



Two Years in Godzone



Crafting a custom cat in Wanganui, New Zealand



By Jessica Rice Johnson

Uprooting the family from our Chesapeake Bay home and relocating to New Zealand to build a custom aluminum catamaran was a big decision. Our plan to sail it back partially finished across thousands of miles of lonely ocean with our children struck some people as lacking good sense. Long lists of pros and cons scrawled on a yellow legal pad kept us up many nights. Richard, my husband and sailing partner for nearly 20 years, had looked for a suitable builder in the U.S. and Canada. No yard seemed as well equipped or willing as the one we found in Wanganui, New Zealand. The designer, David DeVilliers, was living in Auckland, a short flight away. The current exchange rate was favorable.

The other reasons for New Zealand, called *Godzone* by many Kiwis (as in “God’s own country”) were obvious. We had traveled around both islands during a break from a prior circumnavigation and truly enjoyed the convivial people and postcard-perfect scenery. This would give us a chance to experience more of the *Land of the Long White Cloud* and would jumpstart our next adventure. Also, our two young daughters, ages five and seven, would have the opportunity to attend school in a

foreign country.

The decision was made. We informed friends, who were happy for us, and grandparents, who were not so happy. We emptied our house in hopes that it would rent. A big yellow container was loaded with building materials for the interior fit out and every part that we could foresee needing later on. In went folding props that had come from Australia and were now on a return trip. With some guilt, I contemplated the increase to the carbon footprint of doing the project overseas. Perhaps our ultimate use of wind power and the eight solar panels loaded for installing on the deckhouse roof would mitigate that. We also shipped Richard’s toolboxes and the electric converters needed to run the power tools on 220 volt current.

COTTAGE VERSUS BUS

Settling into New Zealand was an easy affair thanks to Neil, a good cruising friend we met 10 years earlier in Whangarei. We rented a cottage built by his father in 1950, ideally located on a north-facing hill in sunny Nelson, nestled in the south end of Tasman Bay. Sheltered by the surrounding mountains and tempered by the sea, our yard was full of citrus trees and tropical plants even at 41 degrees south. Here, the girls

and I lived for the next six months. Emma and Molly caught the bus each day to a lovely school situated on a bluff overlooking the bay. They learned Maori language and arts, played cricket and competed in their first triathlon. I did freelance graphic design work.

I definitely had the better end of the deal. Richard spent that first winter living in a cold and drafty converted Hino bus next to the yard office at Q-West Boat Builders, a commercial shipyard. It was located across Cook Strait in Wanganui, a five-hour car trip and three-hour ferry ride from Nelson. His days were spent making numerous design decisions and working alongside the welders on *Elcie*, as the boat was now named. Amazingly, New Zealand has not yet fallen to the litigious ways of other countries and so Richard was issued a shop key, coveralls and welding mask. They only asked that he not work with heavy machinery alone at night. This was my request also.

It was September of 2008 and the yard was several months behind schedule, mostly due to delays in procuring some of the aluminum material needed. Once the welding was complete and the engines installed, there was a huge push to get *Elcie* launched. She was moved



out of the shed and on went bottom paint. The rigger came down from Auckland with the mast sections on a truck. Neil, our friend and landlord, joined Richard in Wanganui for the frantic final week before launching. He helped tick off some key items, including building a temporary helm station, providing power to the navigation lights and electronics, and installing the anchoring gear.

THE TURNING POINT

I flew up to Wanganui to help where needed; I was also eager to be on board for the 120nm trip across to Nelson. Upon arrival, I found Richard and Neil to be both sleep-deprived and keyed up from the previous weeks' frenetic pace. Another very long night and hectic day were spent tying up loose ends and we were ready to go. Though we left the yard in the dark of night due to the need for a high tide, the foremen and several of the welders showed up to see us off.

For Richard, this moment was a big turning point. For many months, he had worked on *Elcie* as part of a team, alongside craftsmen whose skill and expertise were evident wherever one happened to glance on board. Now, the responsibility to see



this project to a point of completion was all ours. Throughout the construction, Richard was enormously impressed with the quality of the work and the ingenious ways in which aluminum was fashioned into every boat part needed. The remote location of this small island nation has evidently produced a clever and industrious workforce.

The inaugural trip was cold, exhilarating and very, very loud. Deafening noise from twin 75hp Yanmar engines reverberated through every plate and stringer in the empty hulls. Even yelling at point blank range, it was impossible to hear each other. Richard and I took turns trying to sleep on a hard piece of temporary flooring and standing up steering by the course over ground (COG) on the GPS. It was our good luck to have a calm night for crossing the often-rough South Taranaki Bight over to Tasman Bay. Brilliant stars reflected on the water surface. There were only a few fishing boats to watch out for.

