

Miss Cindy's Transcontinental Adventure

Story by Tony Bigras

The origins of this adventure are lost in antiquity. The notion was well formed by the millennium and was reinforced by visits to a Nicaraguan restaurant in Nanaimo, B.C. The restaurant had a big relief map on the wall and between courses I would often wander over to get a feel for the terrain between San Juan Del Sur, the big lake, and down the river to the Caribbean. I liked the idea of an alternative to the Panama Canal.

By the winter of 2007 I had made plans to build a boat to take through the lake and river. The drawing board had seen lots of different ideas float across it. Eventually they fell off the edge and it came down to two possible designs. The Ultra Tri was a very small wave-piercing power boat. A single-cylinder air cooled diesel gave the 23-foot boat about 150 MPG at six knots. The Micro Cruising Cat was the other vessel still on the board. Either way I wanted a small project that could be built over the summer. It should be of modest cost, a good sea boat, and able to travel on the lake and river in Nicaragua.

In the summer of 2007 we had taken the big trawler cat Osram VIII up to the Queen Charlotte Islands; 1700 miles with lots of neat stuff and the best weather on the north coast in 20 years. The trawler cat, while a nice warm cozy cruiser with her fireplace, marble floor and soaker tub, is like a big reliable bus. *Rummm rummm rummm*, then you arrive on time where you planned.

It was a very nice cruise but I missed the serendipity of sailing. Maybe the wind drops and you fish for a while or the breeze changes and your next anchorage does too. I wanted another sailboat.

I built a two-foot-long free sailing model to confirm the stitch and glue panel layout. When I launched it from my marina dock in light airs I had to hurry into my dingy to row and catch it before it hit Newcastle Island. It was an excellent performer. I watched it in waves, checked the stability and balance, observed spray and the interaction of the waves between hulls. The first day I took the model out sailing I knew it was a very sweet boat and that she had no vices. Other people really liked her too. I received an offer to buy the model before I got back to my marina.

Finally the decision to build was made and I went and picked up 18 sheets of 1/4" okoume ply from Eric at Edensaw in Port Townsend. I had arranged to build the boat in a friend's two car garage. He had just built a lightweight fly fishing skiff in there so I knew the garage liked to have boats built in it.

Construction started on May 6, 2008. I took a few weeks off in June to visit my brother in Europe. Once the hulls were put together, more space was needed so the construction site changed to a backyard next to a 28-foot galleon. Construction was finished in early September with about 12 weeks of actual building time including the masts, spars and sails.

Miss Cindy is a conventional bridge-deck cruising catamaran with a lateral schooner rig. She carries 200 sq ft in her twin standing lugsails which is a fair bit for a cruising boat of her size. The boom roller furling was inspired by Matt Layden's Paradox. In my version the top boom is not parallel and the sail has a big roach with battens that make her look like a junk from a distance. The furling and boom support mechanisms are quite different from those on Paradox. She has shallow vortex-generator type keels with stainless steel shoes. Weight with her basic bolted on equipment aboard is about 550 pounds. Usual cruising displacement is 900 to 1100 pounds.

The window design has attracted a few comments. The bubbles are traditional oculi for warning off trouble. Together with the curved windows they form a ravens eye and beak in the style of Haida art.

After sea trials I made a change to the keels to add a little more forefoot and rocker. This was to increase weather helm while also providing more beaching protection to the hull. Then we headed down the road on our cruise. I had originally planned on a small car and trailer but a big Chevy wagon appeared at the right time and price so I decided to cartop her.

