

Hall of Fame - Kris Larsen

By Graham Cox

Kris Larsen: 1954 -

In 1898, Joshua Slocum completed the first solo circumnavigation of the world aboard *Spray*, his 36ft, engineless, gaff-rigged yawl. *Spray* was an extremely basic craft, rebuilt by Joshua from a wreck, using hand tools. He mostly worked alone, with very little capital, in a paddock under a tree. He not only made history but pioneered a way of life.

This way of life took some time to develop – it was 21 years before Harry Pidgeon became the second person to circumnavigate alone aboard his home-built *Islander* – but the idea that people of modest means, in equally modest boats, often home-built, could live aboard and extensively voyage the oceans of the world, either solo or short-handed, took hold of the public imagination. Thus began what could be called the Slocum era of ocean voyaging, and it continued almost without change for more than 70 years.

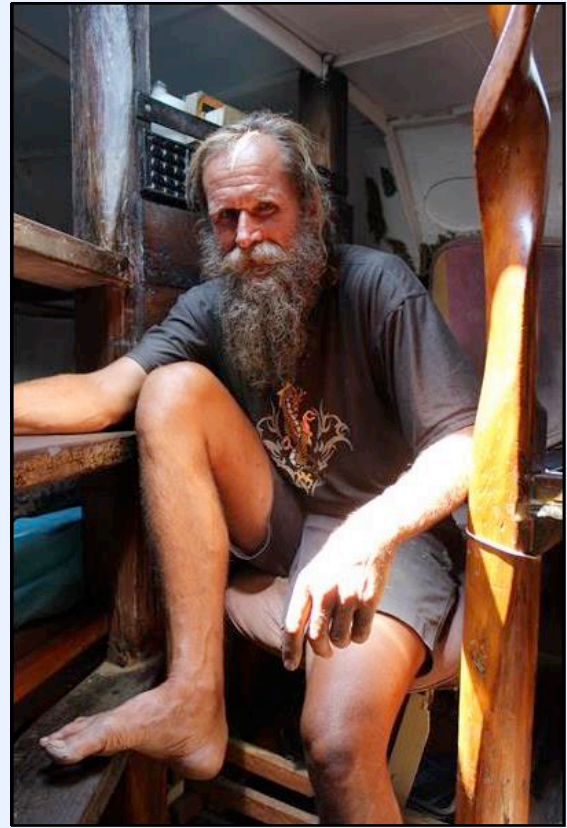
By the 1980s, this era began to rapidly disappear. Increasing bureaucracy, technological advances, marinas, and the politics of a post-colonial world all but eliminated penniless vagabonds aboard simple boats from the crossroads of the sea. The perceived wisdom today is that you need a significant amount of money to cruise, both to finance the sophisticated yachts considered necessary, and to cover running costs.

However, a few stalwarts of the old school remain, capable of living by their wits. They know that all you really require is a strong hull, rudder and rig. The rest is superfluous. And your greatest asset is your imagination, the ability to recognise an opportunity, or to create one if it doesn't exist. That and self-belief.

One of these stalwarts is Kris Larsen, aboard his engineless, junk-rigged steel yacht, *Kehaar*. Kris writes in his book, *Monsoon Dervish*, that you wake up one morning and realise that all the pioneers are gone, lost at sea like Slocum, or otherwise sailed away on the caravel of time. It is up to you to carry on, not to mimic them, but to find your own path.

Without a doubt it takes ingenuity to sail like this, more so these days, but Kris is one of those people whose lives have provided good training in the art of survival and shifting for oneself. His father was a prominent economist, active in the Prague Spring, who died in mysterious circumstances shortly after the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. Kris became a political refugee. In the mid-1970s, at the age of 21, he found himself penniless and stateless in Western Europe.

He had a good education – he spoke Czech, Russian, Bulgarian and Swahili by the time he left school, and



Kris Larsen in Kehaar

soon made English his fifth language. He studied the great poets and philosophers at university. Despite this, he was unwelcome wherever he went, deported from one country after another.

He found ways to survive, living below the radar and taking whatever jobs he could find, usually as an illegal worker. He sailed on a yacht from Sri Lanka to Singapore, learning basic celestial navigation, and became hooked on sailing. After working in Singapore as a sandblaster, and exploring “the Archipelago”, as Joseph Conrad called the East Indies, he made his way to New Zealand. He spent some time there prospecting for gold, and attempted to cross the Tasman Sea on an elderly 20ft yacht. Eventually, he joined a yacht in Noumea and sailed to Australia.

Kris spent a number of years in Tasmania, building houses, almost settling down, but the failure of both his marriage and business in the 1980s returned him to his dream of a long solo ocean voyage. He had always been attracted to East Africa and its Arab dhows – the reason he chose to learn Swahili in school – and liked the idea of sailing there, eventually. And he hated cold climates. Apart from his limited sailing experience, he had read all the ocean-voyaging classics. He also had a belief in his ability to shape his destiny. Both these things would stand him in good stead.

