



Left, *Adagio*, John Geisheker's Westsail 32 dances on Lake Superior's ice cold water before her move to Seattle's Lake Union. John and partner Michealle Wetteland sewed her sales themselves using Sailrite kits and acres of tables in a company cafeteria.

Right, Chicago makes a fine backdro for Russ Oldfather's *Elohssa Repus*. The Name has a long story and is a "backwards spelling," as his partner Judie McGlinchey explains tactfully.

## Westsail the World

by John Vigor

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From afar, in her element, the Westsail 32 is the stuff romantic dreams are made of. Her mast is tall, her bowsprit long. A wooden tiller sweeps gracefully over a pointed stern, and a deep gunwale forms a beautifully curved sheerline that runs unbroken from the bows to just aft of the cockpit.



But as you get closer you begin to realize that there's brawn behind this beauty. The Westsail 32 is a massive boat in many ways. At 20,000 pounds displacement, 7,000 pounds of it in her keel, she is probably the biggest 32-footer afloat. Her fittings are huge. Her decks are wide. Her topsides are high.

Compared with other boats of her vintage, going below on a Westsail 32 is like entering a cathedral. Her 11-foot beam and 27-foot waterline was enormous for a 32-footer

## An Owner's View of the W32

by John Geisheker

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I once knew a lady who collected dolls obsessively at age 80 because she failed to get one for Christmas at age 5. I bought my Westsail 32, *Adagio*, seven years ago solely because the "Westsail the World" brochure hung like a taunt on my office wall while college, children, grad school, and work sped by.

The W32 is the Humvee of any marina: old-fashioned lifeboat lines, high bulwarks, massively over-built, the look of indestructibility. With something like 200 ounces of glass in every square yard, it has one of the hardest lay-up schedules in the fiberglass boat world, creating a hull that could withstand, it is said, decades of osmosis. (In one famous anecdote, a W32 took a week's pounding on a coral reef, only to

in the early 1970s when she was born. Here, against all the odds, was a boat big enough to swing a cat in, a mini studio apartment floating on the water, and one that could help you escape to the places you'd read about, romantic-sounding destinations such as Bora-Bora, the Galápagos, even Cape Horn itself.

The fact that the Westsail 32 could also be purchased as a kit, completed to various stages, helped fuel a frenzy of escapism in America. In the mid-1970s, demand for this boat was so great that the factory couldn't supply ready buyers with one for 18 months. Between 1971, when it all began, and 1981, when the production run ended, about 1,100 Westsail 32s were launched. Almost all are still afloat, and almost all are increasing in value.

Bud Taplin, first general manager of the builders, Westsail Corporation, figures that the increase has been 3 to 5 percent every year for the past five years. Talk Westsail 32, and you're talking \$50,000.

"Westsail boats are one of the few lines that are worth as much now - or more, at 15 to 20 years old - as they were new during the 1970s," he claims.

Bud is the man Westsail 32 owners turn to when they need help or advice. His Worldcruiser company offers a wide variety of services, including spare parts, instruction manuals, service manuals, and original plans.

The brawny Westsail 32 came along at just the right time to tap into a huge pent-up demand for a solid, seaworthy boat built of maintenance-free fiberglass, and her sterling qualities have kept her in constant demand ever since.

### **Basic Design**

The origins of the Westsail 32 are clearly Scandinavian. Bill Crealock, who had a hand in the design of the earliest models, believes the basic hull was a William Atkin design, greatly influenced by Colin Archer's larger Norwegian sea-rescue ketches of 70 years before.

Indeed, in his book *Of Yachts and Men* (Sheridan House, 1984), William Atkin features a gaff-rigged ketch called *Freya* which has the exact dimensions of the Westsail 32. *Freya* was, in fact, a 47-foot Colin Archer scaled down to 32 feet by Atkin, Art Hildebrand, and William Washburn Nutting, former managing editor of the magazine *Motor Boat*.

