

The family way

Celebrated yachtsman Laurent Bourgnon has swapped sail for power as he takes his young family on an incredible voyage around the world in an eco-beast of a catamaran. We talk to the family after they rounded the South American coast and prepared for the Pacific

Text: Rob Peake Photos: Laurent Bourgnon & Sunreef

Laurent, his wife Caroline and their family are circumnavigating the globe in one hell of a green machine.



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still too small to operate the boat. On a sailing yacht it would need too much of my own time and work, and this voyage may take a couple of years!”

Laurent himself was taken as a four-year-old across the Atlantic by his parents in their yacht. A few years later when he was 13, the family set sail once again, this time around the world. They are experiences that shaped his life and ones he would love his own children to share. “Time passes by so fast. The children are getting older and I don’t want to miss this precious time. I want the children to discover the world as a family, from a nautical perspective,” he says.

So Laurent’s choice of motor boat over sailing boat was made for its ease of use. Interestingly, he believes that most yachts spend around 70% of their time motoring anyway. He chose a catamaran for its safety, stability and large deck space. For a family of newcomers to the marine world, the comfy cabins and plentiful storage of the twin-hulled vessel are ideal. A keen environmentalist, Laurent adds: “I want to show the entire world that a powerboat can be as environmentally friendly and as inexpensive as a sailing yacht.”

The vessel the Bourgnons chose as their home for the next few years is a customised Expedition version of the Sunreef 70. Polish firm Sunreef started in 2000 and are known for their sailing cats, which run up to 146ft in length. They also have plans for 80ft and 60ft motor cats.

The Expedition version has some differences compared to the standard boat, notably a jaw-dropping fuel capacity of 20,000 litres. However, Laurent has made some big structural changes. In normal guise the Expedition version has a length overall of 70ft (21m), but is now significantly longer at 83ft (25m) overall. This is largely due to underwater bow bulbs fitted to each of the catamaran’s sponsons, which Laurent says have added as much as two knots to the speed.

The boat was originally fitted with twin 370hp Volvo D6s, but Laurent has remapped these to boost them up to 420hp. Apart from increasing performance, he says this has also lowered fuel consumption.

On top of these changes to the standard Expedition boat, Laurent extended the bathing platforms, made some modifications to the propellers and gearbox, and he fitted solar panels, wind-propelled alternators and non-toxic antifouling.

All that means the modified 83-footer does 7.5 litres per hour per engine at ten knots. Laurent filled up the boat with 10,000 litres in Cannes and next refuelled in Puerto Montt, halfway up the Pacific coast of Chile. That’s a distance of more than 10,000 miles. Compared to other renowned fuel-savers on the market, these are impressive statistics indeed.

The trans-Atlantic Elling E4s we featured in MBY April 2009 were doing almost a litre per mile, but they were going significantly slower at seven knots, and at 48ft are around 25ft shorter than *Jambo*. The Nordhavns, Flemings and Selenes of this world all boast transatlantic ranges, but again they cruise at single figure speeds. Push the speed up to ten knots and many of them wouldn’t get much more than halfway across.

There are some impressive long-range motor boats out there. The rise of the production trawler yacht means that the Atlantic and other big crossings are no longer the preserve of the offshore sailor. But even in the era of these fuel-lean ocean-crossers, the Sunreef 70 Power *Jambo* currently being taken around the world by Frenchman Laurent Bourgnon is a remarkable beast. At eight knots, this twin-hulled, twin-engined vessel can do a staggering 20,000 nautical miles non-stop. On a global circumnavigation, you’d only have to put into port once.

The man behind this voyage is a sailor, and a sailor of some standing. Laurent Bourgnon was just 20 when in 1986 he hit world headlines by sailing an 18ft Hobie Cat catamaran across the Atlantic with a friend. The mad-cap achievement was the precursor to victories in some of the biggest yacht races in the world, including the Transat Jacques Vabre and the single-handed Route du Rhum. Along the way he set a trans-Atlantic sailing record of just over seven days in 1994.

After hanging up his winch handle, Laurent needed quite a special boat: one that would satisfy his own thirst for adventure, but which would also accommodate his wife Caroline and young children, aged 14, 11, seven and three, who rather unexpectedly are new to the boating game. Laurent laughs: “My wife is not a sailor and the children are



Right: a welcoming bay in Argentina. Inset above: the children have their sea legs now.



Laurent keeps a careful watch at the helm.



Left: a typical day taking the tender out to investigate a glacier. Above: Caroline ensures the children keep up with their school work during the cruise.