He knew exactly what he wanted. It would be a strong, utterly simple boat, junk-rigged and engineless, navigated by sextant, in the tradition of Slocum, without electrics, electronics, radio or liferaft, a boat in which he could safely live an independent life at sea for long periods.

Despite having almost no money, he found the rusting hulk of an abandoned steel boatbuilding project - barely a pile of steel sheets tacked together into the shape of a hull - and bought it. He then taught himself how to weld, modified the keel so that it extended to the transom, allowing an outboard rudder - one of his key principles - and added a raised, flush deck.

Based on a western yacht hull, *Keehar* is a Moonwind design by Australian yacht designer, John Pugh. It was originally designed to be 32ft LOA, but was extended to 33ft by the original builder. Kris is not quite sure how long it is now. He explained this recently with his usual droll humour:

About 10 years ago I got sick of my foremost point always rusty and leaking. I realised I did not need a sharp nose, as I do not have a forestay. Pulling out the Ockham's razor I chopped about 18 inches off the front of my boat, getting a short square nose where I mounted two rounded stainless guides (like stationary rollers), to work two anchors side by side. In Panama they measured my boat for the Canal transit but they have their own special ways of measuring.

The topsides drew inspiration from Arab dhows, and the rig from Chinese junks, as modified by Hasler and McLeod. One of Kris's few expensive purchases was a copy of Hasler and McLeod's book, *Practical Junk Rig*, which he appreciated for its wit as well as its wealth of information.

For a mast, Kris bought an Oregon tree, still standing in the forest, from the Tasmanian Forestry Commission. He felled it himself. The bottom 40ft became *Keehar's* mast, 12in wide at the partners, 8in at the heel and 5in at the truck. It stood 32ft above deck. Kris shaped the mast as his first task, which meant that it had plenty of time to dry before being raised. The rest of the wood was milled into 2x2in lumber for internal framing.

That mast lasted 45,000 miles, eventually being replaced by a hardwood log in the Philippines, after shakes in the timber caused rot in the core. The new mast also rotted and broke a few years later, off the Kimberley Coast in Western Australia. He got back to Darwin on that occasion, unassisted other than by his partner, Natalie, by making a jury rig from the stump of the mast and an A-frame consisting of battens. They resewed the sail to fit.

The current mast is a tapered, galvanised, steel lamp post, 11in at the foot, 5in at the top, with a simple pine plug belted into it, to stiffen the tapering tube. It is about 250kg, with a wall thickness of 3mm, and so far

has taken him a further 50,000 miles. The old-fashioned hot-dipped galvanising is still holding.

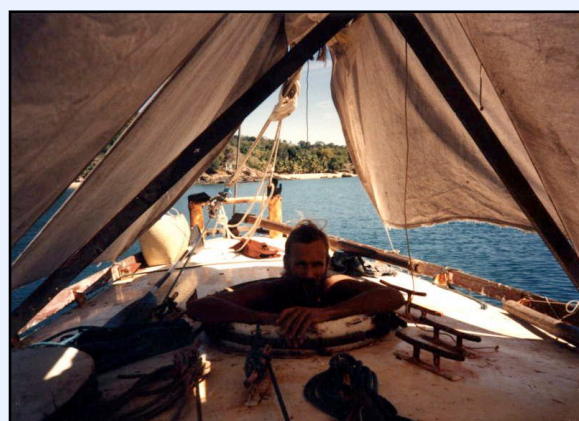
The only variation from PJR is that he fitted a stout boom, in the belief that even if all his battens broke, he could still sail the boat with just yard and boom, like a standard lugsail. He has had mixed success, breaking seven booms to date, because he uses a preventer at sea to stop the sail gybing, especially in light winds and sloppy seas. Recently, he has moved the preventer from the middle of the boom to the after end, leading the other end to the bows, which he hopes will solve the problem.

The original yard was built of Oregon to PJR's specifications. It never failed, but after 20 years the ends were worn out. For the circumnavigation starting in 2014, Kris replaced it with two aluminium mainsail booms, one sleeved into the other. It is about the same weight as the Oregon one and has given no problems.

The 18ft battens were also originally timber but kept breaking. He tried bamboo but found it rotted easily. In Japan, he replaced the top four battens with old Laser dinghy masts, made from 2in aluminium. Later, he also replaced the rest of the battens with 2in aluminium tubes. He has only ever broken one of these battens, in a nasty gybe in rough weather when rounding the Cape of Good Hope.

Kris built an 8ft x 8ft, king-sized bunk under the after deck, where the cockpit would usually be, a cabin sole, a chart table, and fitted a gimballed cooker. It would be six years before *Keehar's* galley was completed. The rest of the interior remained open and was to prove useful for carrying cargoes. Without an engine, interior or other paraphernalia, *Keehar* is surprisingly light, when not loaded with cargo, weighing in at a mere 5.5 tons.

