

# CRUISING IN *Europe*



Looking down at Pulpit Rock (82x82 feet), Lyse Fjord, Norway. Elevation 2010 feet

## *Couple plans high-latitude cruise to Iceland and Greenland*

Brian Stewart didn't do much traveling during his years of working and raising a family, visiting just one other country outside of North America. Well, he's now making up for lost time. Retirement hasn't slowed him down at all.

He and wife Jane Witherspoon took a shakedown cruise to the North Channel and Lake Superior in 2005, a few years after purchasing a rundown Whitby 42 that they now call Pilgrim, which they bought in Sodus Bay, N.Y. They spent a few years fixing her up.

Their first trip in the northern Great Lakes was to test the boat and modifications they made to the electrical and plumbing systems, along with the other add-ons like solar panels, a cabin heater and other equipment.

They sailed back to Lake Ontario that fall and hauled out at the Whitby Marina, so that a bit more work could be done on the boat. The following spring, in May 2006, they left and headed down the St. Lawrence River and along the U.S. eastern seaboard to Florida.

From there, the couple crossed the Gulf Stream in early 2007 to the Bahamas.

That June, they made a run back across the Gulf Stream to Charleston, S.C. and headed across the Atlantic to the Azores and on to Europe.

Over the past five years, they have cruised to England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Poland and Russia. They sail each year for about six months and haul out where they are and return to Canada.

They leave their yacht, usually wrapped and tucked away for the winter in a building

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in a marina, and fly home to visit with family (the couple have three grown daughters and a son) and friends and to look after their Toronto condo, which they have kept while cruising. Their yacht, Pilgrim, has been left on the hard in Florida, England, Germany, Sweden and now in Scotland, where it was left in the fall of 2010.

The traveling started shortly after both Stewart, 63, who grew up in Sault St. Marie and Witherspoon, 67, who grew up in St. Louis, MO, and summered in Michigan, both retired from their jobs at IBM in Toronto, where they met. Stewart is an electrical engineer.

This spring, the members of National Yacht Club (NYC) in Toronto -- who grew up racing Albacores, Flying 15s and a Northstar 500 (they have also owned a CS 33) -- are planning a trip to the higher latitudes, from Scotland to the Hebrides, Shetland Islands, the Faeroes Islands (Denmark possession) and the coasts of Iceland and Greenland.

The trip was inspired by a story they had read about an Irish Monk with severe wanderlust by the name of St. Brendan (aptly, his surname was The Traveller). They want to follow the path taken by this man, who sailed so many centuries ago.

According to the story, St. Brendan sailed in the 5th Century in a homemade boat made from leather across the North Atlantic to Newfoundland -- about 500 years before the Vikings and 900 years before explorer Christopher Columbus set out on his voyages.

Not bad, for a monk in a leather boat, sailing between some very large icebergs.

The trip was recorded in early Medieval Latin, Spanish and German manuscripts and most recently, another sailor named Tim Severin researched boats at the time and suggested the voyage by the Monk was done in an Irish Currach made from leather.

Severin built a model of the boat, which is a framework of laths and is nowadays covered with tarred canvas. He and four others sailed the North Atlantic route in the 33 ft. model of the

boat in 1977, and safely arrived in Newfoundland.

A movie was made of this trip, which Stewart and Witherspoon have seen, and the trip intrigued them. They will leave in early April and prepare their yacht, on the hard in Clyde, just west of Glasgow, for high-latitude sailing, and the difficulties presented by icebergs and dressing properly for the extreme weather they will face.

"We have observed the effects of global warming" in our travels, said Stewart. The couple enjoys studying the flora and fauna in different countries and take photographs as they go. They often go hiking and now want to see nature in the far north.

"We don't know how long there is for these natural events and this is our opportunity in life to see the ice shelf...There will probably be little time left to see the ice flows and the sea life...probably in the next decade everything will be gone.

"I never made it out of North America except for one trip," said Stewart, in an interview with Ontario

## Sailor Magazine.

"Jane has done some travels and I wanted to see different cultures and different countries and understand people from other countries and their customs...we are on a pilgrimage (which is why they named their yacht Pilgrim)."

