

# So you want to build a boat?

part one

Living  
in a  
dream  
world

by PAUL FRANKLIN

## Always carry a spare

**B**EING A RATHER conspicuous construction in a suburban garden, a number of people became very curious about the activity on our front lawn. The conversation usually went like this;

"What are you making?"

"A boat."

"What sort of boat is it?"

"A 40ft plywood sailing catamaran."

"Have you built a boat before?"

"No."

This usually caused an incredulous look of disbelief.

"Have you done a lot of sailing?"

"No, but I saw Ellen McArthur on the TV."

This resulted in another facial expression that made the incredulous look of disbelief look like the benign acceptance of the Dalai Lama. People then either recalled a pressing engagement or became gushingly complimentary.

To be honest I consider myself deserving of neither reaction. I am no more an undiagnosed danger to myself and society than I am an engineering genius. I do however, like Martin Luther King, 'have a dream', but without the charisma or social conscience.

Now that there is one clearly recognisable hull the right way up on the drive, and another under construction, fewer people ask me what it is. But I do get quizzed about why I'm making 'his and hers' monohulls. "Don't you get on?" ask some. "It's a spare," I say.

## Stupid is as stupid does

I have heard it said that the only difference between those that build a boat and those that don't is the individual's level of stupidity. Only the stupid do it. If I had a dollar (or even better, a Euro) for every time some helpful individual advised me I'd be better off buying one I might just have enough funds to do exactly that. But the simple fact is that I don't, and I'm beginning to think that Lotto may be some kind of con. As a result, I am stuck with never achieving my dreams, or getting there incrementally by building one. The task of building a boat is risky and many will warn you against it. Internet sites like *Trademe* are sadly littered with shattered dreams. But as with any foolhardy



Marking and cutting out bulkheads.



Children and strongback in their infancy. (top left)  
 The first bulkhead in position. (top right)  
 Great garden feature – second attempt! (above)

undertaking, there is always the possibility that you just might pull it off.

### Watch what you wish for

Building something takes energy, and not just the calorific type. It takes drive. The drive to build a large boat needs to be enormous. This is not because the bits are big but because the effort has to be sustained over a long period (longer than they tell you). In fact, it requires a big dose of obsession.

The conventional wisdom is *'don't build bigger than you need'*. Only the truly masochistic would expend huge amounts of energy building an enormous boat just to potter about in a harbour. People who seek grandiose status items tend to buy them rather than build them – superficial consumerism is about instant gratification rather than arduous and protracted struggles. Building a big boat usually means you have something other than the local harbour in mind ...

### The big dream – sail the world

I once read somewhere that sailing around the world is the most common fantasy. At best, this most likely only applies to males, and in which case it could only be considered the second most common fantasy.

As a child I heard my father indulging in such fantasies, adding that he'd pull the plug when he ran out of money and go down with the boat. Whilst having a certain romantic appeal I was more concerned that someone who'd spent 11 years in the navy thought that boats had plugs. I probably misheard and he was actually planning an extended bath.

Some of us fantasize to escape tedious or less than happy times. The problems start when the fantasy turns to obsession. This is usually the time to ring your doctor or turn yourself in. My fantasy was escaping in a boat. I bought forests of boat magazines, constantly surfed the net for designs and lay awake each night building my dream boat. In the end the only cure was to get out there and do it for real. I still do all those things but now I build a boat as well.

### Turning dreams into reality

The hardest part of making the transition from dreamer to doer was telling people that I was suddenly building an offshore yacht. I might as well have told them I had just received the first shipment of uranium for my backyard nuclear reactor. Not everyone laughed openly, but the silent sceptic is much like dog excrement in the house: all the more unpleasant when you can't see it but know it's there. I admit that my plan to build a boat did sound pretty crazy. But so does spending the only life you have doing things you don't enjoy, with the only reprieve being retirement in your dribbly and infirm years (my apologies to the over 65s).

### Suddenly it all made sense

For years I had been unsatisfied and restless and even emigrating across the world provided only a temporary reprieve. However, it did show us that we were capable of successfully making dramatic changes to our life. But the buzz of a new country soon dulled and tarnished under the usual daily grind. This made me realise that we weren't just looking for life in a new country; we were looking for a new life period. Luckily, once you've made one dramatic change nothing seems impossible.

