

Spectacular anchorages
abound in the Aleutians

STURDY WORKBOATS CAN MAKE GREAT CRUISERS

BY RODGER GRAYSON

We are often asked, “Why do you cruise in an old fishing boat?”

The popular view is a “cruising” vessel means a sailing vessel. Books and magazines are full of sailors’ tales, images of cruising the oceans in small vessels, visiting exotic ports and secluded anchorages. Industries thrive on the dreams so developed.

Certainly, many of these boats are capable and seaworthy cruisers, but they are few compared with the number of small working boats on the oceans of the world, in whatever conditions prevail at the time, whose crews are quietly trying to make a living.

These sturdy, seaworthy vessels, with lots of storage space, reliable machinery and a knock-about finish, sound like the

perfect combination for a cruising vessel to us!

Sure there is the cost of fuel, but there’s no big, expensive sailing rig or lots of shiny stainless steel and fancy alloys. Anyway, almost all yachts have engines and often gensets, generally squeezed into a tiny space with little room for maintenance or much fuel.

In fact, in many coastal areas, especially in the higher latitudes, even yachts mainly motor, as there is no wind, too much wind or it’s from the wrong direction.

In addition, older workboats are often cheaper to buy and, if chosen correctly, pretty economical to run compared with a pleasure craft. Plus, you might end up in heaven for saving a small piece of nautical history from a sad end.

What attributes of a workboat make it a good cruiser? To us, the most important thing is economy. That pretty much relates to hull shape and power. For those interested in the technicalities, the book *Voyaging under Power*, by Robert Beebe, is a wonderful reference, as is George Buehler’s *The Troller Yacht*. But basically, look for a fine entry and a clean wake.

Older fishing boats, built to carry high-value product and perhaps evolved from earlier sailing vessels – the salmon trollers of the Pacific Northwest, older southern hemisphere crayfishing boats and maybe some of the old cod boats of northern Europe – are often a good start. Most modern vessels are built more for speed, with square, flatter sterns, often heavy displacement (more than needed for cruising) and heaps of power. They can make great, comfortable, fast cruisers but will be heavy on fuel.

Ali and I had always had sailboats. I grew up with dinghies, raced on keelers of various sizes and we lived on a small cruising ketch for some years. We built a small catamaran to sail up the western coast of Australia and explore the inlets and islets of the



The Japanese love paperwork.
Boats at entry ports must fill out lots of forms



There are literally thousands of ports in Japan (2900 on the list)



Seafood is a Japanese staple. Inshore fisheries have suffered in recent years, so the mind boggles at what it used to be like

Kimberlies, but our cruising plans had become more ambitious.

We wanted to spend time in southern New Zealand, Alaska, perhaps Chile, Greenland and Scandinavia. We wanted to carry bikes, kayaks, lots of spares, welding gear, supplies for six months or more and ideally a motorbike. All this will easily fit in the holds of a 12-15m workboat.

We live in a small fishing and tourist town in southeastern Australia, have worked on small fishing and workboats from time to time, we love wooden boats and are not shy of maintenance. After a lot of hunting around, including Europe and the United States, where I was working at the time, we bought the *Betty Mc*, a southern Australian crayfishing boat.

She was built in 1962, owned by the builder's family and was very well maintained. We used her as is for a few years to make sure we could handle the transition from sail to power and then set her up for our trip.

This was no full conversion, just a bit more living space in a new wheelhouse, new machinery and electronics, plus reinstating the original sailing rig. (We found the gaff in the builder's shed).

Cruising plans are personal but to travel across the world's oceans you need a range of about 2500 miles, so long as you pick your route. It is easy enough to cross the Atlantic Ocean via the standard routes or hop across the Pacific via the islands and Hawaii or north through Japan.

The only routes you cannot do are long, direct runs such as New Zealand to Chile, but with so much to see on the way, why would you? Boats with hulls especially designed for long distances can achieve fuel economy as low as one litre per mile. In our case we average about 1.3 litres per mile and can get below 1.2 litres in ideal conditions. We never do worse than 1.5, even pushing a sea and a headwind.

