



# Sailing to Portugal...

...to remain there forever

Text Man van het Woord. Photos: Martine and Willy Vermeylen

**A special boat trip that was more adventurous and lasted longer than expected. A journey on a Linssen Grand Sturdy 470 AC Twin that had its highs and lows. Incredible encounters with dolphins and sharks, charming harbours in which to spend the evening and night, pleasant interactions with other skippers. But also closed locks, an overheated engine and loads of driftwood. The most frightening moment was when Willy fell into the water while trying to retrieve a fender. The trip through the most beautiful landscapes on a comfortable ship made up for all the inconvenience. As well as the final destination, of course, the fishing village of Olhão in Portugal. "We live on our beautiful boat in a country where it is never winter, the people are friendly and the most beautiful sailing routes are literally around the corner. We're never going back."**

It was obvious to the young couple, Martine Verleene and Willy Vermeylen, that they would need a boat. Both were born and raised on the Belgian coast. Martine's father was a ship owner and fisherman, and she and Willy both worked in Bruges at Outboard Marine (later OMC Europe), the company that manufactured Johnson and Evinrude outboard motors. In 1976, they bought their first boat: a 4.34-metre Shakespeare Clubman 14 with an Evinrude 75 HP motor. "We had no sailing experience at the time and our first attempts were disappointing. Going on the North Sea in a speedboat was difficult. With strong currents, high waves and wind strengths of more than 3 Beaufort, we couldn't really go out." From 1979 to 1988, they sailed on a Shetland 570 with an Evinrude 75 HP motor. "This boat allowed us to get to know the inland waterways. During the holidays, we would

make round trips in Belgium lasting a week or two or take a trip to Lake Veere." When their three-year-old son fell into the water, they were finished with boats for a while. "Fortunately, we had taught him to raise his hand if something like that happened and I was able to pull him out of the water quickly. But it was still a frightening experience."

## **In love with Portugal**

The itch persisted in the meantime. "We were attracted to the water every holiday. We would go to Monaco or Barcelona, for example, not for the museums and the architecture, but for the marinas and the sea." By 2012, they had both retired and the question of 'what to do with the rest of our lives' presented itself. It soon became clear that it would have to involve another boat, but concrete plans would have to wait

a while longer. When granddaughter Femke went to secondary school and the grandparents became 'less interesting' to her, the idea arose to leave Belgium. "In 2017, we first talked about getting a boat on which to live that we could use to sail to southern Europe." The couple had a few requirements. Their new home had to be on the mainland and easily accessible from Belgium. Italy, Spain and France were dismissed for various reasons. Which left Portugal. "We went on holiday there in December of that year and after a few days our decision was made. The temperature never dropped below 15 degrees, the people were friendly and the price-quality ratio of just about everything, especially the marinas, was excellent."

The following spring, the two went back to get the wheels of bureaucracy turning. And that was easier said than done. "We needed an address on the mainland. A boat with a permanent mooring did not count. So we decided to rent a flat. We couldn't rent furnished flats for very long, as the owners prefer to rent them to tourists during the holidays. Unfurnished flats didn't allow pets and that would mean that we couldn't bring our dogs. Fortunately, we were able to sell our house in Belgium and so we decided to buy a place in Olhão. A small flat near the boat mooring. Once we had arranged all that, we suddenly received the message that there was no longer a berth available for a boat of our size. They were expanding the harbour and we couldn't get in while the work was taking place. And there were still 659 boats ahead of us on the waiting list, which has now grown to 800. To cut a long story short, until we can get into Olhão, we are moored

in Vilamoura. This town has a completely different atmosphere, more like Monaco, but not as pricey. It's beautiful here and we'll see how long it lasts."

#### **'It has to be a Linssen'**

For their big trip, the couple absolutely had to have a Linssen boat. "There was no other option." Martine and Willy first saw a Linssen at the Belgian Boat Show in Ghent, where they peppered Luc and Ira with questions. "Very friendly people who quickly convinced us that our next boat would be a Linssen." They later visited the shipyard in Maasbracht. "Once again, we were given a warm and professional reception. All of our questions were answered, we went on a trial run and were given a guided tour. It was wonderful to see the process from flat steel plate to fully finished boat." Unfortunately, the couple were forced to conclude that a new Linssen was not financially feasible. That's how they ended up at Best Boats in Roermond. There, on 14 March 2018, the couple bought a 2001 Linssen Grand Sturdy 470 AC Twin with 833 hours on the clock. The boat had been given a refit in 2016, followed by new instruments and a new interior.