Four days later she was carried by hand over the seawall onto the beach in San Felipe Mexico, and we set sail. In October the winds are usually light and mostly from the north. We had three such days and *Miss Cindy* and I got to know each other. She has very good natural self-steering in these conditions. She typically runs or broad reaches at about 1/2 the wind speed in breezes to 10 knots. The aft boom-end



Length overall 16' 3"
 Beam 8' 5"
 Draft rudders down 21"
 Draft to keels 14"
 Sail area 200 sq ft.
 Masthead height 17' 0"
 Rig: Biplane standing lug with large roach and full length battens
 Roller reefing around boom.
 Engine: Yanmaha 2 hp 2 cycle outboard
 Weight rigged 500 pounds
 Design displacement 1000 pounds
 Typical sailing weight 900 - 1100 pounds



Photo by John O'Neill

hardware was clearly too light and I replaced them with some 1/4 " aluminum plate at our first stop.

We had our first heavy weather about four days out when a Santa Ana hit from the north with winds of 35 to 40 knots. I had a few concerns—shoals in the channel ahead, would the wind build, were the masts strong enough? *Miss Cindy* didn't seem to have any concerns as we romped along in six foot waves with about 40 square feet of sail. After a couple hours we tucked in behind Isla Encantada and anchored over a rocky bottom a couple of boat lengths from shore. It was an interesting afternoon watching the wind and waves. We had a tiring night on anchor-watch as the tide moved thru a 14-foot range. We were glad to scamper out of there at first light into eight-foot seas and 30-knot winds. The shoal ahead turned out to not exist, and we anchored in wonderful Gonzaga Bay mid morning. While there, I made a change to increase the diameter of the roller furling drums as it had been difficult reefing in the strong winds.

In those early days I was still learning how to best sail *Miss Cindy*. At that time going to windward I was pinching her, tacking thru 90 degrees. Later on when in smooth water I would foot off for better speed to windward, sailing at around 100 degrees. At sea in big waves, I would sail to weather tacking between 120 degrees. While these are not stellar numbers, she was able to make to windward well in winds up to 35 knots. The biggest shortfall cruising upwind was the lack of a self-steering wind vane. Such a vane would have provided better performance than the sail-balance and bungee-cord techniques used, while allowing much more relaxation by the crew.

I considered daggerboards early in the design but decided on the shallow fixed keels. These are not as good to weather, but add to her excellent directional stability, and are perhaps a better choice for beaching and bumping into things.

We continued to have fair winds on our sojourn down the Sea of Cortez. There was some wonderful night-sailing with gurgling wakes, phosphorescence, zillions of stars, and lots of sea life. Santa Ana had the courtesy to leave us alone until after we had sailed into Aqua Verde.

It blew for a day or two there then dropped a bit so we headed out on the 18 mile hop to El Gato. The breeze was only 20 knots when we left but it freshened along the way. It was a rambunctious run in large seas with 25-30 knots and the skipper reluctant to reef. We carried full sail and surfed and surfed and surfed. Even in those conditions it was often practical to leave the helm loose to step below for brief intervals for a position check or grab some chow. *Miss Cindy* was well behaved, no fussiness when surfing at eight or nine knots. On the bigger waves or with the bigger gusts she was a bit more demanding. Our top GPS speed on that run was a bit over 13 knots. Sometimes the helm was quite heavy or sometimes quite light depending on how we sat on the wave and if we were surfing.

As we continued south the Santa Ana winds had little force left so we enjoyed classic Sea of Cortez light air. Sweet, sweet days. There were occasional morning blows and we managed to break a top boom. It had broken in fairly heavy beam-reaching conditions. *Miss Cindy* handled those conditions well with only some modest under-bridge pounding when a wave would break passing between the hulls. We

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had some temporary window sash boom replacements by La Paz and were ready for our first long passage. We had done some 80 mile overnights usually staying within 10 miles of shore. The passage to Mazatlan on the mainland would be about 200 miles. We would leave with a decent forecast but the weather would be free to change its mind once we were offshore.