The deck is entirely flush, with all controls leading to a circular hatch, in the style of *Jester's* central control station. Originally the boat had a wheel, but on their first passage it was discarded for an 8ft tiller which can be reached from the hatch. Originally there were no

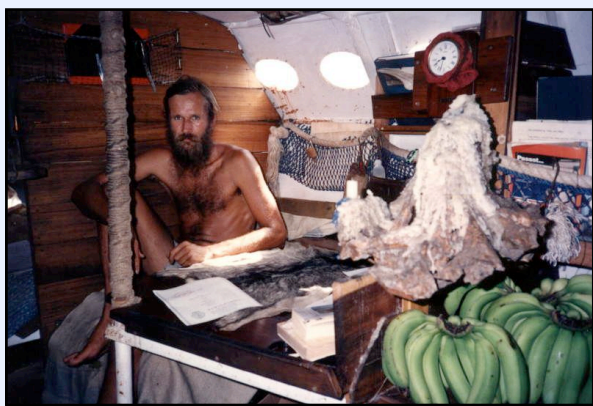


Kris in the circular hatch

winch, making hoisting the 450 sq. ft. sail hard work, a task that defeated many younger people, but Kris was both strong and determined.

By the time he turned 60, he was finding the sail too heavy to hoist with any wind in it. A friend gave him a crate full of parts that made up an antique two-speed bronze winch, with a chain inside and a crank drive on a different axle than the drum. He often uses it to lift the ground tackle as well, especially when using rope, because his home-made anchor winch has no gearing.

Initially there were 16 oval portholes, but several years later, while in Japan, these were welded shut and four skylights fitted to the deck. At the same time, a large, circular hatch on the foredeck was welded shut and a smaller one fitted near the mast. Not long after doing this, *Kehaar* rode out two typhoons at sea. There are no skin fittings or other holes in the hull below the waterline. It is hard to imagine a more seaworthy ocean-crossing vessel.



Kris in Kehaar's cabin by day and at night



Using his ancient Singer sewing machine, Kris made a sail from an old tarpaulin and two derelict canvas sails bought for less than their postage from Brisbane. Then he launched the boat into the Mersey River and shoved off for Bundaberg in Queensland, which seemed to him at the time to be a worthy destination. It promised to be warmer anyway.

Along the way he taught himself how to sail the boat, anchor and navigate. They had a few close scrapes and some memorable arrivals, but things improved with time. Once he learned to sail the boat to windward with a slack sheet, *Kehaar* proved to be a capable ship, able to ghost through light winds and tack reliably.

Crossing the border into Queensland was a momentous occasion, but already *Kehaar* was whispering to him. He realised what a fine ship she was. She had excelled in rough weather after leaving Tasmania, and Kris has been enthralled with how she surfed down large following seas. In his log, he wrote about looking down at her from up the mast:

From up here Kehaar looks like a kayak with her round hatch and no cockpit. It's fascinating watching her slice through the waves, self-steering with the tiller lashed. A heap of steel, a few ropes, and an old tarpaulin. Hardly a triumph of technology, but certainly a work of art.

Now Bundaberg seemed to be more of a beginning than the end of something. Soon he was off again, to the Whitsundays, where he had a fine time, sailing around in a big mob with other vagabond sailors, partying hard. Kris does not drink (he says he is an alcoholic), but he made up for it with plenty of dancing and romancing. Then it was on to Darwin for the cyclone season, or the Big Wet as they call it up there.

He fell in love with Darwin within days of arriving. It is a place that speaks the same language as Kris, philosophically, and it was more like coming home than arriving. He has based himself there ever since, when not voyaging. He even joined the Dinah Beach Yacht Club - something he never dreamed he would do - after meeting the shirtless, bare-footed commodore. The club became his second home.

He was soon hard at work, earning money for the next stage of his adventure and preparing *Kehaar* for her first ocean crossing. Darwin is an extremely hot and humid place in summer, but that did not deter Kris from accepting a job as a sandblaster, just about the hardest, hottest, dirtiest work imaginable, but it paid well and gave him time for his own projects. Kris has never been afraid of hard work when he has a clear-sighted goal. But that goal is always a path to freedom, and when it is achieved, he's off.

Kehaar was given a new sail of 8oz Bainbridge Dacron, sewn up by Kris, built on the floor of the Dinah Beach Yacht Club bar, after closing time. (It is that sort of a place, friendly and informal.) This sail proved to be an expensive disappointment. It was fine for the first year but soon had patches all over it, and after two years it was replaced in Madagascar with a sail made from cotton canvas. As Kris points out, he can make 12 sails of cotton canvas for the price of a Dacron one, and he finds the material much pleasanter to work with.

During his time in Darwin, *Kehaar* was also sandblasted and repainted, and fitted with a new, improved windvane self-steering gear, made to Bernard Moitessier's geometrical principles, with advice from a visiting French sailor. It was a success and steered the boat for many effortless miles. Its name was Jeremy.

After seven months they left Darwin, heading west. There was only \$600 in the kitty but the boat was in fine shape and loaded with basic stores. They headed SW until reaching 20°S, then made directly for Mauritius, 4,500 miles distant, sailing on the port tack all the way. This put them into the heart of the Equatorial Current, which gave them 1 knot of free speed through the water.

