



Around AND ABOUT



Dutch sailors Harald and Marion Hart have long enjoyed adventuring up and down the North Sea, Baltic Sea, along the Channel and rounding the corner to warmer Iberian waters. Last summer they added the Irish Sea and Scottish waters to the tick-list, spending four months sailing around Britain aboard Contest 50CS *Steppingstone*.



HARALD AND MARION HART ARE NO STRANGERS to Britain's southern shores, visiting many times through their decades of yachting from the Netherlands and beyond. Yet the UK focus had previously always been on the south coast despite an innate yearning for more northern waters. Then talk began of a more ambitious, 1700-nautical mile rounding of mainland Britain aboard their Contest 50CS *Steppingstone*, their second Contest, the couple having previously owned a 45CS.

The trigger it seemed needed ultimately only a light finger. As Harald explains, "The NVVK, the coastal cruising association in the Netherlands, was running informative sessions including one we enjoyed about sailing around Iceland. Another was planned discussing going around Britain, which we were considering for the future. Then with six or seven other couples thinking the same, we thought why wait, let's go this year, 2019!"

And come early summer they all did, meeting up on occasion with four setting off anti-clockwise, and three more conventionally clockwise including Harald and Marion.

Some had planned their routing meticulously, but Harald and Marion differed, "That's what we don't like to do," says Marion, "Some like to plan every step of the way, read every little thing about where they're going, calling the marinas, making reservations far ahead. But all that planning... with sailing it doesn't work!"

It's that get-away ethos that first set the couple afloat back in the middle-Eighties. "What made us go sailing was looking for freedom. Roads were overcrowded, especially in summer, and everywhere too many people. We found out that sailing could give you a lot of space, and the chance to relax. But we couldn't sail!"

It seems that wasn't a problem – that is if, in their words, you dare to take steps! And with the Harts' well natured, contagious humour, those steps seem often to include a good laugh as much as a challenge. Harald picks up the story, "We were both interested and said ok we have no boat, no experience, so let's start with a navigation course. Which we did in the evenings in Den Haag where I remember how in the breaks the others would talk between themselves about their boats, their experience. They asked about ours. Well we don't, we had to say, we have neither. It was a bit strange!"

Putting theory straight to test soon after while holidaying in Croatia, they found themselves gifted with unexpected, and they'd say unearned, respect when thinking to rent a 26-footer locally. "The man, he asked if I had experience. I replied, well, I have my navigation certificate. Where are you from? he says. Holland, we say. Ah, the North Sea, that is really something!"

With that the boat was theirs. Released from the dock, Harald and Marion quickly motored away and hid behind the island, secretly speed-reading the Bob Bond *Handbook of Sailing* they'd smuggled aboard with them. Incidents were more than one, they say!

It was then with a later Greek sailing holiday with friends in the know, that it really started. In 14 days they'd been taught the basics, the bug had bitten deep and, in mind of that line: daring to take steps, Harald and Marion soon had their first boat... an 11-metre Nicholson 35, a mighty big introduction to yachting back then in the mid-Eighties. But unfazed they never looked back, only forward, cruising everywhere, and only ending that boat's time with family-Hart after a six-month adventure from the fjords of Norway to Lagos in Portugal – and with three very young children aboard, the eldest being just five years old.

Fast forward to last summer and the current three-cabin Contest 50CS that they bought new for the best of couple's cruising with room enough still for visits along the way from the now very grown family. This rolling adventure around Britain presented so much new opportunity as well as, by going clockwise, the chance first to visit many old south-coast favourites including the Harts' all-time stars such as Beaulieu then Dartmouth and upstream Dittisham. They were making new discoveries, too, like Helford River before rounding England's western extreme.

Above: Marion and Harald Hart enjoying close-quarter exploring in their rounding of mainland Britain.

Left and previous pages: Highlights of the voyage included the wide open splendours of Scotland's many lochs, cruising the Crinan canal and, of course, a tasting or two of the local whiskies.





