

How a lightly-built – but, says owner and skipper Robert Ayliffe, brilliantly designed – 23ft Norwalk Island Sharpie proved more than a match for the dreaded Bass Strait run to Tasmania





Tou are totally irresponsible!" My planned departure was just one week away when, at a friend's birthday party, news that I would sail my NIS 23 Charlie Fisher across Bass Strait to Hobart met with strong criticism:

"You shouldn't entertain this in anything other than a heavy displacement, deep-keel boat. Your boat is far too lightly built, the plywood is too thin, it's only held together with epoxy. The strings are too thin, the equipment is feeble and it's totally unsafe for the conditions you're venturing into..."

And this from a man whose opinion I value. My critic strode off. Then a dignified looking man introduced himself: Bram Portas. He asked me how I felt. "Gutted," I told him.

"Don't worry about all that," said Bram. "Fifteen years ago I sailed across the Atlantic from the Mediterranean to the West Indies in a 21ft (6.4m) bilge keeler, a Westerly Nomad, smaller and lighter than yours. We survived a couple of force nines. I kept something from that trip and I've been waiting for the right person to pass it on to. Come with me."

We drove to his home where from his garage wall Bram solemnly took down a hard, yellow plastic drogue made to be deployed before the wind in extreme storm conditions. "This is yours," he said. In the Atlantic, Bram explained, the 10-metre swells coming up behind them were breaking over vertical, threatening to throw

their small boat on its back. Towed on about 100m of rope tied to a stern cleat, the drogue was in water several swells behind, and since most of the molecules in a wave are simply rising and falling, the resistance of the drogue held the boat back while the breaking wave passed underneath. Again, and again.

This time it would be different. My sailing companion, Ian Philips, and I knew the reputation of Bass Strait and the Tasman. We had been researching this trip for six months. Tough, calm and resourceful, Ian is an experienced navigator on the water and as a pilot of light aircraft - he has sailed Bass Strait since childhood "it's totally unsafe

and this knowledge was invaluable in planning and for the conditions preparation both before and during our voyage.

As for Charlie Fisher: my 'thin strings' were Spectra - material unaffected by UV and extremely strong - and all the running gear was Harken or Spinlock. For the size of the boat, the plywood and solid timber scantlings are solid. 25mm x 25mm cleats set in Bote Cote epoxy, everything massively epoxy sealed. The plywood topsides are 9mm gaboon sheathed in glass and epoxy, the flat hull bottom two layers of 12mm gaboon. We have a very good rudder box dagger, the case is composite ply, maximum thickness 80mm, and the lifting mechanism is sturdy. The pintles are very strong stainless steel. Nothing leaks. Looks

can be deceptive: the NIS 23 looks light, but was designed by Bruce Kirby - who really understands structures.

Simplicity, too, is key. The American Sharpies, used for oyster gathering - flat bottomed, flare-sided centerboard boats with unstayed cat ketch rigs - are a perfect example. It was their simplicity of design and construction, along with their shallow draught and legendary seakeeping, that in 1986 led Bruce Kirby to the type when the waterway by his home was silting up and he wanted an easy-handling, good-looking boat for cruising them. The local, traditional Norwalk Islands Sharpie form was a

> natural and Kirby, famed for designing the Laser, Sonar and now Pixel small yachts, gave the type new life as a popular

yacht for home or commercial construction in plywood/epoxy composite.

you're going into"

Before I built and launched Charlie Fisher in 1988 I had read about the exploits of the early American Sharpie sailors, such as 'Commodore' Ralph Munroe and his Sharpie Egret, immortalised in the book The Commodore's Story. Sailing Charlie Fisher for 18 years in open ocean, calm lakes and 60-knot gales between South Australia's Kangaroo Island and York Peninsula, had confirmed my early confidence in the open water capability of Kirby's NIS 23 design. It also gave me confidence in the boat for Bass Strait.

In preparation for our trip, I beefed up the bulkheads, especially those forming the cockpit framing. These became crash bulkheads, the effect of which was to make a series of epoxy sealed watertight chambers from the transom to the companionway - forward, half of the under vee berth area was already fully sealed.

