

Building a Béniguet

Nic Compton is introduced to the Béniguet, a sensible trailer-sailer that can be built from a kit – and then he shows how she's constructed

Everyone, it seems, loves a trailer-sailer. With mooring costs on the increase and disposable income on the decrease (according to the Office of National Statistics), it makes a lot of sense to build or buy a boat you can pop on a trailer and 'moor up' on your driveway.

The annual cost of mooring my little 25ft wooden sloop at Brighton marina five years ago was upwards of £2,500 per year, and you have to do a lot of sailing to justify that expenditure. We didn't, and eventually sold the boat rather than fork out more money.

All of which explains why the market for pocket cruising boats under 20ft – particularly those you can build at home

– is so busy. There's everything from William Garden's Eel and Iain Oughtred's Wee Tern, both pretty little double-enders, to Phil Bolger's Chebacco and the Milford 20, both based on sharpie lines. There's the very traditional-looking Design 074 from George Whisstock and, at the more modern end, the Cape Cutter 19, with its wide transom and beamy, powerful hull – almost a miniature Open 60 in disguise. All these designs are exercises in compromise; what you gain in speed, you lose in accommodation, trailability or aesthetics... and so on.

And then there's the Béniguet. She's probably not the fastest or the roomiest or even the prettiest of the bunch, but she is one of the most well thought through and cleverest pocket cruisers on the market

– like the sensible boyfriend or girlfriend you end up marrying after you've been through a string of glamorous but ultimately unsuitable partners with more attitude than sense. Or, as the editor of one eminent boating magazine put it: she just "looks so right".

That's no accident. The design evolved from a long-standing relationship between designer François Vivier and boatbuilder Pierre-Yves de la Riviere. After working on commercial shipping for half a lifetime, Vivier helped launch the French magazine *Chasse-Marée* in the mid-1980s and started designing traditionally inspired small boats soon after. His partnership with de la Riviere began in 1997 and eventually developed into a line of professionally built boats and kits for amateur construction.

The inspiration for the Béniguet came from the realisation that, while many clients loved the performance of Vivier and de la Riviere's first collaboration, the 22ft *Stir Ven*, they found the boat quite hard work to sail – or "très physique", ie very physical, to use the French term – and there's no doubt the accommodation space on board was limited by her shallow, flat hull sections. What was needed, says de la Riviere, was a boat that was "smaller but more liveable, more stable and less physical".

By the time he produced the Béniguet in 2006, Vivier had 20 years' experience in small boat design under his belt, experience which is evident in myriad ways. Firstly there's the aesthetic element: drawing a boat with a genuinely pretty



ABOVE Aricie's owner Robert Crawshaw takes the helm sailing off one of the dozens of small islands off St Malo
RIGHT Builder Pierre-Yves de la Riviere holds the jib sheet

shape that doesn't end up looking like a large yacht that's just been squished lengthwise is the main challenge with this type of boat. The key is creating the right cabin shape, with just the right amount of camber and sweep, which marries perfectly with the hull, not just from the side but from every angle. This might sound obvious, but it's much harder to achieve on this size boat, as testified by the numerous pocket

cruisers which end up with chicken coops on them instead of cabins.

With the Béniguet, Vivier has got it just right. The spoon bow and understated sheer make for a pretty hull shape, while the cabin is substantial without looking excessive. This is partly because of the clever use of camber but also subtle touches, such as the way the coamings are incorporated into the cabin sides

Photos: Nic Compton



fore and aft, all the better to draw your eye down the boat's sheer.

Then there are the practical details that speak of someone who has been here before and has already anticipated most of the problems. An obvious example of this is the shortened keel, which runs for three-quarters the length of the hull before rising up to the outboard well. It seems slightly counter-intuitive, but it makes launching the boat much easier (with rudder and outboard raised, there's almost no draught right aft) without seeming to have any negative effect on the boat's performance. Likewise the centreboard has been positioned far enough aft to clear the cabin – the case protrudes just enough to create a handy ledge for a step – without producing any noticeable lee helm.

There are also telling smaller details, such as the design of the outboard well, which incorporates a 'wet' area on either side, where the outboard can be laid when under way. Alternatively, the outboard can be stored in one of the cockpit lockers – placing the weight where it should be: as near the middle of the boat as possible – and the 'wet' area can be used for stowing fishing and diving gear.