Day after day, they averaged 100 effortless miles. *Kehaar* steered herself, the junk rig required little attention, and Kris rejoiced in his solitude, with no idle chatter or petty annoyances to disrupt his days. This is what he had so often dreamed of: a long, uninterrupted ocean voyage. He kept busy maintaining his running gear, cooking, reading and contemplating life.

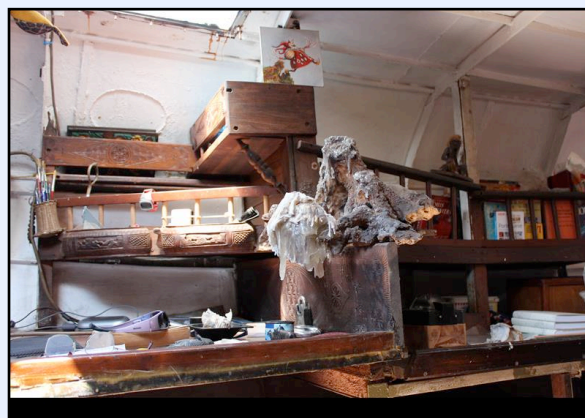


Just drifting . . . and contemplating life

With such a basic, simple boat, there was little that could go wrong or demand attention. He could immerse himself in the beauty of the world around him. There was nothing, other than *Kehaar's* indestructible steel hull and self-steering gear, perhaps, to differentiate her from the pioneers of this way of life, such as *Spray*, *Islander*, and *Firecrest*. They were all engineless. In the early days there were no electronics or long-distance communications available, nor were there any on *Kehaar*. There was nothing to distract the skipper. It was just one sailor, a boat, and the endless ocean.

He started out with a basic knowledge of astro-navigation but was soon into a deep study of the subject. He felt an affinity with it. Once he discovered he had the sextant telescope in the wrong way around,

things became even easier! By the time *Kehaar* arrived in Mauritius, after 41 days on the same tack, Kris was something of an expert in the subject.



Kehaar's chart table

He is never lonely at sea. Ashore, he is a gregarious man, fond of socialising, dancing, and the company of women. But after about 10 days at sea he becomes a different person. He is no longer a man on a boat trying to sail from A to B. He is just living on the sea, content with the world around him, not thinking about destinations, about how long it is going to take. He has all the time in the world. Sometimes it takes him three hours to make and consume breakfast. Time ceases to exist except for practical purposes like navigation.

From Mauritius, they sailed to Madagascar, an island fabled for its exotic wildlife and equally exotic people. After a troublesome landfall on the east coast, where thieves steal the running rigging off your boat while you sleep, he relocated to the friendlier west coast. Over the next 16 months he made eight crossings of the Mozambique Channel, visiting South Africa, the Comoros, Kenya and Zanzibar.

He didn't enjoy his visit to South Africa much, where social relations seemed fraught, and opportunities for supplementing the kitty are minimal, but he fell in love with Madagascar and the Malgache people, finding them warm and generous. It is a primal society, people make things happen for themselves, and Kris felt at home. He brought back bundles of clothes and soaps from Africa, establishing a reputation in the villages as a coastal trader. He took Malgache artefacts to trade in South Africa but they were not much use in the poorer East African countries. Sometimes he took vanilla beans.

Kris and *Kehaar* became well known in the coastal villages of Madagascar and *Kehaar* was at home among the engineless coastal trading vessels, with their improvised gear, which sail in and out of every anchorage. One day at sea, he got up at dawn and looked out of the hatch, to see that *Kehaar* was racing a large dhow. Two basic, engineless craft, not dissimilar

in profile or heritage, both embarked on trading voyages ... in that instant, the world became timeless. Kris sometimes felt he had arrived too late in places, but for once he was right there.



Kehaar on a beach in Madagascar

Perhaps his most memorable landfall was on the island of Zanzibar, where the narrow lanes bustle with modern traffic, bazaars, spice shops, coffee vendors, dhow sailors and tourists. In the morning the fishermen come back in from a night's fishing, beating drums and chanting, an ancient chant of joy that says, "To hell with tomorrow". Ashore, this attitude is intoxicating. Life may be tough and frugal, often desperate, but it seems free of the neurotic, indecisive prudence that so often cripples western societies.

Lamu, Kenya, was another memorable landfall, redolent with memories of the great days of Arab trading dhows. Then Kris pointed *Kehaar's* bows eastwards again, riding the monsoon change, much as the Arab traders had before him, when sailing to the East Indies, that dazzling archipelago that straddles the Equator from Indonesia to Japan.

For information about the weather, he uses USA Pilot Charts, first compiled between 1840 and 1855 by Lieutenant Matthew Maury of the US Navy. *Kehaar* carries an 1889 French chart that spans from Suez to Okinawa, encompassing most of the monsoon world. Kris has spent many days with this chart open before him, dreaming, making queer drawings in the margins, writing down all the rumours, gossip and information he has gathered along the way.

On the way east, he visited Salomon Atoll in the Chagos Archipelago, anchoring off Boddam Island for three months, then to Sri Lanka, where he was briefly detained on suspicion of being a terrorist, after inadvertently sailing into a closed port.