"In Belgium, if your boat is no more than 15 metres long and you sail at less than 20 kilometres an hour, you don't need a licence. We thought that was absurd. So we took all the courses we could. Then we converted our sailing licence into an international ICC." The boat also had a change of name from Crazy Frog to Twilight. "We love the dusk and one of my father-in-law's boats had the same name." A mooring in Belgium proved difficult to find, so Martine and Willy







decided to go to Plasmolen (Eldorado), the place where the previous owner had moored the boat. "We'd never even heard of Plasmolen, let alone knew anyone in the area. But we didn't regret it for a moment. It's a very nice place where people can easily make friends." The Vermeylens hired an experienced barge master to assist them on their first sailing trip from Roermond to Plasmolen. "That was a good decision, as it allowed us to gain experience with locks under his supervision. We were going to come across a lot of them during our trip."

### **Theory and practice...**

On 24 September 2019, the couple left Eldorado feeling a little wistful. They had lived there for more than eight months. The quay was full of people waving them goodbye. The journey started well but by the third day the mast would not fold away. Fortunately, it turned out to be just a loose wire and thanks to a video call with the Eldorado team, Willy was able to repair it himself. In the final Belgian harbour, they mapped out their sailing route through France. In theory, they could cross the country in 20 working days (the locks do not operate on Sundays). "That was wishful thinking," they laugh. "The VNF website we were using didn't mention works, breakdowns and strikes, which we often came across. And the stated depths and clearances weren't always correct either." There were also unexpected benefits. When they came across breakdowns and works and had to take alternative routes, they ended up in the Strépy-Thieu boat lift on the 9th day of their journey, with a drop of more than 73 metres. "Very impressive, a real bonus."

One of the many other adventurous stretches along the way was the Souterrain de Ruyaulcourt through which they sailed on day 13. "We sailed for an hour in this narrow tunnel with our spotlight on, right behind a barge that was causing a lot of swell. This meant that we had to keep correcting all the time and one of the bow thruster circuits burned out. We were only able to solve this problem once we were out of the tunnel. On top of that, we also got stuck because the water depth turned out to be less than stated. Fortunately, that didn't cause any damage."

### **One foot in the grave**

Martine and Willy had their biggest and most unpleasant adventure the following day. They received a call that they had lost a fender at lock 17 on their route. Willy went off board to get the thing ashore with a dragnet. A brick broke off the quayside and fell into the water, followed by Willy. "Terrifying moments. It was the middle of October so I was wearing thick clothes. I wasn't wearing a life jacket, the water was choppy and the quayside was too high to reach. I managed to grab the lock gate, but I soon lost my strength in the cold and couldn't climb up. I don't know how, but suddenly I found a foothold and managed to pull myself up. My wife was panicking."

What had happened to Willy only properly sank in later that day. "I went into shock and didn't feel like continuing the trip at all. I'd had one foot in the grave and wanted to go home straight away." It took them two weeks to recover from the experience and then they decided to continue their journey. Broken down locks, narrow channels, a bridge under which they could only

fit by removing the window from the boat, plants that had come loose, floating tree trunks, an anchor that had come loose... None of this stopped them. "Our boat is comfortable and the surroundings were really beautiful. Nature had taken on its autumn colours, which we enjoyed to the full."

### Night frost and fog

On the night of 17/18 November, day 25 of the journey, it froze for the first time. "We were worried that we would be stuck frozen in the canal. We had to scrape the windows every morning from then on. We found the inside wheelhouse difficult to use, so we had to stay up in the cold."

The couple breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the highest point of their journey (352 m above sea level) on day 29. Things didn't get much easier after that, however. There was a period when every day started with thick fog. "You can't see any signs in the fog and, on top of that, the current was fast and there were a lot of thick tree trunks floating around. Waiting for clear visibility became our new ritual."

Due to a strike at the final lock of their voyage, in Saint-Gilles, they had to stay moored for 24 hours in a place that was not really suitable. "We had to tie the boat to a couple of reinforcing bars sticking out of a concrete wall. That was quite tense."

Sailing through the Camargue was a reward well worth the wait. They could even wear shorts. Trotting white Camargue horses and foraging flamingos ensured the ultimate holiday feeling.

### And then the sea

On day 42, they bade farewell to the inland waterways and continued their journey over the Mediterranean Sea. "In Sète, we first gathered information from some experienced sailors. The most important lesson: don't sail when the wind is blowing in from the sea, because that makes it difficult to get into the harbour. Sailing at sea took some getting used to, especially the rolling of the boat." They had to wait a long time for better weather in Cap d'Agde. "We were hit by two heavy storms there. We were anchored deep in the harbour and the water was crashing over the quayside. We used our rubber mats to protect the boat but we were still uneasy."