Another important development in the boat's design was the move towards digital cutting (ie

CNC), which Vivier had made three years earlier with the design of the Minahouet, his first design fully optimized for CNC (see PBO, October 2018). From the outset, the Béniguet was conceived as a kit, either for amateur or professional assembly, and has all the advantages of a modern plywood construction. Most of the boat is assembled from interlocking plywood components, held together with epoxy and sheathed with epoxy-glassfibre. Even the keel is made from a single length of plywood, reinforced with 15mm of laminated solid timber, encapsulated in

'This is a stable, forgiving boat that I can sail single-handed'

while using solid timber for decorative or non-structural parts.

It's a quantum shift from using CNC simply to cut the component parts of a traditionally designed boat, with all the inherent limitations of traditional boatbuilding. The benefit for the professional boatbuilder is speed of construction, while for the amateur builder the main advantages are ease of construction and improved accuracy.

"This is the wise man's boat," says Robert Crawshaw, the British former university lecturer who has agreed to take

me out on the Béniguet he keeps on a mooring near the Breton port of St Malo. And he should know. Before buying *Aricie*, he owned two Stir Vens, the first of which he bought new from Pierre-Yves in 1999, and the second which was built as a replacement when the first was lost in a storm in 2003. After sailing both boats around the north coast of Brittany for 14 years, he eventually swapped his Stir Ven for a second-hand Béniguet in 2013.

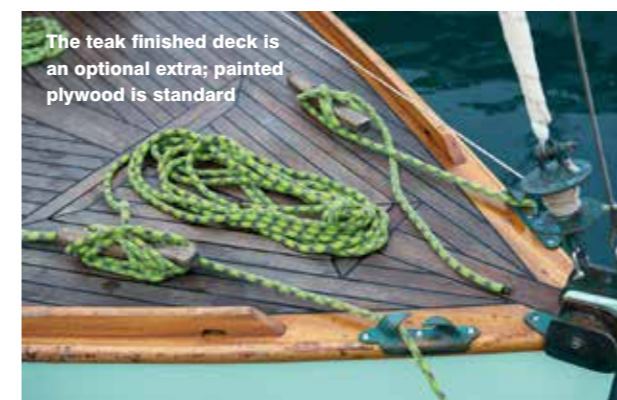
"This is a much more stable, forgiving boat," he says, "that I can sail single-handed if necessary. The centerboard arrangement on the Stir Ven means you have a crew on board; you can't helm and adjust the centreboard at the same time." Other considerations that persuaded him to swap were the internal outboard well (the Stir Ven has a bracket on the transom),

higher freeboard, larger cabin, self-draining cockpit and easier manoeuvrability. Since he bought *Aricie*, Robert has mainly cruised the coast around St Malo and the neighbouring Baie de St Briac. On one hair-raising outing, he and his partner Chris got caught out in a storm off the infamous Cape Fréhel but were able to surf the waves and take shelter in a shallow inlet thanks to the boat's shallow draught. There were no such dramas on the day we took her out for a run off St Malo. Indeed, the boat was simplicity itself to sail. Up went the gaff mainsail, down went the centreboard, out went the jib, and we were off. There was some slight confusion about which jib was fitted and we ended up with the smaller one by mistake, but as the wind soon gusted up to Force 4, that was probably just as well.

The Béniguet is designed for comfort rather than speed, but she's no slouch either



The heavily cambered coachroof gives a surprising sense of space down below, with two short bunks forward



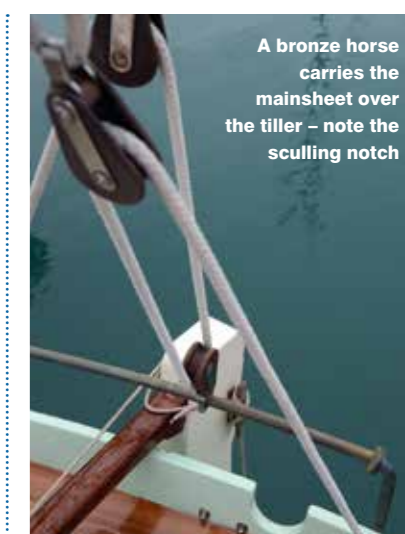
The teak finished deck is an optional extra; painted plywood is standard



Traditional bronze fittings give *Aricie* a gnarly traditional feel



Things got interesting when the photographer clambered onto the foredeck...