I started reading about people cruising in boats. The more I read the more it appeared to be this different lifestyle we

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*Macro photo of inorganic fibres*



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were searching for. It was about experiencing the world rather than consuming it. It was about adventure and self-reliance. And you even got to travel!

### Stop the world I want to get off

I think that most people know that affluence by default won't bring happiness. But despite what we'd like to think, most of us still chase it. We work longer hours, have poorer social and family lives, we drown in advertising whose sole purpose is to make us dissatisfied with what we already have. But still we go along with it – just knowing about it isn't enough to not get sucked in.

Somewhere I read that as soon as you have decided to cruise the lifestyle has already begun, even if its years before you see water. I was deeply excited; the new lifestyle and I won't even get seasick for years. However, I found it really meant that the hardships start way before you can start bragging about sailing around exotic locations. But even that wasn't so bad ...

For a while we carried on our normal lives whilst building the boat. This slowly got very hard, i.e. possibly enough

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The start of many scarph joints. (left)  
A framework full of potential. (below)

money, nowhere near enough time. Now we have made changes and have nowhere near enough money but possibly enough time (given long enough). The lack of money for daily living is not as frightening as we thought; choosing poverty is not a bad as having poverty forced upon you. And it's all for a good reason. At last! We have a good reason! So, we have already achieved better values without even getting our feet wet!

### It's not rocket science

People often remark to me that they could never build a boat. I think most of them are mistaken – they just don't really want to. The self-help industry tells us we are self limiting; we can't do something simply because that's what we tell ourselves. I don't buy the books but I buy the theory to some extent. Even an old 'shiny-arse' (office worker) like me can build a boat. Generally, in terms of difficulty, the build is more akin to doing the washing up for a whole city/region/small country than performing brain surgery.

### Every silver lining has a cloud

Despite the romance, it's not all flowers in the hair, dancing in the rain and feeling at one with the world. So far building the vessel for our dreams (as opposed to 'vessel of our dreams') has not made life

easy. Building a boat is monotonous, a huge responsibility, frustrating, tiring, dirty, anti-social and a health hazard. And those are just the good days when you're getting something done.

I would definitely concede to buying one if you can. We didn't, because it would require saving very hard for years and years, and we just don't have that sort of discipline – all too much like waiting until retirement to be happy. Building a boat meant that the money

would haemorrhage over a period, a slow, rather than instant, financial death. It also provided a transitional period to get our heads around things. Anyway, I thought I wanted to build a boat (and I have found that I do!).

### Remind me why I'm doing this!

It can feel like a real burden when you see neighbours packing the tent in the car on a hot weekend. But wait until they realise they forgot the tent pegs (again). Times like this I get my soap box out and remind my wife (and self) that we are both the happier under the forced labour of boatbuilding. We have a plan, we are shooting for a dream and we are reclaiming our right to be individuals. If you're not careful, life can lose its dynamic quality, and everything, including yourself, gets old. You can't stop the grey, the wrinkles, piles, corns and arthritis on the outside, but you can stop yourself treading water 'til the Big Sleep. My advice is to seek out your dream, grab it and let it lead you away in a new direction. Or, just go out and buy a new car or flat screen TV ... your choice. For those of you who can have both – don't even talk to me.





The gentle decline of our garden. (far left)  
 Is it finished now dad? (left)  
 I fell off here and broke my wrist. (below left)



### Top tips for growing your own

If you are thinking of building your own boat, here are some flawed pearls of hard earned wisdom –

1. Think long and hard about the design you want to build. Don't think you can change bits you don't like – you might seriously screw up handling, seaworthiness, etc. Make sure you talk to the designer, or maybe another design would be more suitable;
2. Think even longer about whether you really want to do it, can afford to, etc;
3. Once you have decided to build, don't let anything stop you. There is no room for changing your mind if its not what you expected. If you experience this then you have not followed 1 and 2 above;
4. Buy a good set of plans from a designer that is still active (and friendly, helpful, patient, accessible, i.e. close to a sainthood);
5. Do not build outside unless you have absolutely no option and are willing to have some terrible times;
6. Do not build unless you have total consent from your partner. This is a perennial problem, and subject to change without written notification;
7. Don't get a belt sander too close to your trousers. Prying out flesh and trouser leg really, really hurts.

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