The couple likes to play it safe when they are sailing, and describe themselves as "belt and suspenders" sailors who don't take risks while out in the ocean. If there's a dispute over the route, a tack or when to leave, they agree to accept the most conser-

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Rowing lessons in the guest harbor at Skeishavna, Leka Island north of Rovik, Norway. Pilgrim is at dockside.



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vative opinion offered between the two of them, regardless of who suggests it.

In addition, they send emails to family members when they are leaving and arriving at various locations. These emails form the basis for logs they post on a website ([www.pilgrims passages.com](http://www.pilgrims passages.com)) that is mainly designed for family and friends. They augment the log with photos, so that their kids and others can keep up with their travels.

They wait for weather windows before making a passage. And for sailing in the North Atlantic, they will rely on weather and ice-flow reports from Greenland and Iceland marine officials and local coast guard radio reports.

They also rely, like many other cruisers, on so-called "weather routers" such as Canadian Herb Hilgenberg, who guides boats through dangerous weather systems from his home in the Toronto area, with the use of Ham radio and a Single Side Band (SSB) transceiver.

These routers speak on the marine radio to many skippers in a particular spot in the world and pass along weather details between skippers, and gather weather information on their own. They suggest routes to skippers to escape pending storms.

During the more than five years that Stewart and Witherspoon have been cruising, they haven't got in trouble except a close-call after heading from Charleston to the Azores, a series of islands off of Spain, a popular stopover for yachts heading to and from Europe.

They watched for a weather window and left the U.S. but lost touch for a few days with a weather router they were using. When they finally reached him by radio, a vicious storm was bearing down on them and they had to sail south in a hurry

Another close call happened when they received some bad advice from a local cruising guide on a particular anchorage, which wasn't the proper depth for their vessel, and which almost resulted in the complete loss of their yacht.

Getting weather information in some European countries can be tricky because of a language barrier and the fact there is no 24-hour marine weather broadcasts over the VHF radio, like in Canada. "We are pretty spoiled here," said Witherspoon.

In Norway, the couple uses a tape recorder for weather forecasts and plays it back slowly to translate the words and figure out what weather is coming at them. The forecasters there use the Beaufort scale rather than knots. The use of the VHF is not popular there.

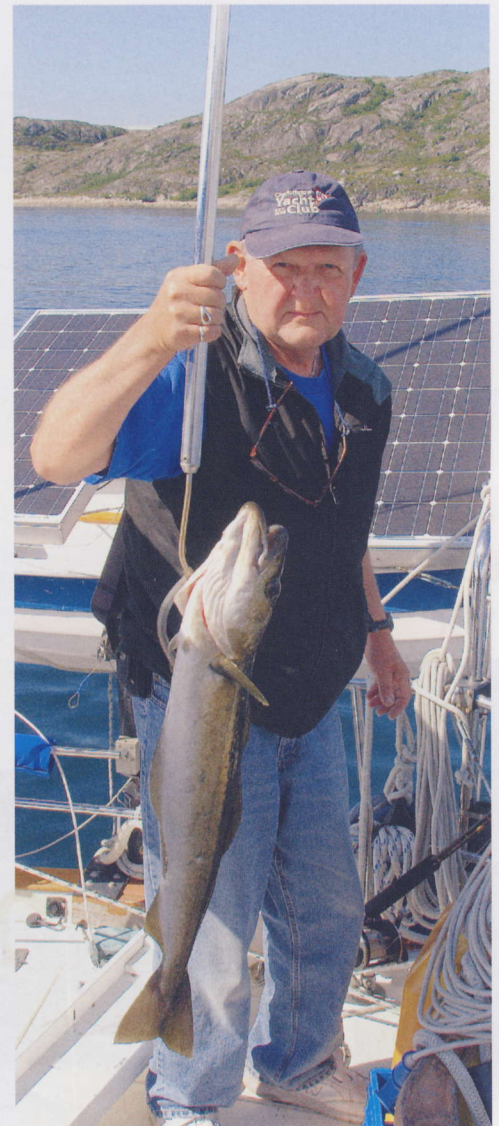
The weather forecasts are often inaccurate, said Stewart, especially when they sail in the fjords and there is wind shear from the high rock cliffs, which can add immensely to wind velocities.

