

Lost Horizon Discovered in the Caribbean

James Dobbs and Nicola Pears have spent the last 25+ years making the most of their 'Lost Horizon' in the Caribbean. In a succession of boats so named, they have chalked up an impressive record of winning races – not only at Antigua Sailing Week, but throughout all corners of the Caribbean. Indeed, so successful have their boats been that James and Nic have won the CSA Travellers Trophy so many times they have been ruled ineligible to win it again!

The pair divides their time between Europe, where they spend summers sailing the coasts from Spain to England and back again on their Rival 41, visiting friends and favourite haunts along the way, and Antigua which is their base in the Caribbean and home to their third *Lost Horizon* – the hot J122 liveaboard cruiser/racer.

James and Nic's sailing adventures could fill a book, each one creating another notch on the learning curve. But it is the people who have shared their journey that Nic recalls most fondly. "What I know most from racing is the endless stream of good people that have passed across our decks; how hard they have tried and how much they have done," she explains.

Nic's first experience racing was in 1986 on James' first *Lost Horizon*, the 41-foot Rival. "In those days James would invite friends from England to come and sail with him in Antigua Sailing Week. Mostly they were good sailors, but not all were necessarily experienced. I have glimpses of open mouths, incredulous 'oh's' of horror, of roaring and shouting and total bemusement. Afterwards, it was rum punch and sandwiches, laughter and relief, as everyone unwound themselves, the ropes, the boat and got down to the rest of life."

Having successfully raced the Rival for many years, James graduated to *Lost Horizon II*, the small, but incredibly fleet-footed, Olson 30. Nic was terrified of the almost toy-like lines and bits and pieces, but help was not far away. "I was very fortunate in having a wonderful teacher, Anders, a great Rasta friend from Antigua, who taught me everything I know about doing bow. He would talk me through the manoeuvres saying: 'Don't worry, no problem, take it easy', though when something unexpected happened, he would lapse into dialect staccato, leaving me far behind."

Anders eventually moved on to bigger and better things but made an opportune return years later when James commissioned the J122. The boat was mistakenly shipped to

Curacao which necessitated James and Nic making a 300-mile maiden voyage, all to windward, to St. Maarten for the Heineken Regatta. During the nightmare trip, the boat endured multiple gear failures. In St. Maarten, Anders reappeared and helped get the boat back into shape and gave invaluable instruction on asymmetrical spinnakers.

Another recurring crewmate was Dave Hanna, aka Kiwi Dave, a staunch supporter in the early days. Nic recalls "us both falling backwards in the cockpit when the spinnaker filled for the first time and we were not ready for the enormous acceleration." Although he, too, went on to other things, Dave "was always back, ready to share what he had learned and to give us a hand," she adds. He was such a loyal friend and crew mate that James "bequeathed" the Olson 30 to Dave when he retired her to move on to other things.

Nic recalls one trip on the Olson 30 when they set off with a small crew to Barbados (273 nautical miles to windward) when they gave some Guadeloupian fisherman quite a turn. As they flew round the northern end of Guadeloupe out into the Atlantic, some fisherman sitting in their gomier with engines roaring looked on with horrified and amazed expressions, thinking they were witnessing madness – and indeed they were. During the regatta in Barbados, the mast was irretrievably bent and the Olson had to hobble back to St. Maarten for a replacement, all on starboard tack as port might have proved fatal. Once James and Nic lived on the Olson for six weeks travelling from one regatta to another with no through hull fittings, no head, just a gas bottle to cook on and NO extras as weight was a dirty word.

In some regattas *Lost Horizon* has sailed with an average crew age of nearly 65. Their crew was known as the geriatrics with Hans Lammers being the youngster and Henry Pepper (now almost 90 years old and still racing!) the elder. Stories abound of the crew hauling Henry off the dance floor each evening and then catching him napping between races in the quarter berth.

Geoffrey Pidduck and Janie Easton were other regulars in earlier days. In one race from St. Barths, there was little wind and it poured for days on end. The enduring memory for Nic is "all of us sitting below in the harbour, wringing wet with the rain drumming down outside, passing a bottle of rum around."

When James had both the Rival and the Olson on the go, Nic was often the delivery crew in the Olson and enjoyed a wonderful array of companions. "Dana Nicholson was with me on a delivery to the Virgin Islands. I revelled in hours of endless talking and

companionship; her competence in handling the boat; her stories of her passage through the Pacific and her kindness whenever I was nervous or upset with things going wrong.” Other times Janie Easton was crew and made an indelible mark with her tales of Antigua in the old days, her skill at the helm and her laughter and companionship.

James was frequently known to say ‘chop chop’ to the crew when he was feeling impatient. Nic recalls that on one occasion someone decided to mimic him: “An over-enthusiastic crew member shouted ‘chop chop’ to the pit crew. The main halyard was not yet fast to the mainsail, causing it to shoot up and through the sheave and down inside the mast. I found myself wobbling at the top of the mast trying to drop a fishing weight and messenger down the mast to retrieve the halyard while watching the rest of the racing fleet going out to the start. Fortunately, it was one of those regattas with several false starts so that we were able to make it out in time.”

Other crew from Antigua, like Bruce Harris, saved the day on more than one occasion. One year the boat was holed in the BVI regatta and limped straight into the slings, Nic recalls. There was hardly anyone about in the yard. “Bruce tactfully took the tools from the nervous yard manager and worked through the night. *Lost Horizon II* was whole and painted and ready to go by morning!”

It is not only crew members that have made racing so special for James and Nic. “I remember the hospitality the different islands gave us such as the nursery we slept in on St. Thomas. By far the most wonderful of all was a magnificent villa on top of a mountain in St. Croix lent to us by Doug Allen, then commodore of the St. Croix Yacht Club.”

James also had sponsorship from Jolly Harbour Marina via the then manager, Karl Belizaire, who sailed extensively with them. “I will never forget the thump of his feet as he rushed up to the foredeck to unmuddle some awful mess that I had made. His strength and skill were wonderful,” Nic says.

With all their crew and companions over the years, Nic feels her role has been “to try and nurture the best; to knit and heal both limbs and bruised egos, furious resentments, difficult sensibilities, jealousies and feuds; and to enjoy what everyone has to offer.” That is not an easy task amidst the high emotions of racing: the hot desire to win and to do well but sometimes messing things up and having to swallow bitter disappointments.

Well known for his generosity, James has given many trophies and prizes, including Rolex watches and exotic trips to his many loyal crew and friends over the years. But Nic brushes that aside. Far more important, she says is "the generosity of a good crew that forgives and forgets, that makes the most of what there is and puts the boat first and foremost. It is this that makes racing worth it in the end - the people that take part."

By Patricia Knox