At daybreak, abeam Stephen's Island and feeling somewhat renewed, I heated water for coffee. Hunched over our camping stove, I mentally prioritized a list of jobs that would be necessary to transform *Elcie* into a seagoing home for our family. My short list started with a galley, bunks, one working head and an autopilot. We ate porridge while admiring the wild landscape of D'urville Island at the eastern approach to Tasman Bay. Emma and Molly had their first view of *Elcie* underway when the school principal kindly called them up to his office and offered them binoculars after spotting us approaching Nelson.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Our 18-month visas were half-expired. Summer arrived and under the intense southern sun we applied non-skid paint across the slippery bare aluminum decks. Richard





insulated the hulls, then built floors and the major bulkheads from the honeycomb cell panels that had traveled in the container. I epoxy-coated bare wood and soundproofed the engine rooms. The hull interiors slowly started to fill out with bunks and lockers. We finished the girls' cabin first so they could have a place to retreat from the dust and noise that filled the rest of the boat.

Making friends with other boat kids, the girls spent the summer fishing from dinghies, playing Swiss Family Robinson and hanging out on *Elcie's* trampoline. With such long daylight hours, we often forgot about dinner until friends from neighboring docks invited our hungry boat orphans to join them for "tea." Or a friend might stop by with fish and chips and a rigger (two-liter bottle) of local beer. Afterward, we would put the girls to bed and continue working for several hours.

We finished out the forward cockpit with benches and a table. During breaks, we sat and imagined ourselves having sundowners in faraway anchorages. On occasional trips away from the boat, we would

head to the hills with bikes or for tramping. The wilderness in our backyard was too beautiful to ignore. Closer to the marina, we were within walking distance of Nelson's vibrant downtown with its outdoor market, gardens and museums. Despite these distractions, the rapidly approaching expiration date on our visas was always lurking and we did our best to stay on track.

In the end, we applied for a visa extension. It was promptly denied. How could our efforts to bolster the New Zealand economy be so easily dismissed? Nelson friends, the school principal and even a local member of parliament championed our cause, sending letters of support to the office of New Zealand Immigration. After several nail-biting weeks, my dogged perseverance, along with the ministerial intervention, paid off, and a six-month extension was granted. Our departure was set for the last day of 2009. It was time to enlist the help of some locals.

Andre, a boat builder and cruising friend, made the galley, navigation station, helm seat and dining table. A clever joiner, he was able to work

from my hand-drawn sketches that took no consideration of proportion or engineering. Another friend, Mick, meticulously tackled all of the fiberglass work including showers, holding tanks and the two daggerboards that would keep us from sailing home sideways. Neil would later connect all the wires that Richard and I had pulled through the boat. It was fortuitous that the planets aligned with this collaboration of talented Kiwi friends.

SAILING, AT LAST

Summer began for a second time. Richard's efforts turned to getting *Elcie's* systems installed and working. Our very good friend from home, John, appeared like Father Christmas, plumbed the boat and installed heads. Being a longtime cruiser and boat builder himself, he also sorted out endless last minute details and helped bend on stiff new sails that had been waiting in the forepeak to make their debut. I speedily covered some recycled cushions and sewed temporary curtains for doors. Moving us fully out of Neil's cottage, I set up the galley and cabins. Santa



Tasman National Park and a popular weekend destination for Nelson sailors. We dropped the hook and jumped off the transom steps into clear cold water, deep blue against a verdant backdrop of native forest. It felt so familiar and so good—cruising again. There was plenty on board to eat as I had already spent several weeks provisioning for the long voyage home. Somewhere in the lockers were 42 jars of peanut butter and enough baking supplies for countless loaves of bread and watch snacks.

We did all the usual things—dug our toes into golden sand, hiked up to a waterfall and poked around numerous small coves in the dinghy. For all the enjoyment, we knew it was time to get back to Nelson. On the return, we sailed the boat as hard as we dared until the wind petered out to a mere 5 knots. I took the opportunity to hop in the dinghy with a camera and take some vanity shots of *Elcie* to send to the builders, designer, friends and nervous grandparents. She looked solid, proud and seaworthy in the bright Tasman Bay afternoon light.