This passage was the most challenging of the trip up till then. Mid crossing we ended up in 20 to 25 knots close reaching conditions. Because of the large waves and inexperience with the boat, there was a period of a day or so when I could not get her to self steer on the desired course. The boat was pretty wet with heavy spray from the waves hitting the windward hull. There was lots of sunshine so the spray dried to thick salt layers on the solar panels. I spent a couple of brief periods on the sea anchor napping. After making our easting I turned *Miss Cindy* southwards and we were able to get the self steering working pretty well. Our arrival in Mazatlan late at night was full of drama. We slept well at anchor in the old harbour after a tot of rum.

My visiting crew brought replacements for the top booms and the two of us sailed the 100-mile passage to Isla Isabella. *Miss Cindy* was well over design displacement but she performed well in the moderate conditions. I had replaced the 30-lb thrust electric motor with a 2 HP gas job and we motored about 30 miles in the light air. The electric had been okay for harbour work but the range was only a couple of miles and competed with the computer, VHF radio and sounder for juice. At Tiburoneros Cove *Miss Cindy* made her first visit to the beach since launching at San Felipe.

From Puerto Vallarta we sailed solo again on down the coast. We waited 10 days in Huatulco for a weather window for crossing the Gulf of Tehuantepec. It was the worst time of the year for gales as the reinforced trades from the Caribbean push thru the low gap. We had a four-day window starting in a couple of days but we left a day early to place ourselves perhaps 30 miles closer. In moderate conditions one of the rear boom end pins fell out due to poor bonding with the smooth stainless steel. That was jury rigged just as we got hit by a light gale that afternoon. The wind shifted towards the shore so we moved out to anchor in deeper water to stay away from the shore break. There was a current of about a knot flowing against the wind, and because of *Miss Cindy's* directional stability we ended up stern-to towards some steep four to five-foot waves. It was not comfortable. I eventually moved the anchor line to the stern and she then rode nicely into the wind and waves.

For 250 miles around the tempestuous bay, we sailed on the land and sea breezes. If there was no wind we motored or anchored. We continued on sailing, keeping a few miles offshore in Guatemala then anchoring for the night. At one point against 25 knots of headwind with the current in our fa-

vous, we just put out the sea anchor to let it pull us around the headland thru the overfalls while having lunch and catching a nap. Just before leaving Guatemalan waters the starboard boom downhaul pad eye failed. It was a part rated for over a ton but it failed in 10 knots of wind. Our Chief Engineer had a look at the part and made a field determination that it was stress-corrosion cracking in the type 304 stainless steel. We had some parts we could rig for spares but decided to carry on the 40 miles to Acajutla El Salvador. Self steering on a reach with just the leeward sail was not workable, so we hand steered till the wind dropped then motored in late that night.

We got the downhaul and the boom end hardware fixed up and continued down the coast. We crossed our first river bar without event to spend a few days with friends from Nanaimo. From there on south to the bottom of Nicaragua we would be subject to Pappagallos winds—more reinforced trades funneling through from the Caribbean. At that time of the year these were headwinds. During the next week we experienced the strongest winds of the trip. We would sail during the calmer times, usually after midnight, and by early morning sneak in close to shore to anchor. The coast here is not as easy going as the Gulf of Tehuantepec which is pretty well all sand. Here it is rock and reefs with small anchorages sometimes available.

We finally made it to our southern destination of San Juan Del Sur. I spent a week or so there enjoying the town. It was so windy I spent one day aboard with some extra water jugs on the foredeck to help keep us from becoming a kite. The strong continuous winds pushed all the warm tropical water offshore and the water temperature dropped to 59 degrees. There was lots of condensation in the bilges but it was nice to have a beer cooler aboard. Throughout the voyage the cabin insulation/floatation kept her pretty comfortable.

During a windy day the yard truck dragged *Miss Cindy* up the ramp on her keel shoes. I applied some local antifouling as the Pettit Horizon paint had picked up good size barnacles after just three months. The spars were eager for another coat of varnish as well. *Miss Cindy* was then picked up by a dozen guys and put on a boat trailer for her trip to Lake Nicaragua.