The months on Boddam Island were idyllic. You are entirely on your own here. He set up camp ashore and supplemented his ship's stores with abundant lagoon fish, coconuts, crabs and even the plump local rats, which are a healthy breed that live on coconut flesh

and taste like rabbits. Kris was thoroughly enjoying life, the king of his own slice of paradise.

This led to an amusing article being published in a yachting magazine. A journalist, crewing on a passing yacht, briefly visited Kris's camp. She never spoke to Kris, but wrote a colourful story about a desperate man with a derelict boat (no engine, rust streaks down the topsides, and an unstayed mast!), camping ashore and eating rats to survive. It was not the first, or last, time that he would be misrepresented in the media.

Singapore was once known as the hub of the Archipelago, but today it is overrun by development. Kris didn't last long there, and was soon joyfully running before the NW Monsoon down the south coast of Borneo, into the wilder, less regimented areas of the region. Without a cruising permit to pass through Indonesian waters, let alone stop anywhere, he was cautious, picking small, out-of-the-way places where a few dollars in the right hands meant no questions asked.

The winds were predominantly light, and at times it was a struggle to make headway against contrary currents. It took seven attempts to get from Indonesian Sulawesi to Mindanao in the Philippines. At one point he was swept west, out into the Pacific and had to fight his way back. In these conditions, *Kehaar*, with her flat-cut junk sail, was at something of a disadvantage, but with time on your side, a bit of luck and perseverance, Kris Larsen is proof you can sail a junk anywhere, eventually.

Along the way, they stopped at Sandakan, Western Borneo, which Kris describes as a cross between Darwin and Zanzibar, set down in China. It has the easy-going atmosphere of Darwin, the vigour and bustle of that smuggler's hub, Zanzibar, but is full of Chinese traders. It was a marvellous source of shells. Kris claims he is no conchologist; that he merely likes shells, but he knows a fair bit about them and *Kehaar* harbours a significant collection. He often trades them or gives them as gifts, but he bought one shell here, a rare Glory-of-the-Sea cone, that he has always kept.

There are pirates in parts of the Archipelago, and insurgents who will kill you or hold you for ransom. The Tausug people from Sula Island, 200 miles west of Mindanao, are notorious pirates, ruling the seas between the Philippines, Indonesia and Malay Borneo. Yachts venture there at their peril. Occasionally, while Kris was there, they ventured into Sandakan in fast speedboats, but without guns and with valid passports, looking every bit as daunting as their reputation.

After a dose of malaria, an old malady, Kris sailed on to the Philippines. He was vaguely thinking of going to Hong Kong, but on a whim he stocked up on dried octopus, rice, a box of ripe bananas for drying, and



Kehaar reefed to two panels

three cases of rum, and headed for Japan. It seemed like more fun than going to Hong Kong.

Fun was what he was after, not a job. He had no money, work-permit or visa, but figured out he would talk his way into the place. He would present himself as a modern-day Ronin, those ex-samurai who wandered the land, part seeker, part rogue, answering to nobody. He had in mind a shopping expedition; that is a scavenging expedition, to salvage goodies from this highly-industrialised nation.

The trip was miserable, 1500 miles of heavy rain, squalls, fog and calms. The Kuro Shio current swept them east. It was the rainy season, but that would be followed by the typhoon season, so there was little choice. The boat sprang a few unheard-of leaks through deck fittings that threatened to damage his books and charts, and covered the interior in fine, grey mould.

As he approached Japan, he was intercepted by the coastguard and eventually boarded. They thought he was a Chinese smuggler and were surprised to find just one westerner aboard. They made a great show of searching the vessel but actually looked at very little. It was Kris's first encounter with that cardinal Japanese rule, form is all-important, substance irrelevant. Once he grasped this, he was able to navigate Japanese bureaucracy.

His first port was Omae Saki, just a tiny fishing village, not a port of entry, but he was persuaded to enter by local fishermen, who told him a big typhoon was coming. Like seamen anywhere, they didn't give a damn about government regulations. The sea is their first master. Even the coastguard accepted the situation. Soon the rain came thundering down and the fishermen in their oilskins watched incredulously as Kris stripped off and had his first fresh-water wash in weeks.

After the typhoon eased, he ghosted 30 miles to Simizu, the official port of entry. In windless

conditions, he drifted around the outer harbour for 24 hours until the coastguard decided he was a hazard to shipping and towed him in. They also contacted the local yacht club, whose members took charge of his clearing-in procedures.

Immigration told him he could only stay 72 hours because he had no visa. This was bad news, because *Kehaar's* lockers were empty, he had a grand total of \$45, and it was typhoon season. All the other departments wanted him to give a detailed itinerary of his proposed cruise in Japanese waters. It didn't make sense at first, but eventually it dawned on him that once again it was a question of form, of appearances. Nobody cared what actually happened, as long as the form was adhered to.

Those first days were typical of the months that followed. The Japanese were fascinated with this weird, somewhat outrageous foreigner and fed and entertained him. After some media interviews, locals brought down so much food that he shared it with the fishermen, yachtsmen and homeless people around the port. They had a grand feast.

