

Chartering Off The Grid On Classic Folkboats

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Chartering a Nordic Folkboat from Meerflair emphasizes the joy of simple adventures on a beautiful but basic craft. What more do you need?

Fifty-three square meters. That's 570 square feet. Not much for a cattle rancher, but for a flybridge on a motoryacht, I'd say that's pretty posh. And that's not all: bar, lounge area, Jacuzzi and a motorcycle that is hoisted to and from street level with a dedicated crane. Seeing this kind of extravagance at a recent boat show, I thought about a simpler, kinder, quainter and more nostalgic style of recreation by boat. The scene that came to mind unfolded on the busy docks of Eckernförde, Germany, in the summer of 2000. The season's biggest Folkboat regatta had just finished, and sailors who a minute earlier had been contesting a golden pot were now busy stowing mattresses, sleeping bags, fishing kit, children's toys and bucket toilets before bunkering baguettes, salami and crates of beer. Boats loaded to the gills, the skippers were ready to bring aboard the family and shove off for their annual summer cruise, which lasts two or three weeks and takes them to the isles of Denmark and Sweden.

Against conventions

Doris Schmid and Olaf Weiss, two young sailing enthusiasts from Vienna, Austria, are some of the nicest people ever to start a boating business. Of course, they are also nuts, but that's helpful in this line of work. They are the principals of Meerflair, which rhymes in German and means "flair of the sea," but also cleverly implies "more pizzazz."

They started in 2012 and offer, among other services, a back-to-the-basics experience on charter boats Wiki and Go On, two exquisite wooden Folkboats with varnished hulls. These boats transport customers who want to explore the waters of the northern Adriatic on small boats with bare-bones comforts that used to be the norm when sailing was about sailing, not lounging at anchor, watching late-night shows on a flat-screen television.

Rustic, robust and traditional, the Nordic Folkboat, designed in Sweden by the people and for the people during World War II, is an icon of Scandinavian ingenuity. If Bernie Sanders were an old salt, I bet he'd be sailing one. At 25 feet this egalitarian little yacht displaces two metric tons and schleps around more than half of that in her long keel.

Jib and mainsail add up to 258 square feet of area, which it will drag if it's too much to carry. Reefing? You're kidding. Like an ox pulling a heavy cart, a Folkboat marches in a straight line, slow and steady, no matter what. Turning 75 next year, this vessel still gets a lot of admiring looks because her spiffy lines and classic proportions are the antidote to the "weapons of mass production," those big boats with lots of gadgets and gizmos, a gazillion berths and standing headroom throughout.

So who advised the Meerflair folks to get Folkboats and flout all the rules?

"This business rose out of enthusiasm," says Olaf, a forestry engineer by training. "We wanted to make Folkboats popular in the Adriatic and simultaneously promote a less-is-more principle."

And how is that going? "We have room to grow," he admits. "But the rate of satisfaction among existing customers is high." That implies that clients who subscribe to their concept are searching for a contrast in their sailing exploits.

"A plastic boat compares to a wooden Folkboat like a public housing apartment compares to a log cabin in the mountains," laughs Doris, who wasn't "thrilled with traditional career planning" after graduating from college with a degree in anthropology. She's a practical gal — knows how to cook and tend bar. She also loves adventures, such as surfing in Bali, cruising on the Nile and hiking in Costa Rica.

She met Olaf when he pulled into the same bay in the Croatian islands on a different boat. He'd raced on TP52s and worked as a charter skipper, including doing duty in flotillas with hundreds of teenagers who celebrate high school graduation with a cruise that's not so much about sailing as it is, well, you know — the kind of things that happen on spring break.



Olaf Weiss and Doris Schmid started their Folkboat charter business after careers on much larger yachts.

Rolling the dice

Schmid and Weiss decided to make their joint passion their profession, but not in the employ of a demanding owner of a large yacht. Instead they Googled old Folkboats and found two to their liking in Denmark, which they bought and restored. Starting this season, they'll also manage a 60-foot gaff schooner that will operate from their base in Izola, Croatia.

