

Just a Minahouët

Nic Compton is bowled over by the craftsmanship and excellent sailing he encountered aboard the self-build Minahouët off St Malo

We all know you can have just as much fun on a small boat as a big one – there's even a well-worn saying to prove the point: 'the amount of fun you have on a boat is in inverse proportion to its size'.

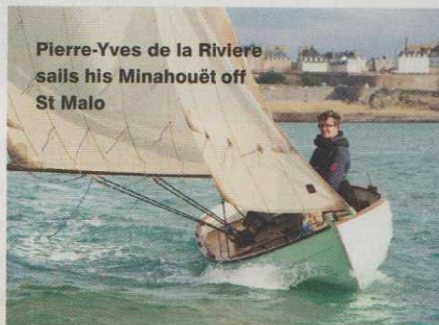
Yet I have to admit that when I headed out to Brittany to try out three boats by popular French designer François Vivier, it was the slightly bigger designs I was excited about sailing. There was the 22ft Stir Ven, an open day boat which I'd seen braving some serious weather off the south coast of Sweden a few years before, and the 19ft Beniguet, a pocket cruiser which looked ideal for some pared-down coastal cruising, or gunkholing, as the Americans call it.

And then there was the 15ft Minahouët, a seemingly basic sail and oar dinghy which I'd asked to see just to complete the range. The boat looked nice enough in the pictures, but my heart wasn't exactly pounding to get out on her. All that

Stain rather than varnish and plenty of paint makes *Pianissimo* look fairly workmanlike

was to change during a two-hour sail on a gusty day off St Malo.

It started predictably enough on the slipway at the Anse des Sablons marina near the historic old town. That's where I met the boat's builder Pierre-Yves de la Riviere, founder of the Grand-Largue boatyard at nearby St Briac. The bespectacled Frenchman had brought *Pianissimo* on a trailer and was uncovering her and preparing to launch. This version of the design was rather understated, with a good deal of paint and the brightwork finished with oil stain rather than varnish (apart from the spars). It all looked very workmanlike and I tried to look suitably impressed.



Pierre-Yves de la Riviere sails his Minahouët off St Malo

Things really started to get interesting once Pierre-Yves had launched the boat and was setting her up ready to sail. Firstly, there was the ingenious centreboard arrangement. The centreboard itself is fitted with a built-in pin which slides down matching slots inside the case so that, once lowered, it can pivot like a conventional centerboard, or it can be raised and removed entirely, like a daggerboard – the idea being that you have the convenience of a centreboard with the accessibility of a daggerboard.

Next I noticed the boat had two mast steps, so it can be rigged either as a sloop with the mast set in the aft position, or cat-rigged with the mast in the forward position. With two or more people in the boat, the sloop option is probably more efficient, while the cat rig is easier for single-handed sailing. Either way, as the boat is lug-rigged, there's no need for stays, so rigging is simple and fast.

Another interesting detail was the way the bowsprit locked into place between





Centreboard/daggerboard and tiller are held in place by simple notches and pins

the heel and stemhead fittings, with just a simple lashing to hold it in place. Likewise the tiller, which had a lug inside the slot which locked into a notch in the rudder head as the tiller was lowered into place, doing away with the need for a pin.

It's pretty basic stuff, but there was an over-riding purpose to it all, a worthy masterplan to this slightly fetishistic attention to detail: to get people on the water as quickly and easily as possible.

"The great advantage of the Minahouët is the ease of launching," says Pierre-Yves. "You can do it on your own, with the minimum amount of impediment. So if it's a nice day and you've got a couple of hours to spare, you can put the boat in the water on your own – and baff, off you go, because it's really very easy."

It's an attitude that goes to the heart of the design and which informed every step of its development. Pierre-Yves and François had been working together for a number of years – mainly building the 22ft Stir Ven and the 11ft 10in pram dinghy Laïta – when they decided the next addition to the range should be a 'voile-aviron' (sail/oar) boat. François had



Easy rigging and launching by one person was a prerequisite when the Minahouët was originally being designed

already designed several boats of this type, such as the Aber and the Ilur, so knew what the challenge was.

"I tried to make a design which was as balanced as possible," he says. "Stable enough for family sailing, but also light and narrow enough to be enjoyable to row."

Part of the plan was to make the boat accessible to as many amateur builders as possible in the form of digital cutting files or a kit, so to this end the components were designed to be cut out by a CNC cutter. The approach marked a significant shift from the boatbuilding methods the pair had used up until then.

