

Cruising in steel

A new range of steel-built, traditional cruising yachts is enjoying success in Holland. David Glenn sailed the Puffin 50 on the IJsselmeer to find out why the 'retro' look is proving so popular

At a time when the tendency for advanced cruising boat design is towards light displacement, movable water ballast, composite building materials and even canting keels to achieve fast, comfortable passagemaking, the success of Olivier van Meer's Puffin range seems, at first glance, an unlikely achievement.

The straight stem, round bilge and chunky transom of the 50-footer we tested, with her big externally-hung rudder, seem throwbacks – you half expect the hull to be built of pitch pine planking on grown oak frames.

She is, in fact, steel-hulled and, with more than 12 yachts sold in as many months, the class is enjoying unexpected success. Why? In Holland there is a strong association with tradition, perfectly illustrated by the popularity of the wide range of flat-bottomed, lee-boarded *hotters* and *lemsteraaks* which are raced and cruised with intensity throughout the country's waterways.

This keenness to maintain a link with simple, proven design probably has something to do with Puffin's success. The appeal has attracted those looking to cruise beyond the shores of their native Holland and across oceans in a tough, comfortable and distinctive-looking yacht.

Interestingly, it has also attracted Chris Kidd of Premier Yachts in the UK, whose Bill Dixon designs are regarded as the ultimate bullet-proof cruising machines for those opting to build in steel in the UK. But you can now buy a Puffin through Premier or have one built at Kidd's new Hayling Island factory.

The niche market for steel-built cruising yachts is small, but active. Kidd believes that what he calls Puffin's retro look is what some people crave in a world of blandness. "My aim is to offer choice. Clients are not buying a retro performance nor retro living accommodation, but something which looks attractive and different," he emphasised.

There are four boats in the Puffin range, a 36-footer with a flush coachroof, which also comes in a deck saloon version, a 42, the 50 and a 58 which is ketch-rigged. The 50 can also be ketch-rigged as an option. There's a 61 on the drawing board.

In Holland the range is marketed by Jan Moes, a successful real estate businessman who was looking for a boat when he came across the van Meer portfolio.

Puffin's designer

Olivier van Meer is well respected in Holland. He was born on a yacht, has cruised more than 110,000 miles and was the youngest licensed captain in the Dutch merchant navy. He's from the 'classics of the future' school of thought and has been running a design team for ten years in Enkhuizen, the unofficial headquarters of Dutch traditional sailing on the IJsselmeer.

Among his large yacht projects have been the rigs for the barquentines *Star Flyer* and *Star Clipper*. He designed the schooner *Zaca a te Moana* and masterminded the refit of *White* ▶