Mistrustful of cockpit locker hatch lids I bought some very strong offthe-shelf New Zealand-made ABS plastic waterproof locker hatches, designed for horizontal mounting. The underframe I fitted to carry the hatches further stiffened the seat tops. The frames lowered the hatch lid height so that there was smooth transition between the cockpit seat tops and the new hatch lids. In addition, the

hatches were placed so that the opening edge was in line with the inside vertical face of the footwell so that no water should pool around the seal - a fact that was to give us great peace of mind and reward us with dry lockers at the end of our journey. This was very important. The boat is too small to carry a life raft.

Our sailmaker made a third 'Jesus' (an additional storm reef in the main) and another in the mizzen. We came to be very pleased about that, too. Plenty of practice

"Bass Strait lies

with our reefing systems assured us that even in rough conditions we could smack in the easily take in or shake out Roaring Forties" the reefs from the safety of

the cockpit. Lazyjacks and battens parallel to the reef make such a difference; as our sails came down they nestled on top of the booms, the loose flakes of sail confined amazingly well, in even the maddest blow, by the lazyjacks alone – no need for the reef ties I had put in years ago. I also had a line attached to the mainsail headboard and run back to the cockpit so the sail could be completely struck for conditions when we

We made a few pacts

Pact 1 No alcohol from the day before our trip until the boat is tied up at the end.

Pact 2 Not to step off the ship until the pintles are at least 4 metres below the sea.

How many times do we hear of 'person lost at sea; boat found next day, bobbing about.'

Pact 3 No piddling over the side.

Rumour: most men found drowned at sea have alcohol in their blood, and their flies are undone.

Pact 4 Safety harness on at all times outside the companionway.

We should have included a 5th pact. Discipline about rest. Sometimes, it is all just too exciting!

might expect to run under bare poles. Short of equipment failure, we would never need to go forward at any time.

Lastly, we fitted very cheap folding cup holders to the cockpit seatbacks and invested in very good insulated mugs with lids and little drinking holes to slurp out of. A real treat to have coffee in the cup – without the blizzard venturi effect sucking it out - and still warm after 30 minutes.

In late January we trailed the boat from Mount Barker to Port Welshpool, on

Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, and waited for our window of weather. Bass Strait lies smack in the Roaring Forties. It is

also right in the frontal zone where the cold polar air masses do battle with the heated air masses from central Australia and rather than mix, they form cold fronts where the cold air drives under the warm air, causing sudden and violent wind shifts, squalls and thunderstorms.

"We tried really hard to pick our weather," recalls Ian. "We waited for eight days before the four-day forecasts showed

a window which promised a good, fast, but not excessively violent trip across Bass Strait. Naturally, it did not turn out quite that way..."

Cabin fever was setting in by the time Ian finally announced that we could leave on Wednesday morning's ebb, and a little after noon that day we were off Hogan Island. It had been a dream run in light to moderate southeasterlies, the boat under full sail self-steering pretty much all the way at up to 6 knots over the ground. The self-steering gear is simplicity itself – a metre-and-a-half of 8mm spectra fixed each side of the cockpit and running through a jammer on top of the tiller handle. Set the handle amidships, adjust the sails and set about your housekeeping. I'd put out the

trolling line and soon caught a ridiculously large Barracuda. I looked at it, thinking, where do I start eating this damn thing? We took the hook out of his grumpy maw, tossed him back with his snappy mates, and opened a can of tuna.

Hogan is the first of a widely spaced string of islands - in fact, the peaks of an ancient, sunken mountain range - known as the Kent group, lying between Victoria and Tasmania. Spooky a bit, now: no VHF or CB 27 meg radio or CDMA phone coverage. We would be on our own until at least the middle of Bass Strait, just after the Kent group. But we were settling in to the rhythms of small boat life that would see us through three days and nights of wonderful, and occasionally startling, sailing on our way to Hobart, way down the eastern side of Tasmania.

By late evening Hogan had vanished far behind us and more distant Kent group islands were rising slowly on the horizon. Progress was excellent and we set about fine-tuning the boat, reorganising - yet again - our stores and rechecking fittings and equipment. We kept our two GPSs on







most of the time and regularly checked their position readings against our Admiralty paper charts.