Edging up the Irish Sea, despite the natural, tempting desire to see everything, Harald says, “Even if you have four months you have to choose, and although the Irish coast was nice, we didn’t make many stops there.”

Running both sides of Ireland’s Brexit-puzzling border, visiting each of Dublin and Belfast, with a couple of halts between, gave a really good taste of a beautiful sailing destination. It is a tricky, rugged coast, though. “We prefer to anchor or pick up a mooring when we can,” the pair say, “but here on the east side of Ireland it’s difficult to find good places for that.”

The push then was to get on up to Scotland and the Hebrides islands lying off the west coast, picking up visiting family from the mainland along the way.

With the couple both sailors confident and capable across the board, Marion calls them a “very good team”, which Harald endorses, saying Marion knows exactly what to do and does so very well. “You know, sailing a well-set boat is not that difficult. Boat handling in the harbour, that’s the difficult bit. But if you are a good team there is comfort. We don’t have need to discuss. We just do!”

“There’s no irritation, no shouting on board,” says Marion, adding, “but there is one skipper, Harald’s the skipper, that’s what I rely on. I can handle the boat but I am very happy to be in this position. That makes me feel safe. I’ll not get into any debate, except maybe on navigation or weather, but not on sailing.”

Smiling yet serious, Harald points out, “Of course, anything that does go wrong is my fault. It has to be, for not thinking and instructing ahead. That is what you must do when you are sailing. To know where you will arrive, how it will look, and you try to get all that information from wherever, however you can.”

Both acknowledge that’s much easier now than in their early days’ navigation aboard that Nicholson 35, pre all the technology and kit they have aboard their Contest now: radar, GPS, AIS and, of course, internet forecasts and more. Back then it was paper charts and pilot books only, wonky hand-held radio direction finding, and very limited radio weather bulletins.

But some things from other times and different worlds still bring benefits, as Marion deftly illustrates. They’ve taught themselves traditional lassoing techniques, and this works a treat. “When we had smaller boats and were docking I’d just jump ashore with a line. With this one a bit higher it can be more tricky. But just like cowboys we practised a lot on shore as well as boat, and now we manage fine! Different ways, by angle and distance... special throws. It’s very different. Can be more of a problem now, actually, if helpers do suddenly appear and interfere!”

It was the wild west of Scotland that proved the real highlight in this trip despite an apparent, slightly divided opinion creaking open to reveal a well-humoured parting of the ways when it comes to ultimately preferred destinations. Remember that ‘yearning for the north’ earlier in the story? Well, that’s Harald whose future-thinking leans toward Iceland and on to Greenland. Marion, after 30 years now living in Norway, inclines to turning south towards more sun again.

So here in the hardy western isles, Harald enjoyed the harsher Outer Hebrides, with Lochboisdale on Uist and Stornoway on Lewis, under more of the raw Atlantic influence than the tangibly more protected Inner Hebrides preferred by Marion. There, on Skye, the charm of small villages Plockton, Badachro and Dunvegan with its castle, fired fascination and added to the natural wonders of the many, many lochs they turned into for nights sometimes peaceful, sometimes less so.

The weather throughout was not at its best. There were nice days, though, and as Marion says, “We knew it wouldn’t be such nice weather but when, as told, we live in Norway and first moved there to the Polar Circle for a couple of years, we know what bad weather is!”

Loving the northern mainland, too, the pair came across such gems as the exotic gardens of Inverewe at the head of Loch Ewe just short of Ullapool, where as with so many of the harbours they entered, visiting yachts mingle dockside with the tough local fishing fleet. Humbling yet inviting and as one harbour master commented, adding a touch of beauty with a yacht like this.

It was with a similar experience that Harald and Marion themselves had first come across Contest. “We went many years without a boat after the Nicholson – with work, schools, sports and such,” says Harald, “but knew to come back. Even then it took us some years to decide on and find the right boat for us, and I remember in several harbours seeing Contests and saying what nice boats.”

