

CRUISING WORLD

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The crew of *Spice*
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Maggie B is cruising the world with an owner who has definite ideas about how a boat should look and perform

A Unique Schooner from Nova Scotia

spent that morning on an inflatable, weaving among some of the finest classic sailing yachts in the world. This was spring in Antigua, where such beauties, with their slim overhangs and springy sheers, have become commonplace. But then an extraordinary pale-yellow schooner poked her plumb nose into English

Harbour, and I was intrigued.

This was no restoration job, and there was no bright-work in sight. I circled her several times, gazing at the low cabin, the powerful lines of the hull, and the knockabout schooner rig with the perfect balance of a Gloucester fisherman. This brand-new boat was, in fact, very old-school.

Later that day, I learned a great deal more about the 63-foot *Maggie B*. She's a blend of traditional rigging, sail, and hull design combined with modern materials. She's not only a treat for

Maggie B charges to weather during the 2006 Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta.

BY CHRIS MUSELER
PHOTOS BY TIM WRIGHT



the senses but also a fascinating reflection of an owner who puts his money where his mouth is and has created his dream platform for sailing the world.

"I'm very skeptical of the modern trend to create a cheap motel room in a boat this size," says Frank Blair. "This boat isn't made to be an apartment in a marina; she's made to cover good distances on blue water." A Yale alumnus, Blair was a U.S. Navy F-8 jet pilot in Vietnam, and he later worked as a chief of staff at the Environmental Protection Agency before starting a venture-capital firm. Through it all, he always found time to get out on the water. The experience that comes with such a diverse series of careers is seen in every detail, abovedecks and below, aboard what he calls a "fusion" schooner.

"My specialty has been integrated analysis of companies," says Blair, who's the head of IEG Venture Partners of Chicago. "The focus on the legal, financial, marketing, and scientific ends of a company are similar to managing parts of a cruise, taking into account the boat, systems, weather, crew, and yourself."

Blair comes from a Down East Maine family who've lived in the state for gener-

ations. He's been a sailor for 50 years, and for the past 15 years, he's set aside his summers to be an instructor for Outward Bound, running a course in pulling boats. "At the end of each season," he says, "I take the dirty clothes off and put the suit back on." That experience, combined with his years spent flying jets and living on an aircraft carrier, had him searching for a social vehicle in which to travel the world, almost as a continuation of his tour of duty many years ago. Though he planned to eventually find a boat and start his trip, the spark for *Maggie B* didn't come until he made a chance visit to Covey Island Boatworks in Nova Scotia to see the progress on a friend's boat.

"I was building a 50-foot tunnel-drive motoryacht, and Frank flew to the yard to check it out," says John Steele, president of Covey Island. "He was intrigued, and he asked what kind of boat I owned, so I took him to my barn to see the 53-foot schooner I was building. It was a 'eureka' moment for him."

After that visit, Steele brought designer Nigel Irens into the fold. Irens has been designing record-breaking multihulls for the world's top sailors (including Ellen

MacArthur's trimaran, *B&Q Castorama*). The three couldn't have been a better fit. Making the project successful, each one had faith in the concepts of the others. "I knew that if I gave Nigel and John the goals and good input," Blair says, "then the boat would look good and go fast even if it was different from everything else out there."

Maggie B is, above all, an extension of her owner. "I didn't feel I had to prove anything or please anybody except myself," says Blair, who didn't want the design to conform to any rules or to have any feature just because "that's the way they did things on schooners in the 1830s."

While in the U.S. Navy, Blair enjoyed the camaraderie found in the open mess halls and the bunkrooms of an aircraft carrier. He wanted to be able to sail with friends and enjoy their company; *Maggie B*'s layout below reflects this influence.

Walking through a small, enclosed companionway, you enter an area Blair calls the "crew mess," which has a moderately sized galley along the port side, and a narrow table and settee to starboard. "This is an informal eating area," says Blair, who notes that the proximity to the





cockpit allows for conversations with the watch on deck while under way.