Stewart said in a log on their website that they waited about a week at anchor at North Lake Worth in Florida to cross the Gulf Stream, which runs between 2-4 knots, to the Bahamas because "crossing the Stream with a north wind is hazardous since the wind is opposite the current and causes huge waves.

"On January 23 the weather was almost perfect for the crossing...we left at 11 p.m. and sailed the 60 miles across the Gulf Stream to The Bahamas. We followed the "rule of thumb" in the cruising guides to steer a course well south of our destination, since the Gulf Stream would sweep us northward.

"We should have steered the rhumb line to Memory Rock -- we ended up about 10 miles too far south."

In Europe, cell phones are popular for



Catching lunch in Bodo, Norway.



Late afternoon in the Mindland Island, Norway anchorage.

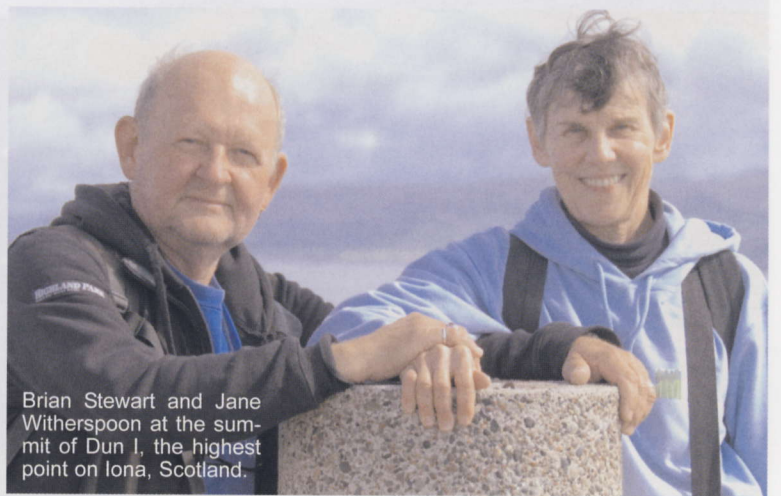




Colourful beach houses along the waterfront in Aeroskobing, Denmark.



No wind makes for a long day of motoring in Vagsfjord, Norway.



Brian Stewart and Jane Witherspoon at the summit of Dun I, the highest point on Iona, Scotland.



The fog lifting over Tobermory Harbour in the Isle of Mull, Scotland.

communications, and the couple usually carries a phone and buys a SIM card in the country they are visiting, to save on costs. They must find a bank for the local currency for fuel and other supplies.

One thing they had to get used to traveling in Europe is rafting, because dock space is at a premium. "We go to bed and when we get up there can be five boats rafted off of your boat and often you want to get out of there at 6 a.m.," said Stewart.

During lengthy passages, the couple will spell each other on the helm after three hours. On shorter trips, Witherspoon will helm and Stewart will look after the sails and some of the other duties requiring a little more brawn than Witherspoon can muster.

"I have the concentration for doing helming for seven hours at a time," said Witherspoon, who also does any work that involves heights, like taking down the wind generator on the mast during their annual, winter haulout routine in the various countries.

"People are sort of amazed

that I'm at the helm all the time but I tell them "Brian's doing all of the work" ". Stewart said his wife is good at the helm and he is quite happy to let her drive the boat. "She is a seat-of-your-pants, intuitive sailor."

Witherspoon grew up sailing dinghies in Michigan during the summers, and like Stewart, enjoyed racing for many years. The couple bought themselves a wedding present in 1993, a CS 33 shoal draft sailboat, which they cruised in Lake Ontario and the North Channel.

About 15 years ago, the couple began thinking about retirement, which they realized was coming up in the next 10 years. They began making plans and decided that they wanted to circumnavigate the globe after they retired.