A bronze horse carries the mainsheet over the tiller – note the sculling notch



The height of the cabin trunk is disguised by carrying the sides into the fore and aft coamings

The Bay of St Malo was a revelation to me, with its large protected sailing waters surrounded by a maze of islands – some of which are potentially dangerous but also offer endless opportunities for day trips and overnight excursions. It's not hard to imagine having a boat here and spending all your spare time exploring every little islet and inlet – and why wouldn't you?

It's certainly an ideal cruising ground for a boat such as *Aricie* and, with a freshening offshore breeze blowing the cobwebs away, we were soon reaching off St Briac towards the offlying islands. The conditions were good (apart from the lack of sunshine) and *Aricie* was clearly in her element. There were a few small things, such as the jib sheets catching on the halyard cleats (Robert usually wraps the cleats with a cloth to prevent this happening, but I'd removed it for the sake of the photos). At one point we spotted a line trailing behind the boat and it took us several minutes to work out it was the mainsail sheet which had slipped out through the outboard aperture – something to look out for before starting the outboard.

As previously noted, all pocket cruisers are compromises – probably more so than most other types of boats, given how much they are trying to pack in – and there's no doubt that the *Béniguët* is a slower boat than the *Stir Ven*, as I was to discover the following day. For a start, the *Béniguët* is 90cm (3ft) shorter; she's also 18cm (7in) deeper and has a much more fulsome hull than her racier cousin. That said, *Aricie* trucked along quite happily, something that was more evident when I was photographing her from the camera boat than when I was actually on board. With 150kg (330lb) of ballast, she's steady but not boring – as I discovered when I climbed onto the foredeck on the leeward side in the middle of a gust. In fact, she



Pierre-Yves looks suitably proud of the cunning cockpit grating-turned-table

behaved every bit like the sensible, trustworthy life partner I took her to be.

Below decks, you get the benefit of that fuller hull shape and strongly cambered coachroof, with ample sitting headroom for a 6ft tall person (ie me!). The space has been well used, with a single berth/stowage area forward, including a heads

under the middle section, and two berths amidships that stretch back under the cockpit seats. In fact, two

smallish children could easily fit in the forward berth, making the boat well suited to a family with young children. And when the kids are older... well, you can start thinking about a cockpit tent, or else buy a bigger boat!

Another ingenious touch is the cockpit grating which, by lifting a section and unfolding the legs, can double up as a cockpit table. Clever stuff!

Despite his evident love for *Aricie*, I couldn't help feeling Robert was still holding a candle for his old boat (the glamorous ex). The next day I found out why, as we set off for a daysail on a pair of *Stir Vens*, one of which was Robert's old

boat, *Senta*. *Senta* was noticeably faster and more responsive than the *Béniguët* even in the lighter conditions that prevailed. I could see why Robert might be nostalgic for this – until I had to lift the centerboard which, at nearly 180kg (400lb), is heavier than all the *Béniguët's* ballast put together. This was definitely far more 'physique' than the *Béniguët* and would have been a lot more challenging in the blustery weather we had encountered the day before. In a moment, I understood Robert's choice.

There's no doubt that the *Béniguët* is a well thought through little pocket cruiser well suited to either coastal cruising for one or two, or day sailing with a small family. Thanks to Vivier's sophisticated CAD kit design, she's not overly difficult to build and should be manageable by anyone with moderate woodworking skills and a good dose of common sense. At sea, she probably won't amaze you with her speed, but she will certainly look after you and see you safely home – and all the while looking "so right".

- The *Béniguët* is available as plans and CNC cutting files from the designer (vivierboats.com), a part-kit from Jordan Boats (jordanboats.co.uk) and a finished boat from Pierre-Yves (grand-largue.fr).
- To read our test of François Vivier's *Stir Ven* design see PBO July 2019.



The old town of St Malo provides an idyllic backdrop for a very pretty boat

'The Béniguët is a well thought through little pocket cruiser'