The Westsail 32 has a long, full keel with no pretense of a cutaway up forward. She's a double-ender with a lifeboat stern and an outboard rudder. She's beamy and high-sided and has a long bowsprit from which to set a lot of sail. She needs it. She's about the heaviest 32-footer afloat.

be sailed off dry.) Unfortunately, the resulting 10 tons must be lugged around for the boat's life, a combination of armor plate and millstone.

This weight and a full keel create an ultra-heavy displacement-to-length ratio of 418 and give the W32 the feel underway of a mini tall-ship, rather than the sports car handiness of a more modern fin-keeler. Luckily, the motion is easy on the queasy. The hull is so rigid that even in a breeze there are no Hollywood Foley machine sounds of wracking bulkheads and torquing deck.

The reassuring motion offshore is purchased at a frightening cost in harbors, however. Maneuvering awkwardly in any confined space, she wields that long bowsprit like a weighted centerpunch. This is a boat meant to travel, rather than frolic in harbor or club race - or dock.

So naturally, on 15 minutes notice, I sail this ocean behemoth for an hour or two, quite content, on a freshwater lake in downtown Seattle barely one mile long. Thirty seconds clear of the slip, both furling headsails are drawing, and we ghost on fluky winds glancing off skyscrapers. I tack a lot.

Contrary to the rumor that W32s need a gale even to stir, mine sails best, all plain (and home-sewn) sail, in 14 knots of wind. She must be reefed at 18 knots of wind. Lots of fin-keel cruisers can stand up to their sail area better than that. This bottom-of-the-wind-scale performance is partly explained by the large sail area for her length. *Adagio* carries a 40-foot boat's sail area of 800 square feet on a 27.5-foot waterline, 500 square feet forward of the mast. (Owners who upgrade find that larger headsails and short-foot mains set to leeward balance the famously wearisome weather helm.) And the W32 has less ballast than you might guess: at 7,000 pounds, only 30 percent of total provisioned weight.

Below decks there is storage for everything except people, though the W32 is a popular liveaboard boat. Like a Victorian home, the stock boats designed for long-range voyaging had way too much "furniture" and even when alone, I find myself occasionally daydreaming of pushing everything back a foot on each side. Fortunately it's nice furniture, if dated; barely a hint of fiberglass and much 2-inch Burmese teak (now unaffordable by mortals).

The hull is solid fiberglass, laid up by hand, while the deck and the long, low cabintop are made of plywood-cored fiberglass. The first 30 or so hulls were finished with a Crealock-designed flush deck and interior, but when Snyder Vick acquired the molds in 1971 he added a trunk cabin for extra light and headroom.

Almost half of the hulls produced were sold for home finishing in kit form. You'd think this would lead to a wild array of different interiors, but in fact choices were limited by the components provided, so most 32s ended up looking pretty much alike down below. The differences are mainly in the quality of the joinerwork and the quality of the fittings. Many amateur-built boats are as good as the factory-built boats, if not better, but some, naturally, fall short even of average. You can tell which boats were home-built by checking the hull identification plates. If the ID number contains the letters WSSK, the hull was sold to be finished as a kit; if it contains the letters WSSF, it was factory-finished. Incidentally, Westsail 32s were produced on both the East Coast and the West Coast.

Her keel is 5 feet deep for almost the full length of the boat, which adds up to a very large underwater area of resistance. The 7,000 pounds of ballast, originally a mixture of lead pigs and steel punchings, is contained within the hull. From 1975 onward, the ballast was a solid casting of lead.

The decks are spacious, making for easy movement fore and aft, even with bulky sailbags in tow. The cockpit is tiny and exposed, little more than a footwell with 9-inch coamings on two sides, but it does have a substantial bridgedeck to separate it from the main companionway. It's an extremely seaworthy cockpit, of course, but it offers about as much comfort and protection from the elements as does a bicycle in a hailstorm. If you approve of hair coats and self-flagellation, you'll like this cockpit. If not, you'll want to invest in a large dodger.

