

The story behind

KUKKA, a Malo 39, arriving in Sydney, Australia

When I was a child, my father bought my mother a Swedish stainless steel frying pan. We were a migrant family from Hungary, and I was aware that my mother treasured this pan above all her other cooking implements, not just because of what it cost but because it was well-made and incredibly stylish for its time. That frying pan, I think, laid a foundation in my subconscious for things to come.

During the 1970s, when I lived and worked as a pharmacist in London, I began buying and using products designed by George Jensen and Arne Jacobsen, equipment by Hasselblad and Bang and Olufsen. Except for the camera, which I have since sold, I still own every piece of Scandinavian design I've ever bought.

I learned to sail in the late 70s when I came back to Australia, at age 30 (before then, I'd been a surfer) and for many years was deeply involved in racing one-design J24s. Cruising was at first a peripheral interest. While I was racing J boats I also owned Weatherly, a 39 ft Halvorsen-designed (does that sound a bit Scandinavian?) former ocean-racing yacht. But by 1995 I had bowed out of competitive sailing and was on the lookout for something better suited to cruising in comfort with a young family.

In February 1995 I set off around the world with appointments (made by letter! and Fax!) to view 10 different cruising yachts for sale, made variously by Hallberg Rassy, Malö, Contest and Oyster. I made an offer on a Hallberg Rassy 42, and a Malö 42. The HR offer was accepted much more quickly than the Malö and for the next 15 years I enjoyed sailing and maintaining a classy Swedish beauty, albeit not offshore as much as I had originally hoped.

Fast forward to September 2008: my children are grown up, the pharmacy business sold, the HR 42 is on the market and thoughts of a younger and sleeker Swedish model to replace her are crowding my head. En route to New York, my new partner Diana and I spent a miserably wet, cold day at the Oslo Boat Show so that we could both see these newer Swedish yachts in the flesh, so to speak.

Ducking between wicked squalls, we stepped inside the dry, heated cockpit of a Malö 37 and met Ulf Mattsson. Diana, who until then equated quality Swedish yachts only with Hallberg Rassy, watched and listened closely as I pulled the boat apart with an obliging and patient Ulf. Who also answered each and every question with equal patience, and an obviously great knowledge of the yacht. I was impressed.

The next week we were in New York when Lehman Brothers went bankrupt and we, along with the rest of the world, were obliged to shrink our dreams. The temptation of a new boat had to be put aside in favour of searching for another previously owned one.

In February 2009 I accepted an offer for my HR42, and the very next day flew to the sugar-growing town of Bundaberg, in Queensland, where I knew a Malö 39 had been for sale for quite some time.

I found *Kukka* stored in the dry storage area at the Bundaberg Port Marina, on the Burnett River. She had been pushed back to the far back corner of the yard and was surrounded by the detritus of the boat yard, caked in bird droppings, her boat cover in tatters, anti-fouling peeling. She was a forlorn and sorry sight. She'd been waiting for a new buyer for 18 months.

Her owner, Mr Kazumasa Tada, had sailed her out of the Malö yard in 2002, and crossed the globe, bound for Japan. She was destined to be the first Malö yacht in Japan, and was now likely to be the first in Australia. He had been forced to abandon his journey when he reached Bundaberg, and eventually put the boat up for sale because of serious health problems. She'd been inspected by quite a few prospective buyers, but it seems they didn't know what they were looking at. Unlike Hallberg Rassy, Malö as a brand has virtually no presence in Australia. The broker was shocked when I arrived knowing more about the yacht than he did.

It took me about three hours to conclude that despite her external appearance, *Kukka* had the Swedish pedigree that I was looking for and had experience of owning, and that she had been well cared for during her voyage to Australia by an extremely competent and fastidious owner. Mr Tada had de-commissioned her himself in Bundaberg and taken no shortcuts.

The Yanmar diesel had been drained of oil and coolant, impellers removed, fan belts loosened and new oil and fuel filters were waiting to be fitted, The Spectra watermaker was pickled, and dry filters were throughout the system. All ventilation and through holes had insect screens on them (important in the tropics). Deck gear had been removed, furlers wrapped and winches greased. Water tanks and hoses were drained and diesel tanks were left full. Spare parts were labeled, in English, and there were instructions and labels for re-commissioning.

Mr Tada was absent, but he was also very present in spirit, as he remains to this day. He was, I felt, my kind of yacht owner. I found the lockers in the head jam-packed with every type of cleaning product for *Kukka's* interior surfaces. So while her exterior had suffered under Queensland's brutal climate, down below she looked just like a Malö in the brochures – she glowed.

Because I know and trust the way Malö builds yachts, and because all the evidence suggested that her owner was a meticulous man, I chose not to have the boat surveyed. Nor did I have the sails inspected (after all, sails do wear out when people sail around the world). However before I made an offer, I employed a specialist timber shipwright to inspect the teak decks, and a diesel mechanic to check the engine. The shipwright spent a day on his hands and knees with a stethoscope, hammer and other assorted tools, and pronounced the decks to be in robust good health.

There was not one seam in the caulking which had let go. The diesel mechanic, when he saw how the engine had been decommissioned, told me I would most likely have no problems. We filled it up, fitted impellers, connected some fresh water for cooling and fired it up. An hour later, a compression test confirmed that the Yanmar was good to go.

With formalities concluded, I spent the next two months travelling 1500 km between my home in Sydney and Bundaberg getting *Kukka* prepared for launching. I had the decks lightly sanded, and they looked brand new. The boat was completely emptied of all its contents, and I spent many intriguing hours inside lockers and below floorboards, discovering and understanding the ship's systems, and sorting and re-stowing the generous amount of equipment left on board.