He rode the tail winds of another typhoon to Muroran, on the island of Hokkaido, where, after another polite refusal to allow him to stay longer than 72 hours, he was invited to appeal to the Minister of Justice. As soon as he'd completed the requisite form, he was advised, with a straight face, that the appeal had been upheld and was immediately granted a 90 day visitor's pass.

After helping a local yachtsman deliver his vessel from Osaka, he moved on to Hakodate, where he began his scavenging expedition in earnest, filling *Kehaar* with such a quantity of discarded goods that he had to build special racks to store it all. Some of these goods were to replace items that had worn out or never existed aboard, others were for future trade, including bicycles, which are ubiquitous in Japan. However, the only success he had with bikes was with children's models, small enough to fit through the hatch. The others, cheaply made, rusted away too quickly on deck.

When winter came he moved south to Tokuyama, on the Inland Sea, which is reputed to have a milder climate. It was still freezing cold. On a lee shore off Kyushu Island, he ran into a severe gale, with winds of over 50 knots which shredded the tired old Madagascan cotton sail. Unable to lie ahull and drift, or run off, he was forced to carry canvas. Then, when the storm was over and *Kehaar's* sail was 90% shredded, he sailed into port under his own steam, salvaged some old Dacron sails from a garbage bin in Fukuoka Marina, and built himself a new sail.



Kahaar with her shredded sail on arrival Fukuoka

The coastguard was less than friendly in Tokuyama. Kris intended to sail across to South Korea to get a visa, but they would not allow him to traverse the Kanmon Kaikyo, the pass from the Inland Sea into the Korean Sea, without an engine. So, after another farcical stand-off, he took a ferry there, instead.

Armed with his visa at last, he settled in for a winter in Tokuyama. As usual, the local fishermen and yachtsmen took him under their wing and found him a snug spot in the public fishing harbour near their boats. He made a solid fuel stove out of a discarded gas cylinder and found a job working as a sign writer. Better still, he was moored near a scrapyard, and was able to procure all the materials he needed to refit the boat. He stayed for six months.

Eventually he moved on, to South Korea, back to the Philippines, north again to Japan, to Vladivostok in

Russia. Once, on the way to Japan, *Kahaar* was caught in a fully-fledged typhoon in the Luzon Strait. Initially he continued working to windward under just the triangular head of the sail, attempting to get sea-room. Luckily, the Kuro Shio current, that old, warm-water friend he'd been grateful to on many cold nights in the past, carried him into clear water. But it was opposed to the easterly wind, creating steep, confused seas.

The wind increased to 40 knots and the topping lift parted, spilling the sail into the sea, forcing him on deck to recover it, a struggle in those conditions, with the spars and sail thrashing around and giving him a bruising. It was dark by the time he had it secured. When the wind went SW, he ran off into the pitch black night under just the peak of the sail. The broken topping lift tangled with the yard, making it impossible to lower the sail, but he wasn't worried, expecting conditions to ease by daylight.

Instead, at 2310, the wind shifted to the south and fell upon *Kahaar* like a ton of bricks. This was a fully-fledged typhoon. The shriek of the wind was like nothing he had ever heard before, and it felt like the sound could pierce his bones. Hove-to with slack sheets, the sail began to flog as it started letting go. The rain was driving horizontally, and every time he stuck his head out of the hatch in a futile attempt to look for ships, gallons of water sloshed in. The seas were breaking right across the decks.

Eventually he crawled on deck naked and cut the sail's lashings from the yard, salvaging the sail but leaving the yard thrashing aloft. He gybed the boat around, away from the coast of Taiwan; away, hopefully, from the shipping lanes, though this course took them into the path of the typhoon. Better that than a lee shore.

Then he went below and battened the hatch. The boat was being pounded mercilessly, but with her flush deck and the large forward hatch and portholes welded closed, during his stay in Tokuyama, the boat was indestructible. Unless he broke his neck or was driven ashore on a rocky coast, they would survive.

15 minutes later, *Kahaar* was knocked down to 90°. Kris was thrown across the cabin and smashed his knee, cracking some of the cabin joinery. The interior was chaotic, with gear strewn everywhere. Smashed glass containers spewed oil, spices, acetone, nails etc, all over the cabin. 200m of spare anchor chain added to the fun, leaping out of the bilges and getting tangled with everything in sight.

A quick look out of the hatch showed that the mast was still standing. Kris lashed the helm amidships and ran off downwind at high speed. He could not see the waves in the blinding rain, but could tell from the motion that they were huge. Then he dragged his sodden mattress back onto the bunk, on top of all the gear strewn there, and lay down, though sleep was impossible. With the wind in the south, indicating

they had passed the eye of the storm, there was some hope things would begin to ease soon.

By dawn the wind was down to 10-15 knots. The seas were still huge but were becoming more even. Kris fired up the trusty Primus stove for some hot noodles and seaweed soup, his first meal in two days. Then he crawled on deck to get *Kehaar* sailing again. He could not bend his leg but he could stand on it. The main halyard was chafed but he used the spare halyard to double it, just in case, hoping they would last until he reached port. There was no way he was going up the mast.