A choice of engines was offered, the three most popular being the Volvo Penta MD2, the Volvo MD3, and the Perkins 4-107. The MD2 is not a good match for this boat. It's just too weak in the knees. The MD3 has a little more muscle, but the Perkins is the workhorse that gets the job done when the chips are down.

### **Accommodations**

In a boat with a cavernous interior like this one, you've pretty much got room for all the necessities of life, with a few luxuries thrown in. In comparison with other boats of its length, everything down below on the Westsail 32 is huge. If you want to become a liveaboard, and can afford only a 32-footer, this is the one to choose.

Just aft of the generous chain locker in the bow is a wide,

The many lockers - I was still finding more in my second season - when filled, do keep the below-decks quiet in a marina.

I have sailed her alone in winds above 50 knots, worrying only about captain mishaps, not structural failure, and logged a few 150-mile days (also alone), a tolerable mid-pack average of 6 knots. The foamy wake is a sure sign there is no rocketship potential here. And I've found that with a bluff entry, full midsections, and slack bilges aft, W32s "porpoise" atrociously in a steep chop and must tack through head seas when motoring.

But at \$45 grand or so - like hamburger, \$2.25 per pound - and for all their faults and lack of modernity, W32s are still a lot of cruising boat. Much sought after and easily re-sold, the 800-plus hulls are unlikely to disappear anytime soon and will continue to be a familiar sight in marinas all over the planet.

*After stints in the U.S. merchant marine and careers as an English teacher and maritime lawyer, New Zealand native John Geisheker now directs Sailboats Inc. Sailing School, in Superior, Wis. When he is not teaching on the Great Lakes, delivering boats, or visiting his native land, he lives on his Westsail 32 on Lake Union in downtown Seattle and sails Puget Sound. He has sailed the Great Lakes since 1967 and has taught sailing and cruising, as the expression goes, "man and boy these 30 years." Adagio, his WS32, is shown on Page 4*



### **In Short Westsail 32**

Designer: William Atkin/ W. I. B. Crealock  
 LOA: 32 feet 0 inches  
 LWL: 27 feet 6 inches  
 Beam: 11 feet 0 inches  
 Draft: 5 feet 0 inches  
 Displacement: 20,000 pounds

very wide, V-berth. It's actually a giant double berth to port and a fat single to starboard, very suitable for a seagoing ménage à trois.

Aft of this sleeping cabin there's a bathroom to port with a hand basin and storage for linen, while to starboard there is a bureau. A hanging locker with bedding storage is outboard of the bureau.

A door in the main bulkhead leads through to the main saloon, where there are four additional berths: a double to port, formed by dropping the dinette table, and a transom berth with an outboard pilot berth to starboard. All very suitable for an additional ménage à quatre, of course, except that crossing an ocean cheek-by-jowl with seven people on a 32-footer, even one of this size, is apt to spawn the wrong kind of emotions, certainly not those of the cordial type.

Another hanging locker for wet oilskins is opposite the large galley, and a proper navigation den to starboard has a chart table big enough to bring tears of joy to any navigator's eyes.

After all this profligate use of space, there's precious little room left for a cockpit, and neither (luckily) is there a quarterberth.

### ***The Rig***

The deckstepped mast and the 16-foot boom are made of aluminum painted with linear polyurethane. Most of the masts were made by LeFiell, while others were supplied by Sparcraft, Superspar, and Royal Marine.

She's a masthead cutter with a sail area of about 630 square feet, 300 of which is in the mainsail, 150 in the staysail, and 180 in the jib.

The original rig had one forestay and one jibstay. A single backstay ended on a small boomkin outboard of the rudder head. The mast had a single set of spreaders, with a topmast shroud and sets of forward lowers and after lowers on each side.

It's a strong and conservative rig, although not particularly closewinded because the shrouds, fastened to outboard chainplates at one of the beamiest parts of the hull, preclude narrow sheeting angles for the headsails. No matter, she needs the added drive anyhow.