Kukka's bottom was scraped clean, a new epoxy barrier was applied and new bottom paint over this, her hull and topsides were waxed and polished. She needed new batteries, and a new mainsail and genoa (as it turned out). New canvas and new cushions were made for the cockpit. During this period, Mr Tada ("call me Kaz") sent me long and detailed emails in response to any and all of my questions about the boat and her history since she had left the yard in Sweden. He graciously consented to our keeping the name *Kukka*.

In mid May, when *Kukka* was slowly transported by the travel-lift to the marina for launching, she was indistinguishable from a new yacht. People who had known her only as a neglected orphan languishing in the furthest corner of the yard for the previous 18 months could not believe their eyes. The ugly duckling had become a...Malö.

Diana and I sailed her out of Bundaberg on 29 June to cruise northern Queensland. We sailed north to Cairns and then returned to Sydney in mid-November. *Kukka* is a Malö 39 with a classic transom, which does away with the sugar scoop. The extra length provides valuable lazarette space but because Mr Tada had fitted a self-steering Hydrovane (a great bit of gear) we had no choice but to use a portable boarding ladder at the side gates. In the end, this was not the problem we thought it might be.

She has a port quarter cabin, a single head aft and to starboard, and a dedicated shower-only space in the forepeak cabin. We have straight settees in the saloon, the unique Malö folding table, water tanks under each of the saloon settees and an extra diesel tank in the floor of the starboard lazarette. The Spectra watermaker is also installed in this space. We have a standard Malö galley with an Isotherm SP fridge and a starboard forward facing navigation table.

On deck, she has manual Selden in-mast furling, led back to the cockpit and the cutter stay is fitted with a Harken furler. She has poles on the aft deck, port and starboard, one carrying the radar and other antennae, as well as an outboard lift, and the other carrying a wind generator.

There were two things which I was a little nervous about before we set out. The first was the in-mast furling, and the second was the anchoring arrangement. In-mast furling is nowhere near as popular in Australia as it is Europe, and there seems to be a lot of prejudice against the system here. I've always had boats with slab reefing. They're simple. I was apprehensive about possible complications with in-mast furling. But having learnt how to use the gear correctly (and this is the key – it took us a few attempts to master the tensions, particularly in strong winds), we like the ease and convenience of operating the system from the cockpit. There's a real advantage is not having someone at the mast in the middle of the night.

I have to admit the signature Malö anchor arrangement was strange to me. I was used to seeing an anchor, a windlass and lots of chain on the front of the boat. We've had no significant problem with anchoring these past few months, apart from the fact that we carried too much chain (100 metres) and had to be diligent about kicking the chain pyramid away from under the gypsy as we weighed anchor. I very much like the fact that I can stand inside the anchor locker rather than having to bend over and contort my body to get into the locker. We have not yet had to deploy a second anchor and I wonder if I should beef up the size of the anchor roller to accommodate this.

The Targa arch is wonderful. It minimizes your chances of being maimed and/ or garroted by the mainsheet. The price you pay is the occasional bump on the head, especially when the forward bimini is down and, for some reason, you forget to duck as you come up the companionway.

The aft cockpit canvas is brilliant in the tropics. We left it up all the time, the penalty there being limited visibility of the mainsail and cramped operation of the sheet winches. Again, that's a small price to pay for the protection from the Australian sun. We like the simplicity of a single, spacious head, and of having a dedicated shower stall which, thanks to an efficient watermaker, got plenty of use.

The generous separate lazarette spaces on *Kukka* were the envy of other cruising yachties we met. Likewise, the generous storage spaces in the cabins and saloon. The galley bench space is tight, but we managed. The folding galley extension table we fitted was very useful.

The refrigeration insulation, whilst adequate for European climates, was sorely tested and struggled with the warmer water and air temperatures of tropical Queensland. We struggled with it too! While some of the newer technology or thicker insulation would have been a boon in the tropics, we managed to extract the most out of what we had by intelligent packing in perforated storage baskets and, most importantly, by installing two brushless computer fans, one of which blew on the compressor under the sink and the other placed under the evaporator inside the fridge in order to direct and circulate cold air to the bottom of the fridge. After these modifications we could keep fridge temperatures stable at between 2 and 4 degrees.

The bilge under the saloon floor seems tailor-made to hold 20 bottles of wine which I stowed in 20cm offcuts of plastic plumber's pipe so that the wine stayed in the bottles. We could have done without the doors into the aft quarter cabin and the head opening into the saloon. That's awkward, and I think has been addressed in newer models where the doors open into the cabins.

Access to the engine and machinery is far better than it appears at first glance. It works very well. The companionway steps are at the right angle and wide too. The split design allowing easy access to shore power, header tank, fuel filter, fuel changeover and anti siphon valve is brilliantly simple.

All this would be worth nothing if she didn't sail well. But she does! *Kukka* is a boat of great character. She doesn't get stressed. She's elegant, and thoroughly well built, and fosters a sense of great confidence. Her systems are well thought out and installed. She can swallow an enormous amount of cruising gear (and books) yet still put on a good turn of speed in all conditions. She is a credit to the design and construction team who conceived and built her.

Our Malo 39 is a yacht which will take us and occasional guests anywhere in the world in comfort and safety.

Alex Nemeth (and Diana Bagnall)
Sydney, 29 November 2009