After a month in and around the lake we headed down the San Juan River. Later, 40 miles into the jungle we picked up our pilot to take us through the rapids and shoals of the lower river. While we watched for fresh water sharks, we were attacked by trees, saw crocodiles, and pushed *Miss Cindy* thru sandbars headed to San Juan Del Norte on the Caribbean coast. The lake and the river were key destinations for the voyage and did not disappoint.

In early April we crossed the river bar to reenter the sea. From there it was a dead beat 200 miles straight to windward to Isla Providencia. We spent 15 hours on sea anchor catching up on sleep and a couple of days trying out various self steering setups for the larger seas. We ended up with a windward pulling bungee cord arrangement that worked well. I really missed the wind vane that got crossed off the “to do” list before launching.

From Isla Providencia we next sailed to Cayman Brac about 430 nautical miles to the NNE. We were on a port tack close hauled the whole way except for a few hours in light winds. While we were motoring the port masthead stainless eyebolt failed, and the sail came down. I took the mast out

and screwed a pad eye on for the halyard and re stepped the mast. The light air only lasted a few hours and we continued along on port tack. All this windward work was showing up the shortcomings of the chafing gear. Half a day in 20 knots with a reef in would wear a small hole in the windward mainsail where it was rubbing on the mast. While it was not an immediate concern given the limited distance left on the voyage, much better chafing gear was clearly needed.

The passage to Cayman Brac had a day of 25 knot winds with big seas. *Miss Cindy* was up to the challenge. Reefed to about 120 square feet she would steer to windward with the help of the bungee cord. Best 24-hour runs on this leg were around 95 miles. Over the six days of the passage we sailed a serpentine course of 530 miles following the wind.

After seeing the wreck of the infamous Donald Crowhurst's *Teignmouth Electron*, we departed for Cuba a couple of hundred miles to the north. In our six months of travel to date we had a total of four official inspectors come aboard. When we arrived at Cayo Largo, Cuba, seven inspectors came aboard and left behind a thick stack of paperwork.

Sailing to the southwest tip of Cuba we had some of the most challenging weather of the trip. We reached along in 25 knots with eight to ten foot seas with occasional sets from a different direction and a few feet higher. *Miss Cindy* got lightly pooped by a couple of breaking waves until more sail was rolled out to give her a little more speed. Surfing on some of the big sets was a little more exciting than I care for at sea, but she behaved well despite tearing along at over 15 knots.

The Gulf Stream crossing to Florida was pretty tame by comparison. We crossed in 12 to 18 knots of ENE wind and I hand steered for just an hour in the night. We let the current make our easting and were passing Key West about 20 hours after leaving Havana.

Throughout the voyage the lateral schooner rig performed well. It was not only very easy to handle but was a great self-steering rig on all courses. Limitations are handling 100 square feet set flying in big winds, but even that was manageable. The unstayed masts were no trouble at all. The stitch and glue ply structure was a bit noisy at sea but was up to the tasks it was put to.

When we put her on a trailer for the 3500 mile ride back to Vancouver Island she had logged 6000 nautical miles in seven months. It wasn't all sweetness and light, but it was nice. I had missed one of Nanaimo's coldest winters on record with several weeks of snow to go with the normal rain and gloom. *Miss Cindy* and I were glad to be seeing new places and meeting interesting people while soaking up the sunshine and ambience on our tropical cruise.

Miss Cindy was conceived as a minimalist cruiser capable of serious coastal sailing and offshore passage making within her payload constraints. Probably as important as the boat, is the crew, and even more important is that the crew and the boat suit each other well. Of the many boats I have sailed, *Miss Cindy* is my favorite—we got along well. •SCA•

Tony Bigras started sailing around 1970 on Vancouver Island with a Glen-13. He worked as a rigger and custom boat builder for several years. Currently working in information technology, he has found time for a couple trips to the Queen Charlotte Islands and one memorable passage from Hawaii to San Francisco.