The mainsail will normally have jiffy reefing with three reef points, and the large, fairly flat cabintop provides a roomy, stable working platform for the crew doing the reefing at the mast.

### ***Performance***

Sail area: 663 square feet  
Ballast: Encapsulated, 7,000 pounds  
Spars: Aluminum  
Auxiliary: Diesel  
Designed as: Roomy, rugged world cruiser

### **In Comparison**

\* Safety-at-sea factor: 8 (Rated out of 10, with 10 being the safest.)

\* Speed rating: Not as slow as some people think. PHRF rating 216.

\* Ocean comfort level: Four adults in reasonable comfort.



Ah yes, performance. Despite her racing successes, there are many people who give the Westsail 32 poor marks for performance. *Practical Sailor*, for example, claims "its performance is mediocre, even offshore" and adds: "It can be wet to sail and clumsy under power."

On the other hand, the Northern California PHRF rating list gives the Westsail 32 a rating of 216, which means her performance under sail is certainly nowhere near disgraceful. It gives her the same speed as Gary Mull's Ranger 23 and the Downeast 38 cutter. It makes her much faster than a Folkboat, at 234. Furthermore, Westsail 32s often surprise fellow competitors by doing very well in ocean races. One has even won the Pacific Cup outright on handicap, as noted under the heading "Owner's opinion."

The point here is that this hull does not reach its maximum speed quickly. She's not a fast-accelerating boat, responding quickly to every puff, so she will fare poorly on an Olympic course around the buoys. But her waterline length of 27 feet 6 inches gives her a theoretical top speed of more than 7 knots and, even if she normally reaches only 90 percent of that speed, she's going to be sailing faster than most other 32-footers with shorter waterlines. That's why she does well on long passages, where it's not maximum speed that counts, but sustained high average speeds.

As for her being clumsy under power, she's only as clumsy as the person at the helm. There are ways to maneuver a heavy-displacement boat like this in confined areas, but they require the skill that comes of good seamanship, practice, and familiarity with the capabilities of the boat and her engine. To describe her as clumsy is really to expose one's own limitations.

This, incidentally, is not a paean in praise of the Westsail 32's maneuverability. It's merely a plea for fair play. Compared with a fin-keeler, she takes more careful handling, just as a school bus does when compared with a family minivan. Nobody calls a school bus clumsy. Like the Westsail 32, it's just built to do a different job.

### ***Known Weaknesses***

Watch out for:

- \* Low-powered engines. She needs a very hefty shove against high winds and seas.
- \* Leaky toerails.
- \* Rot in the bowsprit, Sampson post, boomkin, plywood deck, and cabintop core. Check the rudder cheeks for rot also, but it's not a structural weakness because the load is taken by a metal fitting underneath.
- \* Osmotic blistering. Some Westsails have blistered, but usually not badly.
- \* Check the swaged ends on the standing rigging for

**Jeff & Julie Mack of *Oo-La-La*, their Westsail 32, "She's is a prime example of a W32 with a homebuilt interior finished to factory specs. She is finished inside in African ribbon mahogany. On the outside, she is nothing but *fantastic*.**

***Oo-La-La* also has a rather unusual custom foam core and fiberglass hardtop. Of this, Jeff notes, "It is supported by aluminum tubing and is stiff enough to crawl around on."**



Russ Oldfather's *Elohssa Repus*

hairline cracks or corrosion.

\* If it hasn't been done recently, recaulk all the deck hardware.

### ***Owner's Opinion***

David King of Portland, Oregon, has owned two Westsail 32s in a period of 23 years. He is a professional delivery skipper who also works on boats. He has had his present boat, *Saraband*, for 11 years.

In 1988, in *Saraband*, he won the prestigious Pacific Cup race from San Francisco to Oahu, Hawaii. *Saraband*, a stock Westsail 32, came first in class and won first place overall on handicap.