We sailed through the night standing four-hour watches, although we didn't keep rigidly to these. I was asleep when Ian called below to say we were passing between Erith and Deal, two of the Kent group's 'peaks'. The wind had dropped and it felt eerie out in the middle of that strait; the sea crashed against the islands' granite cliffs, night birds wheeled above us, phosphorescence shimmered in our wash. We were half-way across the strait but we knew that the hardest part was to come.

As day broke Deal remained visible behind us; ahead lay Flinders island, beyond in the haze the Furneaux group. We were making good progress in the southeasterly breeze and talk turned to the navigators who had passed this way long before us. With an eye to the rocky outcrops stabbing impertinently from the deep, and the menacing sworls to starboard signalling rocks lurking just below the surface, Ian voiced our gratitude to those who discovered, charted and gave their names to most of these horrors, often at great personal cost.

How must it have been, we wondered, in a howling westerly on an ink-black night with only dead reckoning to sail by? Tenmetre swells breaking and standing with overfalls, confusing navigation and exhausting the ship and her crew. Even today's large RO-RO ferries operating between



Melbourne and Devonport in Tasmania have reported bridge windows smashed in by the force of it all. Our lively imaginations made sleep difficult.

We were into our second night before we past the Furneaux group. The big worry, Banks Strait, was still to come. This nasty piece of water, in a larger, already nasty piece of water, runs some 20 miles west-east between Lady Barron Island and Tasmania's north coast. It also runs flood and ebb to 4.5 knots so it is vital to pick the most favourable wind and tide combination. With wind against tide come the dreaded square waves and overfalls. Apart from making the usual corrections, working out the tides is especially tricky because

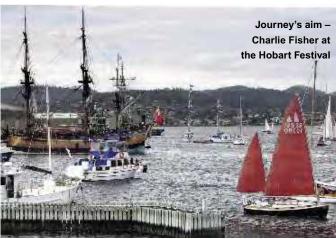
of the different time zones used on different charts – Zulu time, daylight saving time, standard time, and so on.

As luck had it we timed our passage well. I slept most of the way into Banks Strait. Ian roused me as Swan Island light came abeam to starboard. The wind and the sea were building quite strongly from the northeast so I put two reefs in the main pleased at having set it up so efficiently. As the wind went more northerly we were on a broad reach, often making 9 knots. Fearful of collision, I strained my eyes for containers adrift in that crashing sea. Eddystone light to the southeast soon became Eddystone light to the south, as we swept eastward, out of Banks Strait into the Tasman Sea. In the red nightlight, Ian stirred from sleep from time to time to check his charts against the GPS.

It was a great ride all through that second night, the best of times. The self steering behaved impeccably, the tiller tugging happily against its string, the stern light bright on the foaming wake hissing away from the transom, breaking wave tops occasionally sending spray across the cabin top. Hunched in cockpit I felt truly alive, all the more for the slight risk of not being. *Charlie Fisher* was sublime, strong, almost mad.

Towards daybreak, soon after Ian took over on watch, the wind dropped and we made little headway for the next hour or two. When I came back on deck we were a





little south of Eddystone. Ian stayed on the tiller for the next hour, trying to hook the tiny breeze which was now directly behind us from the north. Then, abeam of St Helen's the zephyrs became winds - 10 knots, 15, 20. First reef in, mizzen struck. Twenty minutes later, and still rising. This was not forecast. Bugger it. 'Jesus' reef.

Thirty knots and we're cooking. Warp out - no special reason, I'd read it in the books. Rudder (dagger type) blade up. Centerboard mostly up. Wind still building. Seas already large, swells coming in from New Zealand, from the east, meeting swells from the south - the legacy of a recent storm. Ian had retired to his bunk and was amusing himself by calling out the ground speed from his GPS:

"Steady nine knots. Not bad, Robert. Twelve, hell we just hit twelve."

"Seventeen-point-

you handling this?"