READY TO GO

Goodbyes are hard. We were leaving a place that had truly begun to feel like home. School friends and well-wishers stopped by the boat with wonderful gifts of local wine, fresh berries, canned beets, garden herbs and chocolate. The medical kit was checked and put away. The life jackets and raft were stowed. The EPIRB was mounted and tested along with two radios and the GPS. My list of priorities had grown to in-

somehow found time to buy presents for the girls and left them hauled to the top of the main mast on Christmas morning.

What about those sea trials? Curious passersby often asked us how the boat sailed and we sheepishly told them we had been too busy to get off the dock. No time like the present to test sails and daggerboards and put the newly installed autopilot through its paces. Some Nelson friends joined us for our first sail, an overnight trip to Abel Tasman National Park, with New Year's Eve still several days away.

Everything was new about this boat, but not the sailing itself. Just outside the harbor I turned the bow into the wind. Richard orchestrated the raising of sails. Mizzen up. Keep

her there, luffing. Main up. Fall off, staysail on. Engine off. What an amazing feeling to be sailing for the first time after two years of a seemingly endless project. She quickly came up to about 6 knots, beam reaching in light westerly breezes. I brought her up a bit more and our speed increased to 6.5, then 7—then a noise. We heard an odd low hum coming from somewhere near the stern. Were the props spinning? Were we dragging something? Later, we determined that it was a problem with the plate thickness of the weed deflectors welded to the skegs, but no matter—we were sailing and it felt glorious!

It was no more than five hours to Torrent Bay, the most protected of the beautiful anchorages within Abel



clude some essential offshore safety gear as well.

We still had to work our way across to Picton and wait for the weather needed to depart and head off into the Southern Ocean for Easter Island, some 4,500 nm away. On the day we left Nelson for Picton, we made one last stop to climb the lighthouse that stood on the end of the 15-mile boulder bank, guarding the entrance to the port. It gave us a view of all that we had come to love about Nelson and New Zealand during the previous two years. *Elcie*, our home for the next five months, sparkled in the bright Nelson sun, as ready to go as we could make her in the time that we had.

Onward. ~

Jessica and Richard Johnson sailed into their homeport of Oxford, Maryland in May 2010 aboard the newly built 62-foot custom aluminum catamaran, Elcie. On the more than 10,000 nm voyage home, they made stops in Easter Island, the Galapagos, Panama and the Bahamas. They are currently preparing for an extended cruise of the Caribbean basin departing in November 2011. More information on Elcie Expeditions and upcoming sailing opportunities can be found at www.elcieexpeditions.blogspot.com.

The Decision to Build New

By Richard Johnson

For me, the decision to build a new custom boat came down to a matter that on the surface sounds rather selfish: I wanted my ideal boat. This boat would safely and comfortably carry our family and passengers on extended offshore voyages anywhere in the world. Before making the final decision to build, I thoroughly explored the used market, perusing boats in all states of readiness and disrepair. None seemed to be what I was looking for. Having owned a few well-used boats, I was ready for a boat with the reliability of newly installed systems and components.

The majority of my sailing has been on deeper draft vessels. I was intrigued by the increased potential for adventure afforded by a shallow draft cruising boat. Shallow draft monohulls are generally smaller than what I had in mind. I started to look at multihull plans and was especially drawn to Chris White's Atlantic series. However, the cost of a fully completed composite catamaran large enough to carry passengers was a bit beyond our budget. I considered aluminum for its

strength and ease of construction. With the use of CNC (Computer Numeric Controlled) Cut Files, the process is streamlined, making the building of a one-off design in aluminum very cost effective.

In discussing aluminum construction with several people, David DeVillier's name often came up. A South African living in New Zealand, David and I have similar aesthetics when it comes to boats. Best of all, he sounded very interested in designing a multihull cruising sailboat, his first big cruising cat.

Half a world apart, it became a back and forth of emails and preliminary drawings as David patiently found, on paper, the boat I envisioned. I enjoyed the phone

calls where we hashed out details and discussed changes. Several days later, these revisions would appear as email attachments; boat design in the Internet age.

I have a history of tackling large projects, including three major boat renovations, and tried not to underestimate the work involved. Since the design process with David began over a year before the keels were laid, I had time to research systems, deck equipment, rigging and lightweight building materials. I also tried to determine which items should be purchased here and which should wait until New Zealand. Regarding any environmental impact, it is my hope that the greener aspects of an efficient, long-range sailing boat with ample solar power and the ultimate recyclability of aluminum helps outweigh the toll of building new.

In the end, by building, we have been rewarded with a reliable, strong offshore sailing cat. The interior space is light and clean and the systems are uncomplicated. Our initial voyage has proved her to be all that I had hoped for in a boat.