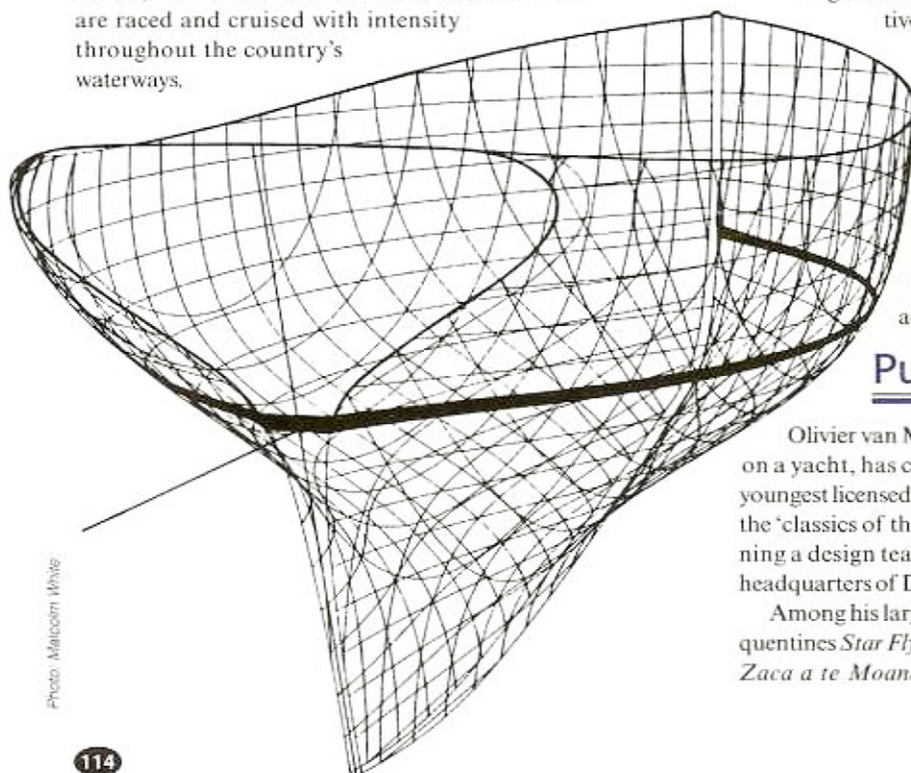
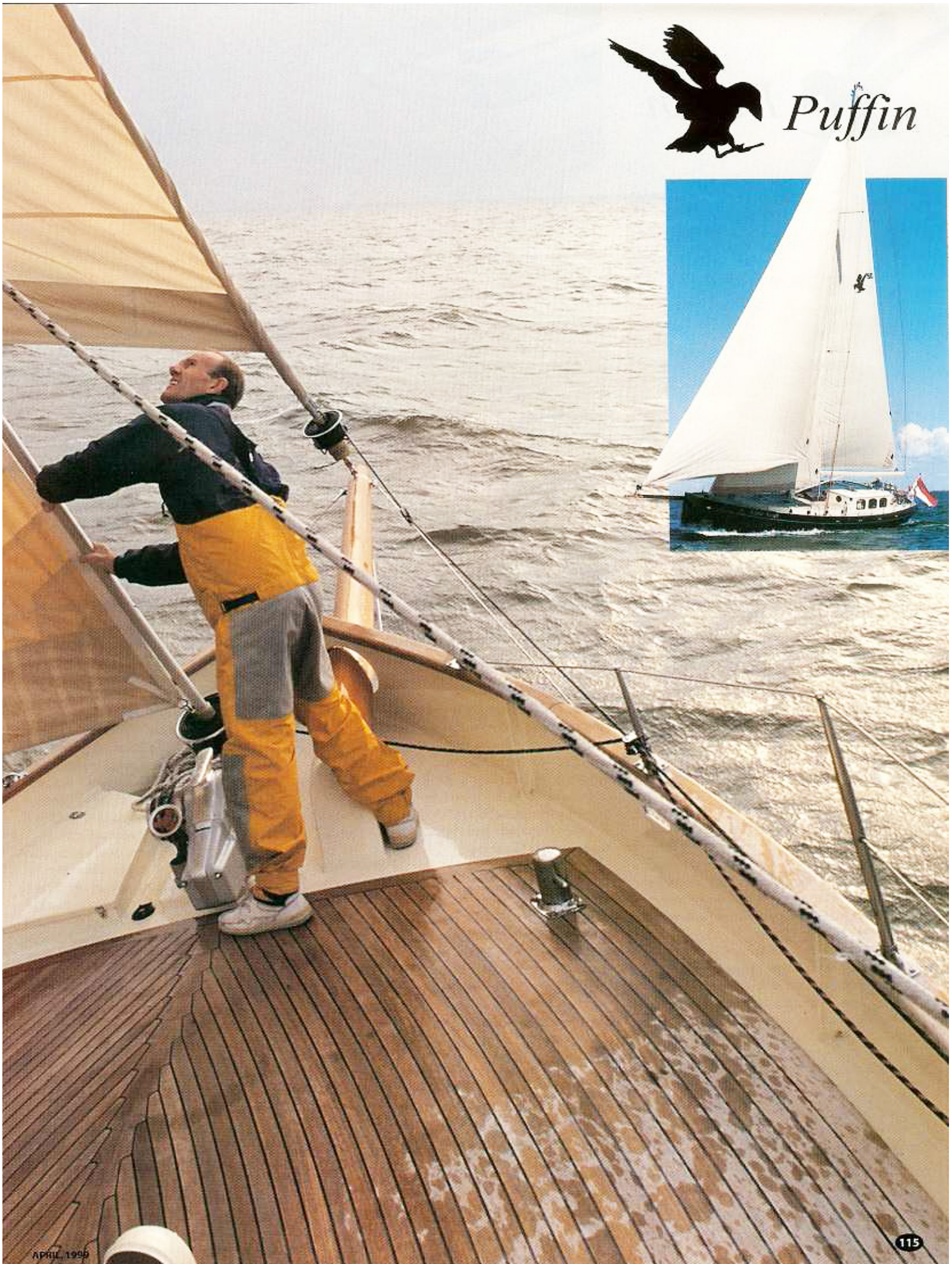


Photo: Malcolm White



079. 1999-1 Yachting World Puffin 50 2



Above: the 'snug' in the forward port corner of the main saloon is very comfortable. Right: the voluminous hull provides capacious living space