A big swell lifted us and we knew this was special. "It's OK if you don't look back," Ian said. Then, reading again from five knots. How are the GPS: "Fifteen, fifteenpoint-five, fifteen... holy moley, seventeen-point-five, seventeen-

only, time on our voyage.

point-five... How are you handling this?" "No problem," I called. But I admit to feeling trepidation for the first, and really

We were to see 17.5 knots several more times as we surged down that coast. I had never seen such speeds, neither in my little boat nor, indeed, in my sailing experience. We were surfing down four- to five-metre swells and in confused seas. I didn't really know what to expect. But we never looked like broaching. My imagination was running riot. Where would it end? We were 15 miles or so offshore. I was cold. Hypothermia I wondered? Someone said 40 minutes

We tried bare poles and found a steady 7.5 knots but Ian decided it wasn't brisk enough so up with the 'Jesus' reef rag.

max, then you go to sleep. Does the bow

panel open up and we all go GLUG?

Then, because we could, we tried all sorts of other things - like lying a-hull, board up with sheets slack; amazing, so quiet. Even though seas were breaking around us we could have put the kettle on. Just like the old Egret stories.

"The moderate northerlies turned into a forty-knot blow as we roared down the east coast of Tasmania," recalls Ian. "After we finally rounded Schouten Island we encountered the weirdest change I've ever seen. We were about ten miles to the north of Maria Island when the wind went dead calm, then after about ten minutes turned instantly into a forty-knot southerly. This blew for about thirty minutes, then it went calm again for ten minutes, then another huge southerly for about thirty minutes, then calm again for ten, and so on, through maybe six repetitions before it settled down to a ten- to fifteen-knot southerly.

> Afterwards, I realised it was probably eddies and rotors coming off the 2,000ft-high mountain on Maria Island."

I had been on the tiller for about six hours, my early trepidation overtaken by heady pleasure in our furiously fast ride. In sight of Schouten, I'd reckoned we had an hour or so to go before we could take a breather behind Maria, but Ian made the call to press on. He was right; that would put us in easy reach of the Marion Bar and

then sheltered water early next morning.

At that instant I realised something was seriously wrong with me: I was shivering, finding it hard to stay awake, experiencing aberrant vision - the beginnings of hypothermia. I called Ian to take over telling him, repeatedly, to put on his warm gear. He wrapped up and took the helm, while I climbed into my bunk and wrapped myself in everything warm I could find. Barely able to move, I shivered for nearly an hour. When the rotors hit, I was at first unable to help Ian in the cockpit.

When I'd taken over from Ian off St Helen's it had been quite warm so I hadn't put on warm gear under my waterproofs. As the day wore on, although I was barely aware of it, the combination of fine spray, physical effort and cold caused by growing cloud cover had conspired to chill me. From then on, no matter what the weather, we started every watch wearing all our warm gear, plus wet-weather gear, life jacket and safety harness and we never had that problem again.

Having survived the rotors we sailed into the third night, relying entirely on the GPS to get us in to Shoal Bay, just around from Triabunna. A sandy little anchorage, Shoal Bay is favoured by yachtsmen waiting for the weather and tide to head back to Blackman Bay and Hobart, but the waterway is littered with hazards and the entrance is narrow. Ian had never before relied on the GPS to navigate such a tight spot; its accuracy was a revelation to him.

Refreshed after a night at anchor, we crossed the Marion Bar and made for the village of Dunalley at the entrance to the convict-dug Dunalley Canal, which provides a short cut to Hobart, avoiding most of the rigours of Storm Bay. And, at midnight on Saturday night, we arrived at the very welcoming Royal Yacht Club, Sandy Bay. It gave us some pleasure when through our cabin roof we heard a group of incredulous yachtsmen on the dock say:

"They came from where? In that?"

These same yachtsmen came to revise their scepticism.

We stayed on for the event that had spurred our journey, the Hobart Tasmania Wooden Boat Festival which, with 700 boats - including a wonderful Dutch contingent with a Music Boote, Tjotters, Botters and more - is probably best described as the 'Brest of the Antipodes'. Three days of music, food and wine, and of course the boats: what better way to celebrate our passage? Memorable.