



Cruising according to Dashew

The father of the fast short-handed offshore cruiser, Steve Dashew, talks to Elaine Bunting and asks why essential safety features still aren't the norm

Linda and Steve Dashew on their 83ft motorboat *Wind Horse*, the only power boat in the ARC. The Dashews have cruised over 200,000 miles under sail

The most unusual entry in the ARC this year, and one of the most interesting, was *Wind Horse*, American cruisers Steve and Linda Dashew's 83ft aluminium motorboat. It's a fascinating vessel, very functional from the outside, but gorgeously fitted out below. The boat was designed by Steve Dashew and since her launch in New Zealand in 2005 the couple have covered almost 50,000 miles.

Before that, the Dashews voyaged over 200,000 miles under sail over 30 years of cruising in three different boats designed by Steve. His first design was the 68ft *Deerfoot*, a very large and distinctive-looking yacht at that time. "It looked completely different. People didn't know what to think," Dashew remembers. "We got a lot of press, but no sales.

"We got back to California and a guy we'd raced with contacted us and said he wanted us to design a boat for him. The BOC Challenge [solo round the world race] was taking off and suddenly our boat, which had no teak on deck and no big overhangs, didn't look so funny."

That was the start of the 61ft

Deerfoot series, the later Sundeer 64 series and Steve and Linda's 78ft ketch *Beowulf*. In this they were able to make passages of over 300 miles in 24 hours, nearly always two-handed.

The Dashews have also published several books including *Practical Seamanship*, *The Offshore Cruising Encyclopaedia*, *The Circumnavigator's Handbook* and the superb *Mariner's Weather Handbook*. If you are serious about ocean cruising, these are indispensable references.

Ballooning hull volumes

In their motor boat the Dashews have been across the Pacific, the Atlantic and up to the Arctic. *Wind Horse* can maintain a cruising speed of 11 knots on passage with two 150hp engines and has an astonishing cruising range of 5,000 miles.

But it is for his sailing designs that Steve Dashew is justifiably known. There are two of his Sundeer 60 designs on the current World ARC circumnavigation and it's particularly telling that the only boat to return to the ARC 24 years after first completing the rally is a Deerfoot 62, *Moonshadow*, still cruising long-distance with a new owner. ➤

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Photos: Dazhew

I wanted to find out what he thought of the surprisingly modest changes in cruising yacht design over a generation and his views on what I regard as one of the biggest changes: ballooning increase in hull volumes.

"Why design a boat for a couple that has all that space you can't use for two to three weeks a year at most?" he replies. "When you try to increase the volume of a boat it forces you to do bad things to the balance and steering. The difficulty of steering directly relates to comfort at sea."

"It's a design spiral," he explains. "A beamier boat has more drag, more displacement, a heavier keel, a bigger engine, bigger propeller and uses more fuel. You're paying all these penalties for what?"

Watertight bulkheads

Dashew says he is astonished that the safety features he considers as non-negotiable in an ocean cruiser are not more widespread after 25 years, though they are inexpensive to include from the design stage. Watertight bulkheads are one example. "To have a cruising boat without a watertight bulkhead forward of the P bracket and forward at the sailroom is nuts. And how much more would that cost? Maybe two per cent more."

He thinks fittings below the waterline should be minimised. The 50ft CCA design he started out with had 22 through-hull fittings and he says that was one of its glaring deficiencies.

"Anything below the waterline can sink the boat, either from fitting failure or a lightning strike. Our basic rule is to have no more than two incoming salt water fittings below the waterline. Everything else is above it or has a glassfibre standpipe. That's only a tiny bit more difficult to build."

He also thinks cruising boat appendages should be a lot stronger. "You have to have factors of safety for operator error," Steve Dashew believes. "You need to run aground and not have to go to a boatyard."

On the Sundeer, he says, the difference between meeting the ABS rule for keel strength and exceeding it by four times is only 120kg. "Or take the rule on rudders: the difference between [an ABS compliant] rudder and two times that is 15kg. Why, when gooseneck and vang fittings give so many problems, don't builders double or triple the surface area of these flimsy fittings?"

I completely agree with him. But why does he think there is so little consumer demand to

The Dashew's FPB83 (Functional Power Boat) *Wind Horse* is utilitarian-looking in unpainted aluminium with 19mm glass windows, but beautifully fitted out with glossy joiner work inside and all mod cons

overcome the cheeseparing calculations of bean counters? "Maybe," he muses, "it's like safety in the old Detroit days. It didn't change until Volvo came along."

Essential systems

Dashew is also a fan of midships engine rooms. It robs a boat of some interior volume, but giving more room to essential systems means they are easier to check and maintain. I completely agree with Dashew when he says:

"If you look at the percentage of people who have the dream of cruising, but don't complete it, it almost always comes down to systems; they spend too long fixing things. Or they have this unspoken unease about what can go wrong. If you deal with those, and you spend more money on the systems, it's more successful and people are more comfortable."

If he were to design and build an ocean sailing yacht for himself again, I wonder what modern materials he might use or design features he'd change.

"High modulus materials," Dashew says. "For example, carbon rigging offers advantages. In terms of vertical centre of gravity, carbon rigging would give you the same benefit as a carbon spar with stainless steel rigging, but at a



A narrower boat is way more comfortable at sea and easier for the autopilot to handle

fraction of the cost. And if you built in comparable factors of safety, as you would with stainless rigging, it would last longer."

The weight saving would allow some huge benefits elsewhere in the boat. "You could change the keel for a shallower draught keel."

Beautiful twist

Dashew says he likes the new racing-influenced square top or fathead mainsails – "they have beautiful twist" – but he is not in favour of a big sail area on a short-handed cruiser. "At some point in the wind range you are going to put your engine on so designing a boat to excel in light airs makes no sense."

"It might be OK if the seas are flat, but how often in calms do you get flat seas? When you're slatting in no wind, [chafe] is very expensive on sails. It's much cheaper to burn diesel. My instinct would be to take those weight efficiencies from a lighter rig in a smaller rig and have a smaller and shorter-chord keel. If you wanted, you could have humungously big code sails for light airs downwind."

Dashew cannot see why, apart from fashion, cruising sailors are attracted to wide, twin rudder designs like the Pogo 40. Twin rudders are vulnerable to damage, he points out, and a wide hull brings problems for the cruising sailor – we are back to the subject of huge beams and hull volumes.

"Those designs would be great fun if you're young, but you have to be a hardcore sailor to enjoy that. Our boats have a narrow waterline beam, but a lot of hull flare for volume. You can get most of the interior space you need with a narrow waterline beam and you don't need the stability."

"For the price of a big 50-footer you could build a modest beam boat of 60ft and you wouldn't pay so many penalties for that in seakeeping. What people don't understand is that the issues that affect heavy weather handling also affect passaging. A narrower boat is way more comfortable at sea



The Dashews' 78ft ketch *Beowulf* at full stretch. The boat embodies their philosophy of speed and comfortable handling for short-handed cruising

and easier for an autopilot to handle. I would trade some of that bloated beam for waterline length and have a big engine room and a big sail locker forward."

Sense of insecurity

"I think," Dashew says, "a lot of people like sailing when they get there, but not while they're doing it. There's an emotional sense of insecurity. You know when you hear a boat creaking or groaning, you know how they steer, you've

read the MAIB [accident] reports and all that is at the back of your mind ... what if ... what if ...

"What if you flip that on its head and you choose a boat that you know will take care of you, one that could grind up and down on a reef for a week and not sink? Boatbuilders know people make an emotional decision on how a boat looks and not on rational criteria. I'm not so interested in how they look when they're new as how they'll look in ten years' time."