"We basically looked at each other and said, "We are 10 years away from retirement. What are we going to do with our lives? Why don't we sail around the world?" said Stewart. His wife was in full support.

And so Witherspoon made

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a list – a very long list of things that they needed to do. Stewart said that she is really good at making lists. They began checking things off: Got the boat? Check. Fixed it up? Check. Saving some money? Check. Retired? Check, and let's go.

Stewart had seen a Whitby 42 sailboat many years ago at the Toronto boat show and said at the time that that was the yacht he was going to use to sail around the world.

Many years later, while sailing in Georgian Bay, he spotted another Whitby 42 at a dock nearby. He showed his wife and

coast of Canada, possibly Nova Scotia. Next year, they want to sail down the U.S. coast and may end up wintering during the 2011-2012 season somewhere in the Caribbean.

They will then decide whether to transit the Panama Canal and sail the South Pacific to Australia. The cruising will go on as long as their health holds out. The couple kept their condo because they don't want to cruise forever and will eventually settle down.

"It is not our intent to go down with the ship or die at sea," said Witherspoon. "We think we will get old together and are not interested in sailing into our 90s. We wanted

wish lists and sometimes it's to avoid paying a European VAT tax of 25 per cent of the value of their yacht if they stay in a country too long. There is also a so-called Schengen visa requirement between 25 EU countries.

The rules mean cruisers can only stay 90 days in a country and must leave for 90 days before returning. Cruisers can't stay longer than 18 months in a particular country or the yacht would be subject to a huge tax, forcing visitors to leave and come back.

Because the couple is leaving their yacht over the winter in some of these European countries, they have to meet length-of-stay



Tobermory Harbour, Isle of Mull, Scotland.

they managed to get a tour. They began shopping for that style of yacht and found a fixer-upper in New York shortly after that.

Stewart says he likes to use his skills as an engineer and work on boat systems and fix things. He says he wants to take equipment apart and put it back together, so that he understands how to fix it, before it ever goes on his yacht. He has a workbench onboard.

"I can strip a radio apart and put it back together again."

The shakedown cruise on the upper Great Lakes was great but during the summer there wasn't as much wind as they couple would have liked to put their boat through its paces. But Stewart says the North Channel offers the best sailing in the world.

The couple, who initially met while working at IBM and have maintained their NYC membership while they have been cruising, enjoyed visiting the U.S. eastern seaboard in 2007 and plan to go back next year. They enjoyed meeting the fishermen and want to return to the scenic anchorages.

Later this year, after sailing past icebergs, they will haul out somewhere on the east

to hold onto our real estate. That's why we maintained our land base."

On the cost for cruising, Stewart said they don't live extravagantly, and mostly anchor rather than stay at marinas. They make their own bread and prepare their own meals while onboard. Cruising costs about as much as owning a condo and living in the city.

Witherspoon said they enjoy each other's company, which can be tricky in the confines of a yacht. "We just love to be on our boat. There is something about being on the boat that makes us comfortable.

"We find the confines of our two-bedroom condo to be very vast – we lose each other in the vastness of the two-bedroom apartment."

The couple likes to make plans two years ahead, but can change the plans for the second year depending on political unrest or other safety concerns in a particular area. They had planned to go south from Europe but wanted to avoid political troubles in Arab countries in the Middle East, and pirates off Somalia.

Sometimes the countries they visit are on

requirements or face stiff penalties.

Stewart said they like to research where they will haul out and book the spot a year in advance, because of the size of their yacht and the fact they like to store the boat indoors, after a bad experience with an outside storage. The average cruising yacht is generally smaller than theirs in Europe.

Some years ago, their boat was in a yard near some trees and water entered their boat and damaged some wood down below. Stewart said it doesn't cost substantially more to store the boat inside for the winter, when they come back to Canada.

They like to work on the boat in the fall, once it is hauled out, before they leave to come back home. They always take the mast down, even though the boat is on a travel lift and this is not required.

The couple likes to inspect and paint the hull and check all standing and running rigging, along with the propeller and shaft, and zincs so there is less work for them in the spring. They usually bring boat supplies back from Canada with them in the spring.