The main anchor chain, deflated Zodiac dinghy, and fenders were all over the side. The windvane and boom gallows were gone. It took some time to get all the gear back on deck and the sail bent on again, but soon he was off again, on course for Japan. That night, hand-steering under a starry sky, he was happy to be alive.

He felt weak, though, as if he was having a malaria relapse, so took some pure quinine that he had aboard from his days in Africa. He felt better the next day, sitting in the afternoon sun, resting and warming his battered body. The following day they sailed into the Japanese port of Hirara on Miyako Island. Local media reports showed that the typhoon had passed directly over *Kehaar*, with sustained winds of 85 knots.

One year later, on what would prove to be his last visit to Japan (at least for now), he ran into another typhoon in the same area. This typhoon was stationary, jiggling about and deepening all the time. He tried to run off under the squared-off sail bundle, but on the fourth night of the storm, *Kehaar* was turned completely upside down. Kris was trapped under a large pile of hardwood planks he was taking to Japan, gashing his head badly.

The boat took on more than 500 litres of water. With its shifted cargo, it was listing at an angle of 45°. Everything was swept clean off the decks: sail, dinghy, self-steering gear, timber rails; the tiller snapped off at the rudder-head. When he limped into Hirara some days later, with a sail improvised from some old tarpaulins and blankets, the customs officer just shook his head.

In El Nido, Palawan, in a friendly beach bar called the *Blue Karrot*, run by a large Swiss punk, Kris met a stunning woman called Natalie Uhing, an artist and fellow spinner of dreams. Kris had always been artistic, filling his logs and the margins of his charts with fantastic sketches of mythical monsters and other doodles. Together, they launched into a creative frenzy of drawing, painting, book-binding and sculpture.

After 5 years of idyllic life in a beach shack in the Philippines, they sailed *Kehaar* back to Darwin, arriving 13 years after Kris first left that port. It took



Kehaar - December 2015



five weeks to reach East Timor, and another 10 days from Timor to Darwin, slow sailing in light winds and smooth seas mostly.

It was Natalie's first ocean passage, and she thoroughly enjoyed the freedom, the great swathes of time to read, think and enjoy the beauty of the ocean, including turtles, dolphins, sea snakes, sharks and birds. One night, when she was alone on watch, some great creature as long as *Kehaar*, no doubt a whale, swam alongside for half an hour.

They established a base aboard an old steel trawler, *Son of a Gun*, continuing their collaborative artistic endeavours. Always a lover, rescuer and re-builder of bicycles (and hater of cars), Kris built a recumbent touring bike of great character from bits salvaged at the tip, and embarked on a 6,000-mile solo tour of Australia. He also published a book about his travels on *Kehaar*, called *Monsoon Dervish*, another about his bicycle trip, and an autobiographical work about his early life, *Out of Census*.

He also took *Kehaar* out of the water for six weeks and re-plated parts of the hull below the waterline, as the cracks in the original timber mast had allowed slow leaks, causing rust in the bilges. He replaced the old, too light, 3mm plate with 6mm, cut from redundant fuel tanks on *Son of a Gun*. As he once said, if you have a basic steel boat and the ability to weld, you can quickly, easily and cheaply repair or modify it. If you don't like the result it is easy enough to change.

In 2012 Kris made a four-month solo trip to Asia aboard *Kehaar*, before departing Darwin in June 2014, once again alone, bound for Africa. This time he sailed across the Indian Ocean at 13°S, driving the boat hard all the way. The passage was faster than his first crossing, averaging 135 miles a day, until they passed under Madagascar. He made landfall 45 days later at Pemba, Mozambique.



Departing Darwin to cross the Indian Ocean - 2014

It was a rough passage. *Kehaar* rolled violently the whole way, and Kris says that although it was the fastest passage the boat has ever made, he has no wish to repeat it. He says he was thrown around like a bolt in a drawer, and was black and blue with bruises when he made landfall.

From there he sailed to Richards Bay, South Africa. Leaving the boat safely moored at the yacht club, he embarked on a tour around the Kalahari Desert, through Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Namibia, on his recumbent bicycle. He also wrote another book, *A Manual of Sextant Navigation*, a simplified guide to celestial navigation. These days, Kris is one of the foremost practitioners of sextant navigation.



Kehaar in Richards Bay, South Africa

After they had rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Natalie joined the boat in Saldanha Bay, 50 miles north of Cape Town, and together they sailed across the South Atlantic to Brazil, celebrating the 2015 Brazilian Carnival in Paraiba-Pernambuco. Later they sailed to the Caribbean and in January 2016 were in Jamaica.



Kehaar, Guyana, 12th April 2016

Natalie decided two years was enough time to be away from Darwin, which she has come to love as much as Kris does, so she returned home from Guatemala in August 2016. Kris went on a walking tour through South America, exploring Mayan ruins, art and scripts, which inspired him to produce his own stunning paintings.