"It was first time we really explored potential of CNC cutting and of modern plywood construction," says Pierre-Yves.

"All the parts lock together. The longitudinal pieces lock into the transverse parts; you simply click them into place and everything falls into place naturally. When you build a boat manually, there's always the risk of

making mistakes when you line up the planks and the bulkheads can move. But with a computer design, there's no possibility of error."

Or as the sales literature puts it: 'Tradition does not exclude modernism... Moulds which slot together means you can put together a building jig of great accuracy from day one. The plywood parts [of the kit] come cut to size and don't require any adjustment: so it's goodbye to the usual doubts and agonizing about lining up and fairing... Plywood gives the boat longevity and low maintenance, while the solid timber trim disguises the use of modern materials and building techniques.'

The plan seems to have worked and, since the Minahouët was launched in 2002, about 30 of the 40 boats launched were built by amateurs (mostly from kits), while the rest were built by Grand-Largue.

Out on the bay off St Malo, a brisk offshore wind was ruffling the surface of the sea, and ominous black clouds were piled up on the horizon. Alone on the boat, while I took photos, Pierre-Yves shot across the bay, the very picture of insouciance.

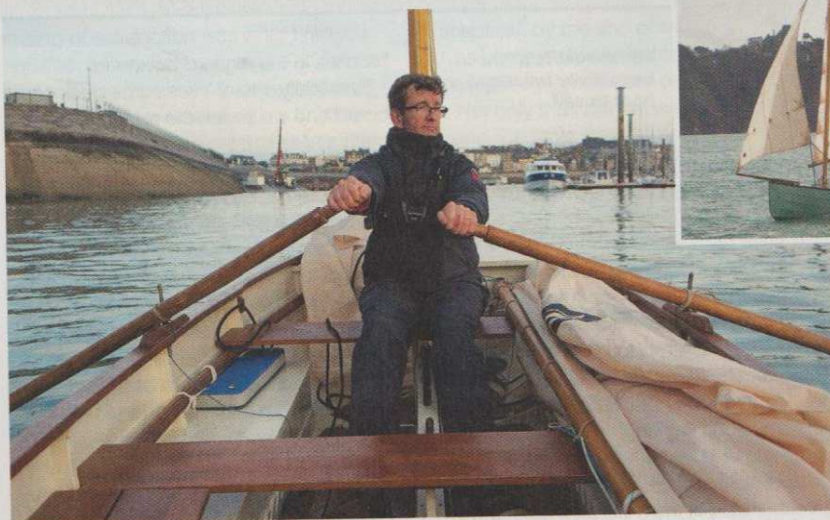
As I clicked away happily, the wind continued to build, and

after a couple of close calls Pierre-Yves lowered the mainsail and put a reef in. With the sail area reduced, the boat settled down and became more manageable.

After a little while, we swapped over and I tried rowing the boat with the sails lowered. The owner of *Pianissimo* had opted for a thole pin and grommet arrangement instead of rowlocks, which took a bit of getting used to. I'm not convinced there's any real advantage to



Sloop rig setup. Cat rig places mast even further forward



Minahouët was designed from the outset to be easily rowed

photos by Nic Compton



Simple but very effective, the Minahouët is almost guaranteed to put a smile on your face

this set up, though it does look good and, providing you row against the grommet rather than the pin, the oar will rest alongside the boat if you let it go.

More to my liking were the adjustable footbraces fitted on either side of the centreboard case to give you something to push against while rowing.

Once under way, I made good progress rowing against wind and tide and managed to row a fair distance back up the bay towards St Malo. I'm extremely spoilt by having my Western Skiff to row, which is considerably lighter than the Minahouët and therefore easier to row. However, even I had to admit that, in the windy conditions off St Malo that day, the Minahouët carried her way better than my skiff would have. I could quite imagine rowing her several miles up an estuary or into harbour – although sailing probably is her best mode of propulsion.



Minahouët is a beautifully balanced boat to sail

hatches in the forward bulkhead.

Eventually, Pierre-Yves came back on board and we shook the reef out of the main and raised the sails again. With the wind abating slightly, we eased onto a reach and headed towards the offlying islands of Le Petit Bé and Le Grand Bé, I felt immediately at ease with the boat, as if I'd been sailing her all my life. There was nothing unexpected, nothing to worry about; everything was where it should be.