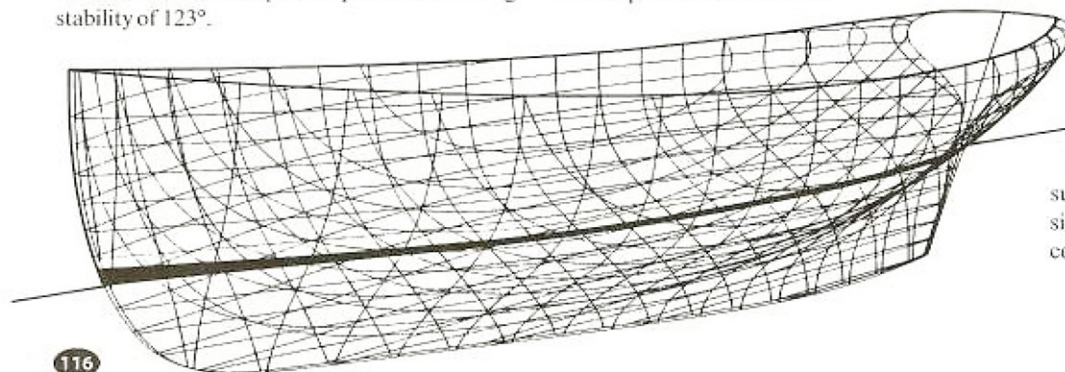
Heather II, but of his smaller designs Puffin is the closest to his heart because she was originally intended for van Meer himself!

Puffin evolved over many years and was first designed with a long straight keel and considerable draught. This version is available, but a centreboard alternative fulfilled the Dutch appetite for shallow draught cruising and is, to date, the more popular choice.

Stability and design

For those cruising long distances the temptation would surely be to opt for the long, deep, fixed keel version, but there are obvious advantages to a 50-footer which can reduce draught from 3.1m to 1.35m (10ft 2in to 4ft 4in).

Although there is 2,500kg of lead ballast in the double-plated, hydrodynamically profiled centreboard, it plays no role in the stability calculations. There's 7,000kg of internal lead ballast and Olivier van Meer quotes a point of vanishing stability of 123°.



116

When we sailed the boat in some 20 knots of true wind she appeared admirably stiff. The board is really there to provide more bite to weather and to help prevent leeway.

The top of the casing is well above the waterline and can be removed to inspect the board, which is lifted using an electric motor and a special chain-driven mechanism. The board kicks back in the event of a collision. It can be set at any intermediate position and be completely removed without having to lift the yacht. Large bearings keep the board stable so that it doesn't clang about in the casing.

On board

Businesslike is the word that came to mind when I first stepped aboard the Puffin 50. She has a large amount of freeboard, she carries much of her beam well into the ends of the yacht and deck fittings are robust. And yet she is unfussy on deck with a marvellous sensation of safety afforded by the deep bulwarks and the

lofty deck saloon, which provides plenty of protection for those in the cockpit.

Van Meer's first customer was 6ft 4in tall and the need to maintain headroom throughout was a challenge. Some may find the deck saloon structure too imposing, but that's a small price to pay for the accommodation features below.

The long, spruce bowsprit might seem intimidating, especially when manoeuvring in a crowded marina or anchorage, but Olivier van Meer is working on a method of retracting it which will have the added benefit of cheaper marina fees.

The simple cutter rig is set on a tabernacle-stepped Sparcraft mast which can, in theory, be lowered by two people for negotiating bridges, etc. The yacht we sailed was fitted with in-mast furling and, while the more performance-minded might prefer a fully-battened mainsail, there seemed to be no lack of power emanating from this arrangement.

A big wheel suited the style of the yacht and the helmsman could reach almost all sail controls from this position. Andersen winches, the primaries being electric, have been selected for the Puffin 50.

If we had to be critical, I would single out a shortage of really useful deck locker space and with the transom-hung rudder precluding a bathing/boarding platform some sort of substantial topsides ladder would have to be designed to make boarding easier, especially when coming alongside in a tender while at anchor.

Olivier van Meer has designed a hull with a

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When the sun's over the yardarm... Attention to detail in the custom-finished interior is excellent in the Puffin 50

remarkable amount of volume and, although there are only five berths and no substantial accommodation aft, the arrangement below is extremely comfortable. There are a number of layouts which can increase fixed berths up to seven. For a couple and occasional guests living aboard for long periods of time, the Puffin 50 would provide an excellent base.