Boat show visits in the States as well as Europe led ultimately to HISWA in Amsterdam for a visit to Contest before another two years’ deliberating. Only then was it decided. The Harts’ return to sailing would be aboard a Contest 45CS, and with a new-build not brokerage boat.

A big decision Harald agrees, “If you buy a boat you have to use it. Our first boat in Norway, we used it a lot, sailing mid-week also. And now we thought, ok, the time has come for us to buy a boat because again we want to use it, not just have it lying there.”

The reason to buy new-build was equally well considered. “The point,” says Harald, “is that we thought we’re not buying a boat for just a couple of years, we’re buying for the

next 15 or 20. Then I thought about how in the first years of owning a boat you don’t know so much and, if a used boat, not have so much information about all the equipment and things aboard. There will always be a problem or two but I want to sail as problem-free as I can. To have and read all the manuals, understand how things fit together and work, then I can manage things myself or know how to explain to the engineer what the problem is. That’s why we felt more safe with a new boat from the beginning.”

Then after just three years of cruising their 45CS to Sweden, Denmark, the Channel Islands and Scilly Isles, came an unexpected switch to a larger and again new Contest 50CS. No way was this in the plan, but the way fell open! “Ja, well, the opportunity arose!” say Harald and Marion, both grinning big-time. “A man from the USA had contacted the yard to buy a boat like we had and, through the Contest team, made a good offer which gave us the chance to go a little bigger, which we took, as for a bigger trip a bigger boat would help!”

And practical as ever, this is not just about guests and more privacy, it’s about equipment. “If we sail further in the future, we’ll need more equipment and spares, and the more I sail the more I will know more about the boat and the kind of spares we really need, and the space for these.”

The rugged shores passed might test a pilot’s navigation when the fog sets in, as it often did to the far north, but they do present the most beautiful coastal cruising when the sun shines through.

In the Orkney Islands, 8km from Stromness, the neolithic standing stones of Stenness are believed to be perhaps the oldest henge site in the entire British Isles.

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From castle ruins to glorious gardens and towering lighthouses, the Harts' *Steppingstone* gave Harald and Marion a long summer adventure to remember.

This logic in yacht care and independence is faultless, especially with the challenges Harald increasingly enjoys. With Marion needing to head home for a few days on family matters, she jumped ship in Ullapool leaving Harald then sailing several days solo with overnight stops in deserted lochs. This took Harald alone right around the top of Scotland, mostly in dense fog, passing the menacing Cape Wrath just half a mile away unseen in a full, fast-flowing, five-knot tide, then punching on towards picture-postcard Scrabster where Marion rejoined for the crossing to the final big highlight, the Orkney Isles.

There Stromness and Kirkwall gave a flavour of Orkney society and the islands' rich ancient history which they explored, and further inland also on the bikes they keep aboard and always easily to hand, extending their adventures wherever they sail.

"Harald always gets restless," laughs Marion. "When in the Orkneys, with people sailing in from the Shetlands you could see him thinking! Once when we were sailing north, I caught him with the Shetland Pilot in his lap. I said no, we stay here longer. He said but there's Fair Isle, the Shetlands!"

In conversation, Harald concedes the high-north will have to wait, maybe Spitsbergen next year, perhaps as a start to Iceland later. Marion's thinking Spain, she says with good humoured smile.

But packing that Shetland Pilot away, nearing the end of the around Britain trip, they set course for Peterhead on the mainland's eastern tip before harbour-hopping down to Newcastle, taking their total stops to more than 60 in this four-month cruise, and before Harald's last challenge. While Marion would fly home, Harald was going solo again, sailing the final 390 nautical miles across the North Sea to Den Helder through windfarms and shipping lanes alone.

And why not? He and Marion have the exact right boat, fitted with all the right kit, and which they each know inside out. There's surely no better way to go 'around and about'.