On the way from Blanès to Barcelona, Martine and Willy were joined by dolphins for the first time. Something that would happen several times during the trip. When they arrived in Barcelona, they

felt small and slightly intimidated. "We were moored alongside such large yachts, including the Dilbar (156 m). We were an ant in the midst of elephants." On the way to l'Ampolla, two sharks swam with the boat for a while. On 8 January, the Guardia Civil stopped the boat at sea, just outside the port of Valencia. "A strange experience. The officials were apparently not allowed to come on board, so we passed them our papers in a landing net. After a time-consuming procedure, we later ended up side by side in the harbour. Why the inspection couldn't take place there was never made clear to us. But the officers did compliment us on the beauty of our boat."

### Part three

On 27 January, the Linssen Grand Sturdy 470 AC sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar. "In terms of sailing technique, the most difficult part of our journey began here. From then on, we had to take into account the tides, which can rise and fall by 3 metres or more. And then there were ocean tankers, strong currents, a strict traffic separation system and high waves. But first we had to sail between two continents; Europe on the right and Africa on the left. Impressive and very beautiful."

In the port of Mazagón, customs turned "the whole boat inside out" looking for illegal immigrants and contraband. On 31 January, Willy finally steered the boat onto the Guadiana, the river border between Spain and Portugal. "We immediately got a good feeling. What a special moment it was to complete the final stage. Us ordinary folk had managed to reach our

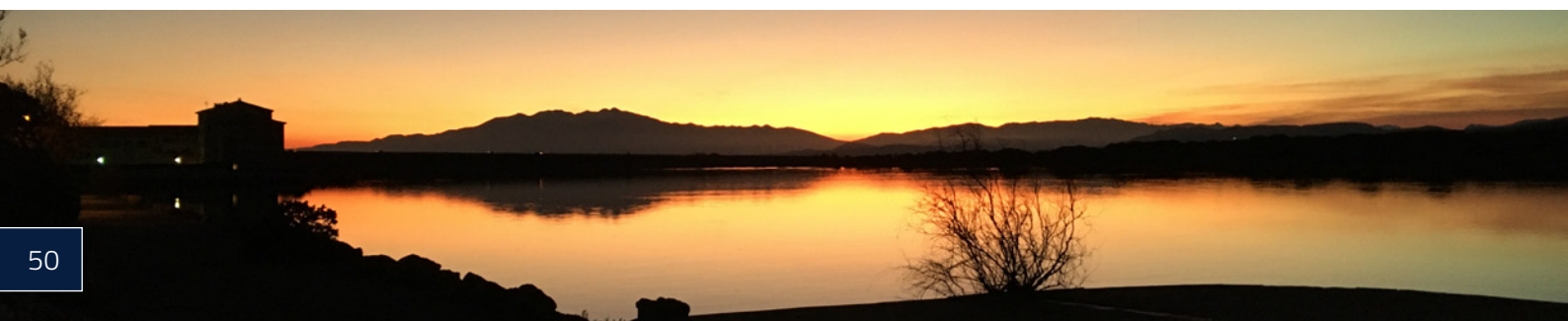




final destination. The people at home were less happy about it. They had been following our photo reports on Facebook and immediately missed the daily updates.”

Looking back on the trip, Willy concludes that it was a very enjoyable experience. “We always felt at home on the boat. And still do. We rarely stay in our flat. Our boat attracts attention. She was often photographed along the way and at our final destination. Lots of people have asked us about the brand, as the Linssen name is not very visible from the shore. We enjoy Portuguese life with a capital E. There’s no stress or time pressure here. People live from day to day and that’s pleasant. What you can’t fit in today you can always do tomorrow. The sun shines at least 300 days a year. You can find the most beautiful mini beaches between the cliffs that are only accessible by water as well as the famous Benagil Cave and Praia Marinha. There are many charming harbours within easy reach where we can moor. We can easily sail to the farthest south-western tip of Europe. Vilamoura is centrally located in the Algarve with its many nature parks. And

in one, two or three years’ time, when we are in Olhão harbour, we will be residents of a very authentic part of Portugal. They speak fluent English, French and sometimes even Dutch here, but we still plan to learn Portuguese to have more contact with the locals. Our future is clear, we don’t want to lose our boat and, apart from family occasions, we won’t be going back to Belgium.”







**The journey statistics**

departure: 24 September 2019

arrival: 1 February 2020

131 days | 6 countries\* | 64 sailing days | 3434 km |  
of which 967 nautical miles | 248 locks | 363 running  
hours for both engines | 3726 litres of diesel (for 2  
engines, heating and power generator) | 3715 photo-  
graphs | 36 videos

\*Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, United Kingdom  
(Gibraltar) and Portugal



Martine en Willy Vermeylen  
Grand Sturdy 470 AC "Twilight"