

Wylo II in southern Portugal
Note the large forward bulkhead
allowing Nick's old motorboat
to be stored in the forepeak

Wayfaring with Wylo

John Woolf talks to Nick Skeates about his sailing past, his ongoing voyages and the shipwreck that led him to build Wylo II

Nick and Dorothy in Tortola on the British Virgin Islands, 1985

Wylo's sailing tender, a two-part nesting dory for deck stowage

I first met Nick Skeates in 1996 when I sailed into Tonga. It was no surprise to meet him 12 years later in Cocos Keeling atoll – he has completed four circumnavigations, after all. But it was a surprise to meet him for the third time moored on a picturesque river in Portugal.

Having scooted up the river in the dinghy to see what there was to see I spotted a Wylo, which made me think of Nick. Checking the name of Nick's boat from the inscription in the book he had presented to us as a parting gift in Cocos Keeling, we saw the note saying to text him if we were ever in the UK or Portugal, which we now did. Almost immediately, Nick replied: 'An hour ago Wylo anchored

a mile south of you after a 14-day passage from Plymouth. See you soon.' What an incredible coincidence, even in the world of cruising.

Nick sailed his dory over to visit us the following day – fitting for a man who tacked the 20NM up the river, whereas we had used the iron sail. He only uses his engine 'to get out of the way of large commercial vessels' and uses a sextant for navigation, keeping a handheld GPS for 'emergencies'. Nick is quick to point out he lives and sails this way because he enjoys the challenge, getting tremendous satisfaction from making landfall using no power except the wind and traditional navigation methods.

He was pleased with his solo 14-day 1,100NM passage, having hove to for 12 hours to let a storm pass, but said it didn't beat a previous 10-day passage, despite the fact that he collided with a 40-ton sperm whale during that voyage. Wylo II still wears the dent today. To quote Wylo's log, 'Hit whale, down on starboard bow, deck shook up, wood joints cracked. Helluva bang, brown water where it happened. The margin plate is bent in three places, opening gaps which I caulked with rags.

Forward bulkhead split.'

Nick pointed out where the line of blubber and other matter from the whale extended down the side of the boat, and indicated the damage where the force from the impact was transferred across to the port side, buckling the steel there – an impressive force, as Wylo II is made of 1/4in steel above the waterline.

Nick's early years were spent in Brockham, Surrey. He was taught to sail by his father on the Norfolk Broads in a 12ft lug-rigged, clinker-built dinghy. After his first and only model aircraft crashed he stuck to building model yachts and steamboats, sailing them on the local duck pond. However, it was a Heron dinghy built by his father that inspired Nick's lifelong addiction to sailing. Later he moved into dinghy cruising, which I had never heard of. 'The Dinghy Cruising Association is alive and well in the UK,' I was assured, 'and the Solent and Thames Estuary are brilliant cruising grounds to explore. A friend and I used to take off for a week with just a tent, a Primus stove and a bag of spuds.'

Nick eventually traded up to Wylo, a 28-footer designed by Morgan, Giles and

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kiwi John Woolf circumnavigated the globe in his steel masthead sloop *Beyond*, writing about the people and places as he went.

He's now back in New Zealand, plotting to head offshore once again.