Naturally, there was an uproar, especially among the owners of larger racing boats commissioned at huge expense and carrying trained racing crews. There was not a single racer in *Saraband's* crew of five, although all were experienced cruisers.

In 1990 King decided it was his duty to show the racing world that the Westsail 32's success had not been a one-time fluke. He entered *Saraband* for the Pacific Cup again, and this time she was first in her class to finish and first in her class on handicap. She came third overall on handicap.

Three protests were handed in, and all three failed. One protest charged that *Saraband's* spinnaker was too large. When it was measured it was found to be a 168 percent spinnaker, rather than the 180 percent spinnaker the rules allowed.

What was the secret of *Saraband's* success?

"Most Westsails suffer from having to drag a big three-bladed propeller through the water," King said. "We have a Max-Prop automatic feathering propeller, and it makes a big difference. *Saraband* gets up to 7 knots pretty quickly."

She sustains her speed well, too. She has sailed more than 180 miles in 24 hours on three occasions, two while racing and one during a singlehanded passage. "I did 184 miles all by myself one day," he said.

*Saraband* experiences a little weather helm as she heels over, "but it's never excessive," he added. "She's always under control."

If the wind rises while his cutter's on a beat, the first action King takes is to reduce the size of the genoa jib. "I reef it down to the size of a working jib," he explained. "The next step, if the wind continues to rise, is to tuck a reef into the mainsail. Next in order is a second reef in the main, after which I'd drop the jib completely. Now, under

double-reefed main and working staysail, she's good for 40-knots-plus."

Westsails are often criticized for not being able to beat. "That's a huge exaggeration," King said. "It's just not so. She goes to windward at the speed of a 29-foot or 30-foot boat. OK, that's not so good because she's a 32-footer, but it's not terribly bad either because most 30-footers are half her displacement and don't have her comfort or seaworthiness."

King and his wife once sailed *Saraband* from Palmyra to Hawaii, a passage of about 1,000 miles, in "reinforced trades" and averaged 110 miles a day on a hard beat. "Compared with other boats, she goes best on a close reach," he said. "In fact, it's very interesting that she goes from her comparative worst (the beat) to her comparative best (the close reach) in a matter of a few degrees."

King said he couldn't recall either of his boats having any structural problems. "Nothing stands out. I did know of one boat where the mast compression post tended to impale the cabintop, but Bud Taplin worked out a quick and easy solution by fastening bolts through the coaming to the main bulkhead."

### ***Conclusion***

This is a serious world cruiser, a rugged example of a traditional design that excelled in everyday conditions in Northern European waters in the days of sailing workboats.

She is roomy, exceptionally so for a 32-footer, and performs safely and adequately, sometimes brilliantly.

At \$50,000 she is not the cheapest used 32-footer around (nor, by a long chalk, the most expensive) but she does offer good value for money and - significantly - seems to maintain that value indefinitely. There are times when boat values rise and fall en bloc - witness the sudden plunge of the early 1990s, for example - but the Westsail always appears to bounce back.

A few people, particularly singlehanders, might find this boat a little bulky sometimes, a lot of hard work for one person to handle and maintain, but most adventurers have no need to be intimidated by her size, which shrinks with familiarity.

There is no sign, even after nearly three decades, that the Westsail 32's strong appeal to would-be world cruisers will wane any time soon.

**John Vigor** is a professional journalist. The author of *The Practical Mariner's Book of Knowledge*, *The Sailor's Assistant*, and *The Seaworthy Offshore Sailboat*, he has worked for major newspapers around the world and is a frequent contributor to leading sailing magazines. He has sailed for more than 40 years in boats 11 to 40 feet in length and logged some 15,000 miles of ocean voyaging. In 1987 he and his wife, June, and their 17-year-old-son sailed their 31-foot sloop from South Africa to the U.S. This series of boat reviews is based on articles from John's book: *Twenty Small Sailboats to Take You Anywhere*, which is available from *The Good Old Bookshelf* (see Page 63 for more information).