THE BOURGNON'S SUNREEF 70 EXPEDITION

Length 83ft 0in (25.30m)
(standard boat is 70ft)
Beam 30ft 7in (9.32m)
Displacement 36.2 tonnes (light);
55 tonnes (loaded)
Draught 4ft 0in (1.22m)
Engines Twin 370hp Volvo Penta D6
diesel remapped to 420hp
Top speed 25 knots
Cruising speed 10 knots
Fuel capacity 4,400gal
(20,000 litres)
Range @ 10 knots 13,330 miles
Range @ 8 knots 20,000 miles
Fresh water 220gal (1,000 litres)
Naval architecture/interior
Sunreef Yachts
RCD Category A



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through the narrow and capricious Strait of Magellan, inside the Horn. Their arrival needed to be timed to perfection: too early or late in the year and they'd be battling distinctly unwelcome conditions. With this deadline to make, and with the anemometer reading zero as they entered the Doldrums, Laurent admitted the boat's trusty twin iron 'headsails' made themselves infinitely more useful than the canvas versions he was used to.

Life on board was good. “We are approaching the Doldrums, there is no wind, it is extremely hot, the sea is magnificent and we have just witnessed a splendid sunset,” he wrote at the time. “The sea is beautiful, no one is seasick on board and the crew is getting used to maritime life.”

A highlight came as they spent an idyllic three days at Fernando de Noronha, the central island of an archipelago 220 miles off Brazil. This World Heritage Site enjoys incredible sea life and is renowned as scuba-diving heaven.

Laurent wrote: “Yesterday we were diving among hundreds of turtles. Loupette, my youngest daughter, who is now doing fine with a mask and snorkel, just couldn't believe it when a meter-wide stingray came to say a shy hello to her. As for Jules and Basile, they have seen a shark for the first time today.”

Laurent's son Jules recalls: “On the morning before we left, all the sea animals seemed to approach the boat especially to say goodbye to us. My sister Justine was amazed when suddenly a whole group of dolphins began playing and dancing around the boat.”

Salvador, Rio, Santa Catharina, Punta del Este and Buenos Aires followed – the places names say it all about their cruise south. Laurent and wife Caroline, however, did not forget to remind the children of their roots. “We spent New Year all together with delicious foie gras and a good bottle of Bordeaux,” says Laurent with a smile.

As the temperatures cooled, they left Argentina and turned westwards into Chilean waters. Here, Laurent needed all his sea-going experience as he negotiated the channels between the myriad South American islets. Funnelled winds and the threat of ice mean conditions can be treacherous.

Before entering the strait, Laurent wrote: “We have already been blocked for a few days by a series of depressions bringing strong north-westerlies up to 60 knots and lots of rain. Day temperatures are between 5° and 8°. At night it falls to zero. So even though it's summer here, we have to put the heating on. In France, it would be our winter for sure!”

They set off, but again the wind picked up and the Sunreef was battered by 60-knot winds at the mouth of the strait.

Laurent says: “It was a tough welcome from savage Patagonia. But we motored on through sumptuous channels, looking in awe at massive blue icebergs and passing the most solitary villages. The scenery was absolutely mind-blowing. It was so fantastic that our family was able to share this experience together.”

As *MBY* went to press, the family was on Easter Island in the Pacific, heading for French Polynesia, *Jambo's* engines chugging quietly on. **MBY**

The Bourgnon family left Cannes on November 8 last year, heading for their jump-off point of the Cape Verde Islands. En route they stopped in Porto de la Duchesse in Spain and then Gibraltar. After leaving the Med, they called in at Essaouira on the Moroccan coast and then the Canaries, before a final leg to the Cape Verdes, arriving on November 27.

Not all was plain sailing, however. “This short final crossing was rough, with harsh conditions and a choppy sea. My wife and children were not used to living on board then, although in the end they did pretty well and no one complained! It wasn't easy for the children to follow their classes, but we are insisting that the kids carry on with school, despite the travelling, so there is daily learning time to be strictly respected and homework is emailed to their teachers,” says Laurent.

The heavy weather and heavy homework were quickly forgotten as a family of bottlenose dolphins appeared at the bow, following the Sunreef almost the whole journey to the Cape Verde Islands. “It was an amazing experience for the kids, and for us,” Laurent says.

Such experiences, as well as the friendly welcome when they made landfall in the Cape Verdes Islands, tempted them to dawdle. But an important appointment lay ahead. The Bourgnons were not planning to round Cape Horn at the very bottom of South America, but were heading

Top: calm conditions following some pretty hairy crossings. Middle: grocery shopping, the South American way. Above: Laurent's family are used to a slightly bigger craft. Below: Laurent and his family have been touched by the friendly reception they have received so far.