A step down forward brings one to a more formal saloon to port and a cramped ship's "office" to starboard. Blair thinks that a normal nav station would be a waste of space and that the deckhouse off the cockpit is the better place to check charts, GPS, and radar. Also to starboard is a plain master cabin that looks more like the crew's quarters. "The worst berth you can have is the one you see in the magazine pictures," he says, referring to large master suites with a centerline double berth. "You'll get thrown out of it at sea. I want a comfortable, snug berth with a bullet-proof lee cloth where I can get my four hours in."

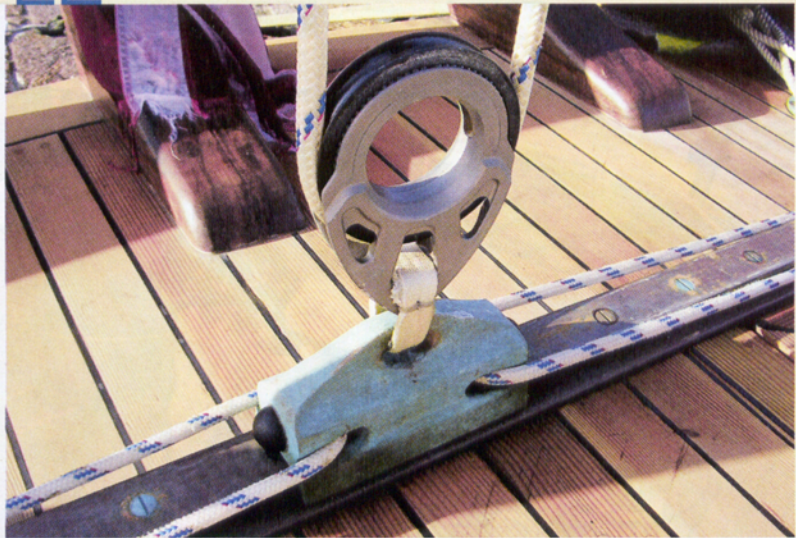
A passage between a head to starboard and a shower opposite leads forward into the crew quarters, with stacked bunks to starboard and a double berth to port. A series of watertight bulkhead doors make you feel like you're on a naval vessel. "I quite consciously wanted an old-fashioned schooner layout," says Blair. "Most space is communal space. That's why the galley is big. A good galley means good food. Good food makes for a happy crew."

High coamings make *Maggie B's* spacious cockpit (above) comfortable and dry. The ship's wheel originally graced the bridge of a World War II Liberty ship. Details like the curved back in the aft part (right) might help to keep the helmsman happy. The deckhouse crew mess (opposite page) doubles as the nav station and is close enough to the cockpit that the helmsman is still part of dinnertime conversations.

On deck, the cockpit seems deep for a boat designed for offshore work. Depth was added for comfortable seating and to provide a measure of safety. If the cockpit is filled by a sea, several ports at sole level, with one-way flaps similar to those on the transoms of racing dinghies, let the water out quickly.

The use of modern technology with a nod to tradition is most noticeable when looking aft. Five open-centered Lewmar mainsheet blocks hang from the white-painted carbon-fiber boom, which rests on a leather-covered boom-crutch. This is all aft of a ship's wheel from a World War II Liberty ship and a bronze binnacle.





Bronze deadeyes on the shrouds (top, left) are strung with Spectra line. A modern block rides on a bronze traveler (top, right). Lignum vitae parrel beads (right) are tied to a carbon-fiber gaff with Spectra line. Classic deck prisms (above)—there are six altogether—light *Maggie B's* interior.

Throughout the building of the boat, Blair insisted on an environmental consciousness in material. He especially wanted to minimize the use of teak, which he believes is being overharvested. During his years at the EPA, just after the agency was created in the 1970s, he saw some alarming data on the depletion of natural resources that stuck with him. “The best teak is rain-forest teak,” says Blair. “But the damage is huge when acres of these beautiful trees are removed. I was going to be unhappy looking at a teak deck.”

The cork cabin sole and fir deck, both relatively quickly renewable resources, are results of this approach. Blair wanted an easily maintained boat, and the only exposed wood—the decks and the silver bali-wood caprail—have gone gray, like aged teak. The cabin, two skylights, and the fo’c’sle hatch are Awlgrip-painted

mahogany. The painted exterior also adds to the workboat appearance, as fishing schooners of the past would paint their cabins and decks to reduce maintenance.