In October 2017, he departed Panama for the Marquesas Islands. Beating out of the Gulf of Panama

in an engineless boat is notoriously difficult, with light winds and adverse currents. In May 1924, the French singlehander, Alain Gerbault, took 37 days to sail the 1,000 miles from Panama to the Galapagos aboard *Firecrest*. And that was in the trade wind season. In October the winds are more fickle. From the Galapagos it is another 3,000 miles to the Marquesas. If you get set north of the Galapagos Islands it becomes almost impossible to reach the SE trades.

After three months without hearing a word, Natalie was beginning to worry. Then, 104 days after departing Panama, *Kehaar* arrived at Maui, in the Hawaiian Islands. Having failed to beat through the ITCZ into the SE Trades, Kris headed NW across the NE trades instead. This is also a very long passage. John Guzzwell, aboard *Trekka*, a light-displacement, performance-oriented yacht, took 62 days and logged 5400 miles between Panama and Hawaii in 1959.

Kris and *Kehaar* were in fine shape, though the sail was badly damaged and the boom broken, leading him to request a tow into port. The media had a field day with this, claiming Kris needed rescuing and was disoriented, implying that the boat was in bad shape. Kris was just tired, and perhaps *Kehaar's* utilitarian, work boat finish and unstayed mast confused them, among all the shiny, complicated local yachts.

Kris spent 10 days in Maui, re-building the sail, using his trusty, 1954, Zinger household sewing machine. Only the bottom three panels of the sail needed replacing. These days he uses cast-off Dacron sails for material, and those panels had come from an old roller-furling jib. The upper panels, made from a heavy-duty sail, lasted for the entire circumnavigation. The ideal second-hand sails for recycling into a junk sail are very large, as they are built from 7-9 oz Dacron and reasonably flat-cut. By cutting long strips from the old sail, and sewing them into the head and foot of the new, he incorporates the original eyelets as attachment points of yard and boom.

Having broken his boom en route, and being unable to source a replacement bamboo or suitable timber in such a short time, he made the new sail with one less panel and sailed without a boom for this final passage. It didn't seem to slow *Kehaar* much. They had a fast, 6 week passage from Maui to Mindanao in the Philippines, with a fresh NE tradewind all the way, and no incidents. From there, it took another 4 weeks to work their way through the Indonesian Archipelago to Darwin in light winds.

Off Ambon, approaching the monsoon trough that lay between them and Darwin, they were struck by

Kris Larsen Art



lightning. It did not hit the steel mast, but struck a stainless bar on deck. Not having any electrics or electronics to worry about, *Kehaar* suffered no damage. Once again, the benefits of a brutally simple, basic boat for ocean voyaging stood the test.

They slipped out of Indonesia between Seramata and Babar, straight into a developing cyclone. Marcus, a category 2 cyclone, went on to maul Darwin a couple of days later. As Kris noted, *you don't need a satellite weather fax to tell you there is a cyclone ahead of you. Huge SW swell, horizontal rain for 24 hrs, SW wind gusting 30 knots ... I scratched my beard and turned around, under deep-reefed sail, jogging away from the centre of the depression, back towards Indonesia. Two days later I felt the conditions abating, so I gybed and close-hauled back towards Darwin.*

Of interest here are Kris's comments about gybing. He is very careful when gybing in fresh winds. Because he often drives *Kehaar* hard downwind, he usually drops a couple of panels before the gybe, sheeting the sail in before putting the helm up. He then lets the sheet fly as the sail comes across, and the friction in the sheetspans controls the gybe nicely. Other than one occasion in a typhoon mentioned earlier, he has never had a fan up.

After more than 30 years and close to 100,000 miles, Kris says the one thing he has never been able to improve on is his Hasler/McLeod rig, at least for the sort of voyaging that he does in *Kehaar*. It is simple, basic, reliable, economical, and easy to repair. Every time he tried variations, he discovered that PJR's way worked better.

He can carry sail in up to 50 knots of wind, though by then he would be down to just the top panel, and probably hove-to. After that he resorts to bare poles. The top batten is unsheeted. Kris says that if he was going to sail in the Southern Ocean, he would attach a sheet to it. He was influenced by Bernard Moitessier's approach to heavy weather sailing, to keep the boat moving fast, scudding before the waves, but after capsizing while running before a typhoon, he is less certain of this technique. He did not carry a drogue during his circumnavigation, as he felt it unlikely he would meet weather severe enough to use it, but says he would consider doing so for a high-latitude voyage.

The Australian Navy intercepted *Kehaar* 60 miles from Darwin, gave Kris a weather update and rang his wife. The last 20 miles took two days, anchoring during the ebb tides, as Darwin has very large tides and fierce tidal runs. When *Kehaar* finally came to anchor off Stokes Wharf in Darwin Harbour, she had completed a 43,000 mile engineless circumnavigation in just under 4 years, navigated entirely by sextant and compass, without use of any electrical or electronic device. It was a fitting conclusion to more than 30 years of traditional ocean voyaging. If Joshua Slocum had been on Stokes Wharf that day, he would have nodded in approval.