Her performance under sail was better than I expected: she was faster and pointed higher than I'd imagined – and perhaps that was why I felt so relaxed on board. From the moment we set off, she performed impeccably and made me feel I was doing a good job; I didn't need to squeeze that bit of extra speed, to worry

When not in use, the oars stow on the side benches, which have been cunningly made lower than the thwarts, to create a gap between the two for exactly that purpose. The boxed-in side benches also provide necessary buoyancy in case of capsize, along with further buoyancy compartments in the bow and stern.

Stowage is provided under the foredeck, on either side of the mast step box, and is accessed through a pair of circular

MINAHOUËT SPEC

■ LOA	4.68m	15ft 4in
■ Beam	1.55m	5ft 1in
■ Draught	0.15m/1m	6in/3ft 3in
■ Weight	250kg	550lb
■ Sail area	12.5m ²	135ft ²
■ Max outboard size		4hp
■ Kit building time		450 hours



A couple of lashings are all that's required to hold the sprit in place



The Minahouët is thoughtfully crafted in every detail



You'll get a respectable turn of speed under full sail

about the set of the sail, or try to point that little bit higher – she did it all herself without being asked. It helped that we were going nowhere in particular and that it was a perfect autumn day and the coast was aglow with late afternoon sun – what was not to like?

I came ashore feeling rather pleased with myself. The boat had handled well, under both sail and oar, and I felt I'd got her number. It was only later I realised this feeling of satisfaction was what François and Pierre-Yves were aiming to achieve all along. It was thanks to their deceptively simple design, executed with admirable modesty, and a whole host of clever little details that I was able to jump in the boat and sail her with such ease. In fact, my feeling of well-being was a direct result of their hard work!

There was one detail which looked like it might cause a minor problem while we were taking the boat out of the water. Unlike the Stir Ven, which has a rounded bow which lifts itself onto the trailer with ease, the Minahouët has an upright stem

which means you would have to lift it manually to get it onto a normal trailer.

The solution turned out to be a break-back trailer, which hinges in the middle until the roller is under the stem and then straightened and locked into position before winching the boat the rest of the way up. Once on the trailer, there's a convenient slot cut into the stem to lash the boat in place. Job done.

And so, having started feeling decidedly sceptical, by the end of two hours' sailing I was completely converted to this deceptively simple little boat.

Not only that, but I was pretty well convinced this was the boat everyone should own. Park it in your drive and the next sunny day, "baff, off you go..."

■ The Minahouët is available as a set of building plans from François Vivier (€240, www.vivierboats.com), as a kit boat from Grand Lague (from €3,060, www.grand-lague.fr), or as a finished boat through UK agents Go Marine (£15,840, www.gomarine.co.uk)

About the builder



Pierre-Yves de la Riviere is an unlikely boatbuilder. His father worked in real estate and none of his family were sailors. After school,

Pierre-Yves studied at business school and got a job working for an insurance company. But the seed of curiosity had been sown by boating magazines his father bought out of a general interest in maritime culture. After a few months working at the insurance company – and despite having by then got married and had a first child – he decided he had to get out and do something he was passionate about, so enrolled on the boatbuilding course at the Ateliers de L'Enfer in Douarnenez.

While there he got in touch with François Vivier, who'd established a reputation as France's leading designer of traditional boats with a string of successful designs. A couple of years earlier, Vivier had won a competition to design 'un bateau pour aller aux îles' ('a boat to go to the islands') with his 22ft Stir Ven dayboat. Although a model of the boat had been made, no-one had yet built the real thing. Pierre-Yves immediately spotted an opportunity to kickstart his business by building a boat with excellent pedigree and an existing media profile.

He built the first Stir Ven in 1999 and exhibited her at the Paris Boat Show that year. It was, in effect, his boatbuilding apprenticeship, and he admits the standard was "good amateur construction" rather than professional. But it was good enough for Vivier to order one for himself – Pierre-Yves's first commission. And so Pierre-Yves's boatbuilding business Grand-Lague ('broach reach') was born.

The Stir Ven was just the start of things. At that time, Vivier's designs were built by a number of different yards, but Grand-Lague would soon become the yard to go to for a Vivier boat. The Stir Ven was followed by the Laïta (an 11ft 10in pram dinghy), and then in 2002 came the 15ft 'voile aviron' (sail/oar) dinghy Minahouët, the first Vivier boat designed specifically for CNC cutting.

Once Pierre-Yves had committed to buying an expensive CNC cutter, there was no going back.

Since then, the company has gone from strength to strength, building about 20 Stir Vens, a dozen or so Minahouëts and a similar number of Béniguet, as well as dozens of kits.