Intermittently they also teach sailing courses and offer their services as skipper/crew for individual charter trips in exotic venues around the world. To make the Folkboat racket work, these boats must look like a million bucks to impress and satisfy their clients. Word-of-mouth advertising, they agree, is still the most effective. And it appears they are finding their sweet spot.

"The sight of a wooden boat is breathtaking, more than 40 years old, but still in great condition, lovingly maintained and restored all the way down to the details," says Nicolaus Hawle, a sailor from Vienna who chartered one of the Meerflair boats with his fiancée. "Wherever we went, we were approached, admired and quizzed." Like a classic car, a classic yacht, even if it's no more than 25 feet long, is as good an excuse as any to chat up strangers.

"With a Folkboat you always find a helping hand. There simply is no lack of contact," explains Alexander Scholz, who owns a graphic design business in Merano, Italy. He sails a Tempest and often charters bigger boats for races in the Med, but also was curious about the Folkboat, which he'd read about. "The feeling was special in every aspect — the incredible manageability, and even the limited comfort was fun, too."

The cabin is cozy and there is no standing headroom, but as long as the body tolerates it, there's nothing wrong with that. "The boat's small pantry is next to the companionway, so dishes can be reached easily," Scholz notes, and you don't have to climb down a ladder to fetch another glass of wine.

Small can be beautiful

The chance to spend a week off the grid also motivated Georg Schöfegger, a teacher by trade who oversees a sailing club's racing program on Wolfgangsee near Salzburg, Austria. "I wanted to explore the lagoons of Grado and Venice, for which we needed a boat with small draft that allowed us to dock almost anywhere. And like any serious sailor I refuse to consider a powerboat, which is why the Folkboat came to mind."

Like Hawle and Scholz, he raves about the reception he and his crew received from locals and fishermen whenever they pulled into a little anchorage or showed up in one of the tiny ports along their route. "Everywhere the boat was met with great interest — we were allowed to dock and stay overnight, where we'd have gotten booted with a regular boat," says Schöfegger. "In Chioggia we tied up at the police docks and the cops came to check out the boat, asking how long we've been cruising."

In Venice they brazenly made fast in a marina for luxury yachts and got free dockage while they went sightseeing. "That probably would not have happened with a Bavaria," he jokes.

Wending their way through the shallow waters, dipping in and out of narrow, winding channels, dodging vaporetta and tourist traffic, Schöfegger also tied up to the pilings of a restaurant on one of the islets. "After an excellent dinner and sufficient libations, we only had to take a step onto our boat and hit the sack."

Such are the joys of small-boat voyaging — but there are limits, of course.

In touch with the elements

"Anyone who doesn't find the charm in car camping will probably find cruising on a Folkboat a bit problematic," Schöfegger advises. You can't be frazzled by the absence of comfort items such as a fridge, hot shower, enclosed head (bucket and chuck it), dodger and bimini. On rainy days a cockpit tent offers protection at anchor, but meals have to be cooked on a small gas burner and motoring means wrestling with a small outboard on a sliding bracket.

On the plus side there's anchoring in remote and quiet spots that are off limits to larger yachts with their deep keels, loud music and rumbling gensets. A crew of two is ideal, says Schöfegger, and they both "should be real sailors."

It's a hell of a lot of work to keep Wiki and Go On in fine fettle because varnished yachts only look good in perfect shape. So far, Olaf and Doris have managed, subsidizing their operation with other income.

"We break even, as long as we don't watch our time for the upkeep," he says, adding that his expertise as a forestry engineer, which otherwise is of little use in the charter business, "helps to pick out timber for repairs."

The Meerflair vision of voyaging on a small boat, something Olaf describes as "feeling the elements," is not your standard charter vacation, and it's a rather strict counterpoint to luxuriating on a \$10 million motoryacht with a flybridge twice the size of the average studio apartment in New York. It's not for everyone, but those who tried it express a desire to return, either to explore more or just to break up the routine. Or maybe they crave the attention they'll get when they pull up to the dock with a small, traditional yacht that looks like a million bucks.

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