

Jürgen anchors *Rubicon* in Carlisle Bay, Barbados, after nearly a month on the Atlantic. Photo by Deane Holt

Hamburg to Barbados & Beyond

A Tartan's Tale

by Grace Holt

Two sailors sit, becalmed, in the middle of the ocean on their 34-foot sailboat. Worried that provisions, water, and fuel will run out before the trade winds return, they are halfway between the Canary Islands and their destination, Barbados. What brought these two friends here? Natives of Hamburg, Germany, Jürgen Mohrmann and his long-time sailing friend, Gerhard Peters, are sailing Hull #1 of the Tartan 34 Classics, an Olin Stephens's design with 43 years of sailing under her keel.

Jürgen left Hamburg July 6, 2010, for the adventure he had been dreaming about since his youth. At six weeks old, he first sailed on his parents' 27-foot Norwegian Pilot Cutter, *Nordstern*. Over the years, Jürgen and his wife, Susanna, painstakingly restored and sailed the boat on the Elbe River and Baltic Sea. Gradually, they both began to yearn for something just as seaworthy, but built for speed and cruising comfort. By 2003, Jürgen was already "secretly in love" with Sparkman and Stephens's designs. Finally, he found exactly the right model, but none existed in Europe.

A new Stephens design was introduced in 1967. Hull #1 of Design 1904 was a 34-foot sloop with a centerboard, fin keel and separate skeg-hung rudder. The Tartan 34 C design became one of the most popular

one-design classes ever. Charlie Britton, co-founder of Tartan Marine and an accomplished offshore racer, owned Hull #1, called *Gaudeamus Tu*.

In 2004, the boat—now named *Rubicon*—turned up for sale in Hallandale, FL. On the Tartan 34 Owners website, Jürgen discovered a photo and description of *Rubicon* and knew he had found his dream boat. He flew to Hallandale, examined and bought the boat, and shipped her to his marina on the Elbe. On Thanksgiving Day in 2004, Jürgen, Susanna, and his parents saw *Rubicon* become Europe's first T34 Classic.

Jürgen recalls, "On our first day out, the wind was blowing at about 20-25 knots. It was the perfect chance to learn about *Rubicon's* sailing abilities the fast way. Everything felt like it should; we had a feeling of safety and performance, which brought smiles to our faces... and still does." In their first offseason, Jürgen and Susanna began the "hard and never-ending boat work" to restore *Rubicon* to tip-top condition. Early projects involved removing the

entire gelcoat layer, drying wet core material with a vacuum pump, and upgrading the onboard equipment. They patiently worked until finally, "one bottle of champagne later," they were ready to find a boat yard to finish the job.

The project was completed in May 2009, in time for the 700-nautical-mile North Sea Week races from Helgoland, Germany, to Edinburgh, Scotland. At the end of the race, Jürgen said, "*Rubicon* loves the wind and the waves, no matter how strong and no matter from which direction."

Jürgen and Susanna were now ready to take *Rubicon* across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, Hallandale, and the Chesapeake Bay to celebrate with friends in the Tartan 34 Classic Association, before returning home. Jürgen found crew to sail to the Canaries, where he waited with Susanna for hurricane season to end. By mid-November, Gerhard joined Jürgen. A professor of meteorology, Gerhard had many years of experience on ocean-going research vessels, but shared Jürgen's dream of sailing across the Atlantic. They waited

for 30-knot winds funneling between Gran Canaria and Gomera to abate. On November 16, Gerhard looked out the port during dinner and suddenly realized the wind and waves had calmed down. With an excited cheer, off they went.

Three days out, the wind dropped off and then died. The sailboat bobbed in the water, drawn backward at times by the current. Jürgen and Gerhard had only the fuel in *Rubicon's* 30-gallon tank and about 20 gallons in jerry cans, so they could not power onward. At one point, the jib wrapped around the furler, so Gerhard hauled Jürgen up the mast to fix it. In the ocean swells, he swung wildly around the mast, "singing soprano."

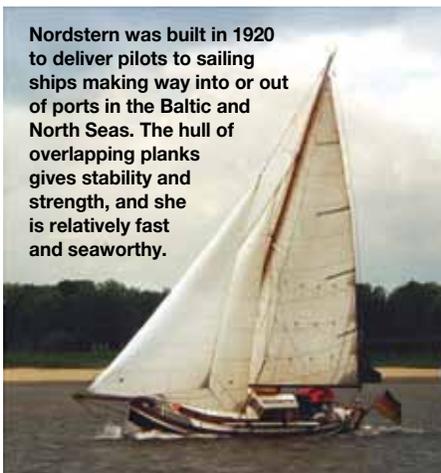
The weather varied from dead calm to sudden squalls with extreme gusts. In the chaos, they had some unwelcome surprises, always at night, when winds would come up out of nowhere and jerk the boat around from every direction. For nearly a week, they suffered through these profoundly disorienting conditions.

In the middle of one night, the wind blew more than 30 knots, and the waves began to build. Suddenly, one very steep wave came from astern and within only a few seconds, two other waves added to it. The hellish 15-foot thing broke over the cockpit. In thick masses of white foam with water swirling around her, *Rubicon* held on and surfed down the huge wave, hitting a speed of 12.4 knots! Then, as suddenly as it had begun, everything went flat, with only the remains of white foam floating over a strangely motionless surface. The trade winds had been interrupted twice in late November and early December by unusually strong Atlantic low-pressure systems, marking most of the trip with extreme and unpredictable weather.

Rubicon had been slowly heading west for four days when Jürgen's weather advisory in Germany, Wetter Welt, advised him to sail south to find the missing trade winds. After two days of sailing against a southwest wind and current, still no trade winds. At that point, Welt told them to turn further south. It was a hard decision to sacrifice fuel to motor out, but they were so fed up with shaking sails, a swinging boom, slamming doors, and potential damage to the rig, that they did it. When they reached 13 degrees north, and the promised trade winds did not appear, Jürgen and Gerhard decided not to motor further, especially since the fuel was nearly gone. So there they sat, quiet and serious for a few



Rubicon in an S&S race on the Firth of Forth before leaving Hamburg to cross the Atlantic. Photo by Liz Tulloch



Nordstern was built in 1920 to deliver pilots to sailing ships making way into or out of ports in the Baltic and North Seas. The hull of overlapping planks gives stability and strength, and she is relatively fast and seaworthy.

moments, and then they took down the flopping sails to wait for wind.

On December 3, a very light northeasterly trade wind began and built over two days to a near gale. At times, *Rubicon* again became a surfboard riding down the waves. This excitement lasted four days. By December 9, *Rubicon* was only 309 miles from Barbados, cutting through the water at more than seven knots.

The next day, Jürgen called Deane and me in Bridgetown to say that he was 150 miles out and expected to arrive within 24 hours. On December 11, *Rubicon* rounded the island's northern tip, and as the sun set over Carlisle Bay, she sailed into her mooring at the Barbados YC. Dean and I jumped and waved on the beach as Jürgen rowed his dinghy ashore, with Gerhard cheering him on. The two sailors walked out of the warm, calm Caribbean water to the first solid land they had seen in nearly



Commercial fishermen in the English Channel often cut off parts of their nets and drop them into the water regardless of the danger to other vessels, including *Rubicon* shown here.

a month. *Rubicon* had delivered them safely to the New World. To celebrate, *Rubicon* will party in Hallandale March 12 and in the Chesapeake Bay May 7. At press time, she is traveling north along the coast of Guadeloupe. Track her progress at charthorizon.com/m/cz/map?vessels=Rubicon&history=2010_Transat_Crossing&v_scope=all.