuvre", some would tease. She was rebaptised *Enya 2*. The improved performance however was not spectacular. Just enough in light air to compete with Martin on his Capricorn but with lots of wind the Capricorn left him behind. It is a rare occurrence, when the duo is not to be found racing across lagoon during the week-end. During the week it's serious business. Drawing board for one and carbon/epoxy lay-ups for the other. Soon *Enya's* rig was subjected to a complete face lift. Martin designed a long fine section gracefully tapered and with substantial built-in camber, giving *Enya's* mast the elegance of a feather. In spite of everything, wear



***Enya's* unusually high racks keep Olivier and crew from getting soaked. (left)**

A rocket capable of 23kts, *Enya 2* generally passes everything in sight. (below)





The New Caledonian lagoon is the perfect playground for Olivier and his favourite toy, *Enya 2*. (below)

Enya 3 at the catamaran club in Noumea, ready to be launched. (bottom)

and tear, repairs, remodelling ... the faithful *Enya* (how many beach cats have that many miles under the hulls?) was still superb.

However hard as he may try to get over it, the design/build fetish was still driving him towards another. At his Jules Ferry St. workshop the next fancy was already underway. Another 'petite', an 18' cat, with hulls inspired by the Capricorn's ones; beams and rigging close to those of *Enya's* but lighter all around for more speed. When pressed for "just how fast?" he easily admits 25kts ... and reluctantly admits hoping to reach 35kts. This time, with Martin still his partner in crime, they popped a wild one out of the oven. Designed on the principle of an aeroplane wing, foils can allow a light multihull to become airborne. The first to sail in this fashion was the French Hydroptere in the 90s. Inspired from the present giant trimarans, their foils will be two metre long curved daggerboards which should lift the boat 50cm off the water. A 'T' shaped rudder, again an aviation concept, adjustable by a twist of the tiller for positive or negative lift, should provide pitching stability. Once balanced on one foil and a skinny tail, the risk of capsizing is nonetheless huge. "A risk worth taking", says Olivier with a cheeky grin. Be ready for some radical aerobatics. ❖

* Christian Deschamps and Michel Bouyssou are also co-designers of the Capricorn.

