



Sailing the Wind Hunter 19

A rising giant in the production yacht industry, Poland is exporting both motorboats and sailing yachts. So why, we asked Our Man In Gmina Czosnow, Alex Hanusz, are so few of them traditionally-styled craft?

With photographs by Bartosz Ulatowski

The reason, I suspect, is that most of the wooden sea-going yachts built in the dull eras of communism were neglected for years. Owners in the nationalised sailing clubs struggled to maintain their boats but never had enough cash to do the necessary upkeep. And let's face it, most of their boats were not well-built in the first place, in yards which were suffering from permanent shortages of materials and irrationally low budgets.

So, for the majority of today's Polish sailors, 'classic boats' are associated with constantly leaking decks, full bilges,

malfunctioning systems and considerable expense; craft which, however beautiful their shapes may be to look at, have become completely impractical to restore after years and years of stopgap repairs. And it seems, this poor reputation has even subconsciously affected popular opinion of new boats with traditional shapes, causing the Polish yachting industry to concentrate on futuristic shapes... until now.

A handful of enthusiasts are working on their dreams, waiting patiently for the local market trends to change or just exporting their inspirations abroad, where traditional-looking



Above L & R: Even with a berth and table for dining and chartwork to port, a v-berth forward and a neat little galley to starboard, the pocket cruiser feels spacious down below.

Right: On the 3-berth version, there's also a separate – and rather smart – heads compartment.

Below: The outboard motor lives in a well to starboard and is matched by a generous stowage locker to port.



craft merit more than platonic appreciation. Among them is Arek Chacinski and his friends from Gdansk.

The yacht that we went to test on Gdanska Bay fits a gap in the local market. The Wind Hunter 19 is between thinking big and thinking small; neither a cruising dinghy, nor a full-sized yacht. She's a trailable pocket cruiser for inland waters and peeking out to sea when conditions allow. Arek, who is one of the builders, let us sail the whole day until dusk – as a prototype, the yacht had still not been fitted with nav lights. The weather was obliging, with perfect winds for sailing but at the inevitable cost of dull grey skies.

But back to the builders... Three friends, who had known each other for years while working in the larger yards, had started their own boatbuilding company. With complementary skills, they began with subcontracted work, laminating hulls and decks for bigger companies, mostly using proven manual methods.. Gaining a reputation for reliability and honesty, they won more and more elaborate orders. Today, complete ready-

to-sail yachts are leaving their workshop, built for partner companies abroad. Their team now consists of 10 people and is still growing.

As they built their business, the trio got to know Stefan Ekner, one of the few designers of traditional yachts in Poland. They discussed creating a classic yacht from scratch together: the Wind Hunter 19. The goal was to create a safe, small family vessel inspired by traditions. What one of them calls a yacht with soul. It has been a 2-year project for the team and the new boat was completed in time to make its first UK appearance at the Southampton Boat Show last September.

Good vibrations

This is not a deep keel yacht. Although I find later that she heels moderately while sailing and does not suddenly keel over, when I step aboard that initial roll seems a little skittish. But for a draft of only 1'10" (0.55m), I can put up with that.

Leaving the marina, Wind Hunter's 5hp Yamaha outboard,



WIND HUNTER 19 SPECIFICATION

LOA: 19' (5.80m)
LWL: 18' (5.50m)
Beam: 7'3" (2.20m)
Draft: 1'10" (0.55m)
Sail area: 231 sq.ft (21.5m²)
Weight laden: 2425 lbs (1100 kg)
Ballast: 992 lbs (450 kg)
RCD category: C

which is mounted in a well to starboard, glides us along pleasantly, with no equipment or fittings shivering from vibration. Later, with full throttle assisted by both sails, the boat rushed us along at 7.1 knots, so she would surely be capable of making way against a strong tide.

Sitting comfortably in the large cockpit, my first impression of the Wind Hunter was that I was steering a significantly larger boat. A safe feeling. This is because the cockpit is quite high above waterline, the hull is wide and the cabin hides the bow. Each time I stand up or sit a bit higher on the aft hatches and look over the top of the cabin roof to the bow, I am surprised to see how close it is! Wind Hunter is only 19' (5.8m) long but both in the cockpit and down below, she gives the impression of a longer hull. Arek reports the same sensation

was mentioned by many of her visitors at Southampton, who were convinced she is a 21-footer.