The key features include a dining area in the deck saloon with superb views through the toughened glass windows, a large navigation area with its own quarterberth, a vast linear galley with electric cooking, a dedicated workshop with complete access to the engine compartment, valves, pumps and other major machinery and a secondary saloon or snug which is one of the most comfortable cabins I have ever had the

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Building in steel

Like many projects in Holland, Puffin is built using a series of small sub-contractors, each a specialist in their own right, whether it be steel hull construction, interior woodworking, plumbing or wiring.

The Puffin 50 we sailed was built by the Mekon yard in Lemmer, where Kown Spee said one of the most important elements in steel building, apart from the basic integrity of the steel plate (in this case blasted marine steel St 42, grade A) is top quality sand blasting, which removes all oxidation (rusting). The plate is blasted twice before an International primer is applied and a special steel painting schedule completed.

Hull thickness varies from 15mm in the bottom to 5mm on the topsides. What is known as triple-5, T profile frames (so-called because they measure 50mmx50mmx5mm) stand at 400mm centres with three heavier frames at the mast. Framing looks light, but Mekon claim scantlings can be reduced even further without losing basic integrity.



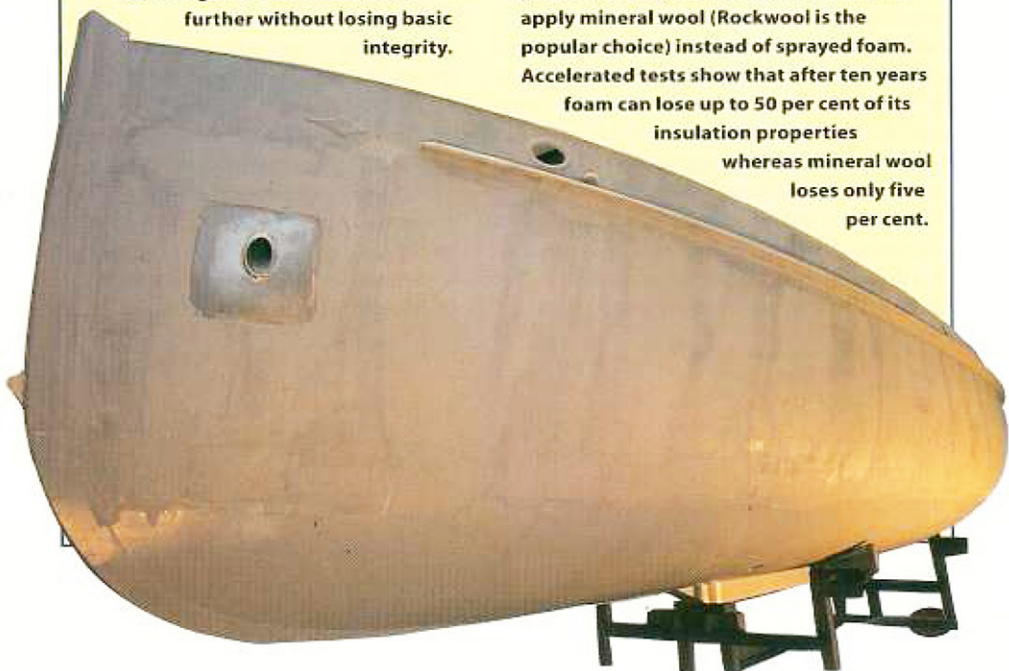
Above: the shot-blasted hull has been coated with a special primer. Left: swing keel mechanism before installation. Below: a bulky hull belies an impressive sailing performance

Only the need for Lloyd's and CE certification prevent Mekon from building less heavily.

Tanks and watertight bulkheads are built in at an early stage and soon afterwards insulation is applied to all inner surfaces of the hull and superstructure.

Van Meer's office has commissioned research into insulation material properties and, as a result, they prefer to apply mineral wool (Rockwool is the popular choice) instead of sprayed foam. Accelerated tests show that after ten years foam can lose up to 50 per cent of its insulation properties

whereas mineral wool loses only five per cent.





The cockpit is deep and well protected by the deck saloon which, to some, might appear marginally out of proportion

pleasure to relax in. This area could be designed as an office.

Surprisingly, the centreboard case does not intrude too heavily – in fact, it has been used to provide a natural divide between the galley and the portside amidships accommodation.

A combination of off-white-painted tongue and groove panelling and stained or varnished woodwork make for a pleasing combination and the provision of traditional, butterfly-style hatches provide a vast amount of light.