'Performance under sail was better than I expected: she was faster and pointed higher'

Building a Minahouët from a kit



1 A flat-pack boat. The kit arrives with every single part pre-cut.



2 The first step is to set up the jig including bulkheads and frames, which slots together and ensures everything is correctly lined up.



3 The centreboard case is also assembled and fitted at this point. The inside surfaces are sealed with epoxy, as they'll be difficult to access once they're in place. Note the slots for the centreboard pivot.



4 The inner stem is made from several layers of ply epoxied together and bevelled to take the hood ends. No need for a complicated laminating jig.



5 Once complete and cured the inner stem is epoxied to the forward bulkhead, the jig holding everything correctly in line.



6 The bottom panel - already epoxy coated on the inside, is held in place while the epoxy cures using clamps and shores wedged against the ceiling.

Step by step



7 The first strake is attached. Planks come in two parts with pre-cut finger scarfs which are glued together before fitting. Note the lower land has been bevelled to receive the next plank.



8 The transom, frames and bulkheads are pre-cut to receive each plank. Note how the aft bulkhead is attached to the jig, to hold it square.



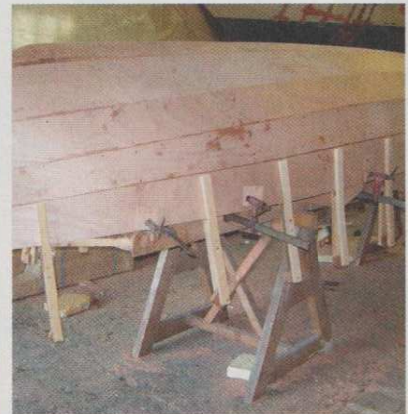
9 Temporary screws with wooden and metal washers hold the strakes in place while the glue is drying. They'll be removed once the glue has cured, and the holes sealed with epoxy.



10 With three strakes fitted, the Minahouët begins to take shape. The hood end screws can be removed and the holes filled with epoxy, or they can be recessed and filled over.



11 Rather than fit a backing block inside the bulwarks, this builder has screwed a temporary block on the transom to hold the sheerstrake in place. An epoxy fillet was applied inside later.



12 Traditional wooden clamps were used to hold the sheerstrake in place on this Minahouët – simple, effective, and cheaper than metal clamps.



13 This builder has strengthened the bottom panel and bottom strakes by sheathing them with fibreglass and epoxy before applying the upper strakes.



14 The outer stem is laminated from hardwood supplied with the kit, using the inner stem as a jig.



15 The outer stem is glued and screwed to the hull, sealing the ends of the planks and making an extremely strong collision barrier!



16 This skeg is made from a single piece of hardwood, glued and then screwed through from the inside of the hull. There is also an option to have a laminated skeg. No outer keel is fitted.



17 Once assembled, the whole hull is sanded down and sealed with epoxy. Note small slot in the stem which is used to lash the boat to the trailer.



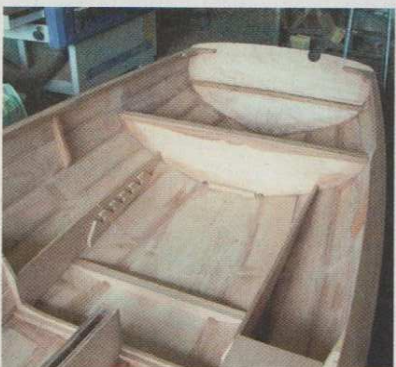
18 Undercoated and ready for a top coat of paint. The underwater shape reveals a reasonably fine forefoot, promising good upwind performance.



19 Planking complete, the hull can be detached from the jig and turned over to reveal the developing boat.



20 The shearstrakes of this boat have been cleverly masked off to prevent them being painted over. Once the lower strakes are painted, the covering was removed and the shearstrake varnished.



21 The fitting out work begins – often the most time-consuming part of the entire build. Here, the slots for the aft foot brace have been fitted, along with some decorative trim on the aft thwart...



22 The side benches double up as buoyancy aids, with the slots for the forward foot braces on either side (the slots haven't been fitted to the centreboard case yet).



23 The forward deck is fitted, with the mast partner in place. The box for the forward mast step (for the cat rig) passes through the forward compartment, accessed through the round hatches.



24 With the fitting out complete, the laborious work of sanding and painting begins.



25 Et voila! The hard work pays off as painting is completed and the sheerstrake receives coats of varnish.



26 This is the deluxe version fitted with a veneered deck, varnished Columbia pine floor boards and a clear finish to the interior woodwork.