Speedy Gonzales

Raising the traditionally luff-laced gaff mainsail is easy with both halyards led to cockpit. One can also employ an unconventional system of blocks to raise the gaff with a single halyard. The jib unfurls from the tip of the solid bowsprit and all these tasks can be done single-handed because leaving the rudder to its own devices for a moment doesn't cause the boat to wander. This also makes steering pleasant: the boat responds to the rudder yet she is not twitchy. You can feel that she weighs 2425 lbs (1100kg), of which around 1000 lbs (450kg) is lead ballast moulded into the keel.



When the wind drops occasionally, she needs some speed to tack successfully, at least 2 knots is necessary to avoid getting stuck in irons. But if it's blowing, say, F 2-3, she runs at 4.5-5 knots on a close reach and even up to 6 knots in a steady F3 – which was a surprise because she didn't look like a Speedy Gonzales to me. She has a little weather helm so you need to stay by the helm.

The hull's behaviour in 3' (1m) waves was excellent, with no tendencies to lift her stern or send too much spray aft – that's good for family sailing, since fitting any sprayhood on the cabin top would be a tricky task. There is simply no place for it and the cabin is high enough to provide some shelter.

Running downwind causes the jib to loiter more than on a modern Bermudian sloop, mainly because of the forestay angle. But, hey, the designer says Wind Hunter is inspired by Bristol Channel cutters and I definitely wouldn't like to give up that long wooden bowsprit. So instead of furling the jib, we decided to... make some tea instead. And to heave-to while we did so. After a minute, she was lying peacefully, drifting at 1.5 knots downwind under full sail, which also gave us the chance for a longer look at the cabin layout and finish.

Heads up

We sailed the 3-berth version of Wind Hunter – a single to port and a vee-berth forward – which also has a proper heads with a real door! Taking a shower wouldn't be possible but you could sit here with some privacy and comfort. A small sink and a chemical toilet are fitted but this compartment would be also perfect for storing wet sailing gear. There's also the

standard option of a 4-berth layout – two quarter berths plus the vee up front – for those prepared to sacrifice the luxury of that enclosed heads.

The cabin is equipped with LED strip lights and is really bright and cozy. Beside the port berth, there is a permanent table, large enough for two people to eat in comfort or do proper chartwork. Under the berths, there are plenty of storage lockers and there is also loads of space under the cockpit sole. This might be fitted with a large drawer for easier use or the space could be used for a diesel inboard – gaining an extra large locker aft in place of the outboard well.

For me, the interior of the Wind Hunter 19 had two surprises. The first was that you get all the upholstery, mattresses, hatches, 3-point basic lighting and stainless steel fittings in a standard price of £21,500 including 23% Polish VAT. Extras on the version we tested were the outboard motor, the WC, cooker, two sinks and low power consumption lighting. You can also choose between wood or alloy for spars – personally I loved the look and finish of the wooden mast, boom and gaff

But these are details... My second surprise in the Wind Hunter's cabin is how incredibly roomy it feels for a boat of this length. How did they do it? Arek pointed out that there is no compression post in the cabin or a bulkhead with a cut-out. "Instead, we laminated an almost invisible 'ring beam' into the lay-up. Using uni-directional glass cloth laid in many layers, one across another and laminating with epoxy resin, we created a super strong mast support, which doesn't affect the cabin space".

For me, that sounds like a lot more work than just inserting a post under the mast. Similarly, I learned, the hull and foam sandwich decks have been designed so that their edges interlock and are then carefully laminated. No screws are used and the hull-deck joint is so well masked that it is not visible at all. You can study the whole build, from making the plug and moulds to the final fit-out, on the builder's website; a practical step-by-step process all too often kept behind the scenes by boatbuilders.

We moored Wind Hunter after dusk and the natural thing was to deploy beverages for an evening in the comfortable cabin. Seriously, this boat would not let me off as soon as I finished sailing!

I congratulated the guys from the Szkuner-Ket boatyard for their honest job. It's not easy to be a pioneer: Remember that here in Poland, boats of this size, with GRP hulls and gaff rigs, were never the cult they have become further west. Perhaps to appreciate their achievement fully, most Polish sailors would need to understand the appeal of such trailable modern gaffers in Britain and France. However, this particular Polish sailor would have had no difficulty at all in being inspired by the Wind Hunter's debut at Southampton and – hopefully – exporting her back to where she came from!

CONTACT

Szkuner Ket Yacht Production, ul. Sztutowaska 10, 80-423 Gdansk, Poland Tel: +48 664 748 559 www.szkuner-ket.pl email: biuro@szkuner-ket.pl