As if the uniqueness of the all-carbon gaff-schooner rig on a strip-planked hull designed by a multihull guru wasn’t enough, Blair’s materials search was wide-ranging: The boat’s frames are made of roof beams that came from a 1932 U.S. Army armory that was torn down just outside of Philadelphia. The old-growth Douglas fir was felled in the 1930s and has been drying for 70 years.

Below, the dark cabinetry and trim were hewn from a black locust tree that was killed by lightning at Blair’s parents’ farm in Illinois several years ago. “I had it cut down, turned into lovely boards, and carefully dried out to be used one day,” says Blair. “*Maggie B* was the day.”

Looks and materials aside, Blair still

wanted a fast boat. Irens, though known for his record-breaking ocean racers, has his roots firmly set in gaff-rigged boats. He lived aboard a gaff yawl as a student in Southampton, England, and his current designs include a series of traditional Bristol Channel pilot cutters built by Covey Island Boatworks, under the Westernman name, and a 38-foot lug-rigged yawl with a mix of modern and old design features. For *Maggie B*, Irens warned Blair that he wasn’t going to design a schooner replica. “I’m not a proponent of traditional design,” says Irens. “I’m more interested in interpretation.” He says that he was sticking his neck out with his proposal to Blair and that Blair was sticking his neck out by not going with the authentic Alden schooner look.

“Fast cruising has to be comfortable,” says Blair. “A racing boat is fast, but it can be hard on the crew. When we sailed



Racing on *Maggie B* is anything but a strenuous exercise.

through the Gulf Stream, on our way to Bermuda from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, in March, we were going 10 knots, and I was able to sleep through it while I was off watch; the boat was perfectly comfortable.”

The boomless foresail, the same concept used on the schooner *America*, adds an additional slot for better upwind performance. Blair notes that the traditional lacing holding the luffs to the masts is overall a safe arrangement, making any failures “soft” failures. “If you have a track with cars, and one rips out or jams, you’re really screwed,” he says. “On *Maggie B*, if one lacing blows out, you grab a piece of line and fix it in a few minutes.”

Since launching the boat in a snowstorm in January 2006, Blair and his various crews have navigated the U.S. East Coast, the Caribbean, and the Brazilian coast en route to Cape Horn. He believes that a crew of four is generally a perfect number for shorter passages but that more are desirable for ocean crossing. Since beginning his journey, he’s learned some lessons about crew selection. “You can have a great pal ashore who knows something about sailing but doesn’t fit in,” says Blair, “and you can pick someone



off the dock, and they’re perfect.” Currently, he’s sailing with two fellow instructors from Outward Bound, two boatbuilders from Canada, and two sailors he met in Martinique. “If I was in a Beneteau sailing to the Caribbean, I’d have to hire crew. But with a boat like this and destinations like Cape Town, South Africa, and Salvador, Brazil, I can be pretty picky about who gets to come.”

There’s a lot to follow on the boat’s website: *Maggie B*’s progress, the local color, the gear that’s breaking, the gear

Maggie B	
LOA	63' 3" (19.28 m.)
LWL	56' 11" (17.35 m.)
Beam	16' 8" (5.08 m.)
Draft	6' 7" (2.01 m.)
Sail Area	2,310 sq. ft. (214.6 sq. m.)
Ballast	29,000 lb. (13,154 kg.)
Displacement	77,000 lb. (34,927 kg.)
Ballast/D	.38
D/L	186
SA/D	20.4
Water	373 gal. (1,412 l.)
Fuel	315 gal. (1,192 l.)
Mast Height	67' 0" (20.42 m.)
Engine	100-hp. Yanmar
Designer	Nigel Irens
Price	CAN\$2,000,000

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that’s not, the sail selection, the menu choices each day. When asked the expected question, “How long is your trip going to take?” Blair gives a dry response: “It’ll be over when I get back.”

Chris Museler, of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, is a freelance writer whose work appears in many magazines and newspapers, including *The New York Times*. Caribbean-based photographer Tim Wright shoots regattas in the islands in the winter and in Europe in the summer (see www.photoaction.com).