It all depends on how fast we want to travel. It is generally accepted that the most economical speed for a displacement ►

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We encountered many vessels while travelling close to Kuril Island. Despite the Asian name, this one claimed to be a Russian patrol boat, but the only thing they asked us was if we had anything to drink



The Aleutians were the site of fierce fighting between the Japanese and Americans in the Second World War. Over 250,000 US personnel were based there

motorboat is around 1-1.2 times the square root of the waterline length (in feet). Above that, fuel use rises alarmingly. For our 12.2m waterline, cruising speeds of 6.3 to 7.5 knots are our ideal range. Slower is more economical still, but that's idling and not good for diesels over long periods.

Our 4200 litre tanks give us plenty of extra for the genset and heater, or over 3000 miles if we ever need it. For most legs, 2000 litres, or a bit more, is plenty. Our longest leg so far was from Kushiro in Japan to Dutch Harbour in the Eastern Aleutians.

Spectacular anchorages abound in the Aleutians. The string of volcanos stretching from just off Russia to the Alaskan mainland separates the North Pacific from the Bering Sea. Major fisheries include crab, bottom fish (halibut and cod especially) and trawling for pollock. Dutch Harbour has been the leading US fishing port by volume for over 20 years and is either number one or two in value.

The Aleutians were also the site of fierce fighting between the Japanese and Americans in the Second World War. Japan occupied two of the islands in the chain and the US had bases housing over 250,000 personnel scattered throughout the Aleutians. Interestingly, weather was the main enemy of the campaign.

The US Air Force and Naval Air Wing lost more than four times the number of planes to weather and mechanical failure than in combat. Fog, strong winds, indifferent charts and limited radar meant shipping casualties were similarly affected. In summer the weather is much more mild. Fog is common, but a GPS, chartplotter and radar combine with stunning scenery and fascinating history to make for unforgettable cruising.

We spent two months cruising along the Aleutian Island chain with plenty of heater use in the cold weather, but 4200 litres was plenty.

With heavy coastal fishing in Japan, larger fishing ships offshore and the Russian fisheries just to the north, drifting gear is a problem in the Aleutian Islands.

Twice on our run to the Aleutians we had to clear abandoned nets from the propeller and rudder, a chilly job in water of seven degrees Celsius. Just as well it didn't happen when the sea temperature later dropped to three degrees with ice melt from the Okhotsk Sea.

Rolling comes with the territory for most small displacement powerboats. "Flopper stoppers" are a common solution and you see more and more of the "fins" like those on the Stark Bros' *Nessie J* and many Australian fishing boats. They are a lot easier to handle than the flopper-stopper rigs.

Some of the fancy voyaging motorboats even have hydraulic stabiliser fins like on ships, but that is an expensive option and all of these solutions knock a bit off speed or economy. Many older boats were built with some sails for steadying and helping out on long legs to fishing grounds.

The *Betty Mc* worked out of Victoria but had a cray licence for southern Tasmania, and a small headsail was generally used to reduce fuel costs and improve comfort on the long haul south. With the addition of the original gaff main, she now carries enough sail to work as emergency propulsion, should we ever have major mechanical problems.

A sail rig is not as effective as the other options in reducing roll, especially when there's a beam swell and little wind, but it saves rather than costs fuel and for us is a good compromise. In the end, the extent of roll you (and your partner) are prepared to put up with is a personal thing.

On the few occasions we've had trips in cross-seas with little wind, I get out the sketch pad and draw up a flopper-stopper rig, but the thought passes as soon as conditions improve. To date, our simple sail rig has been just fine.

What has it cost us to travel under power? Since leaving Australia in late 2007, we've clocked up about 2700 hours on the Cummins diesel, a bit over 18,000 miles, and with genset and heater, we've used just under 27,000 litres of diesel at an average cost of \$1 per litre.

If we add food, the occasional marina, maintenance and sundry costs, our annual cruising budget (for two) is just over \$20,000. On the one hand it's a lot, but on the other it's not much more than many spend on an overseas vacation.

Perhaps the most difficult thing about cruising, be it in an old workboat or a yacht, is finding a partner to do it with! I can't offer much advice there except to skite that I've been blessed. Ali puts up with the occasional discomfort and doesn't even mind painting too much (though never mention sanding...) How good is that?!

We've seen some fabulous boats during our travels in New Zealand. Some were set up as cruisers and others were ripe for the transition, just waiting for a willing, or perhaps gullible, new owner. There were even a couple of lovely vessels with workboat origins, generally owned by ex-fishermen.

The trick is finding one at the right price but well maintained, and an owner willing to part with their pride and joy. These attributes are often mutually exclusive, but the hunt is half the fun.