Sailing the Puffin 50

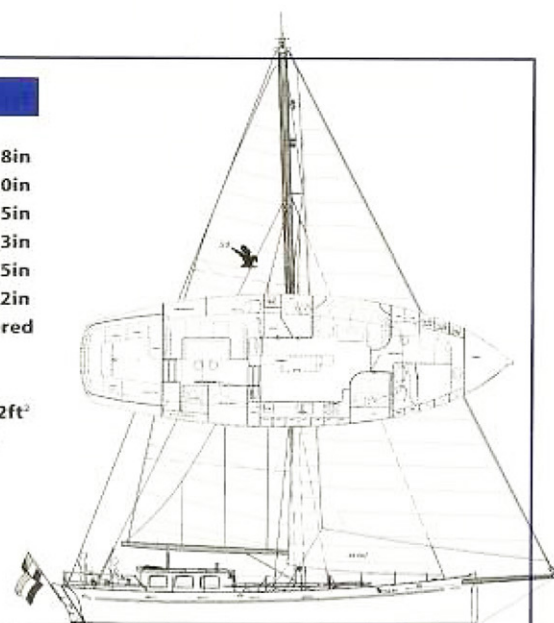
If you look at the hull of the shallow draught version of the 50 sitting in Mekon's yard in Lemmer, you would be forgiven for mistaking this sailing yacht for a *peniche*, more at home carrying coal on the Rhine. That's perhaps a little harsh, but she doesn't look that yachty beneath the waterline. Her blunt, straight stem, vast round bilge and generous back end suggest something much less athletic than is, in fact, the case.

When I looked at the yacht we were due to sail sitting alongside in Enkhuizen, she gave the impression of being a handful to manoeuvre, but her 85hp Perkins main engine and her 7kW Alpacetec

Specification

LOA (inc bowsprit)	17.60m	57ft 8in
LOD	14.95m	49ft 0in
LWL	14.15m	46ft 5in
Beam	4.95m	16ft 3in
Draught (board up)	1.35m	4ft 5in
Draught (board down)	3.10m	10ft 2in
Displacement	32 tons, fully bunkered	
Ballast	7 tonnes (internal) 2.5 tonnes (board)	
Sail area	160m ²	1,722ft ²
Engine (standard)	106hp Vetus Deutz	
Fuel	2x700lt	
Fuel daytank	1x100lt	
Fresh water tank	2x650lt	
Holding tank	1x480lt	

Designed by: Olivier F. van Meer Design,
Dijk 56, 1601 GK Enkhuizen, Holland. Tel: +31
228 32 16 65. Fax: +31 228 32 16 67
Contact: (Holland) Domusvaer bv, Indijk 2,
Postbus 34, 8550 AA Woudsend, Holland. Tel:
+31 514 59 17 95. Fax: +31 514 5920 72.
Mob 06 53 49 90 97. e-mail:
domusvaer@domusvaer.nl



Contact in UK: Premier Yachts, Northney
Marina, Hayling Island, Hampshire PO11 ONH.
Tel: (01705) 465420. Fax: (01705) 462611.
Website: <http://www.premieryachts.com>

Exalto bow thruster had us out of our berth with no difficulty.

With 20 knots of breeze blowing out of a leaden sky across the IJsselmeer, we reached out of Enkhuizen under full sail at well over seven knots and it wasn't until we came onto a close reach that we needed to reduce sail. I was expecting her to be more tender than she was and, once we had rolled up the big yankee, she really got on with the job under marginally reduced main and full staysail. A splash or two of the IJsselmeer squirted through the scuppers from time to time.

Taking the yankee off her also lightened the helm which, although always bearing a little weight, provided plenty of feedback. Despite her bulkiness, she responded quickly, displayed a very acceptable turn of speed both up and downwind (we touched 8.6 knots on a reach) and on the few occasions when we could find some waves, she seemed to shoulder them aside and kept her decks dry.

The feeling of safety provided by the bulwarks while sailing was exceptional, although I would extend the stanchions and guardwires to improve protection right forward. With the bowsprit it is tricky to fit a conventional pulpit. One would also need to arrange some sort of cradling to help reach the outboard

end of the bowsprit in the event of having to tend to the yankee furling drum.

I was both surprised and impressed by Puffin's performance, even with the keel down. When we find the opportunity to sail her in open sea conditions we will report back again. It would also be interesting to compare her with a full, long-keeled version.

Conclusions

For some, Puffin's outboard profile might take some getting used to, although I must admit to finding it appealing and in proportion. Clients can specify a gaff rig which would complement her hull styling, but the cutter version is simpler and easier to use.

As a home for extended cruising I think the Puffin 50 is exceptional. She possesses remarkable volume and Olivier van Meer's experience of living aboard a boat shines through in both overall concept and detailed design. She is well built, her systems are simple and finish quality is good.

The fact that she also sails well must make her a worthy contender for anyone seriously considering a yacht for life offshore. □

