

# A MOMENT OF MADNESS

by John Wilson (*Shifta*)



As we handed over our fifty euros booking-fee to the delightful Petra at the Neustadt offices of Hallberg-Rassy, it dawned on me how audacious we were in thinking that Alison and I, two inveterate non-German-speakers, could come away from the annual "Fun Rally" unscathed and without letting our country down in a big way. I had seen, as you will have, reports from previous years and knowing how good the Germans are at enjoying themselves, thought to myself that this might be an interesting way to end a Baltic cruise, as the rally is held in the third week in August. Petra was very reassuring and so we set off to enjoy a bit of cruising for a couple of months, putting our anxieties aside for the time being.

Our cruise plan, such as it was, had been to revisit areas we'd seen before at greater leisure and meet up with some friends who were also sailing in the Baltic. To cut a long tale short; after appalling weather at the end of May, we were treated to the finest summer for many a year and so roamed east along the German coast and the isle of Rügen to Poland as far as Kolobrzeg before turning north to Bornholm and our first assignation – with a Nicholson 32 on her way to Helsinki. After that our next meeting was with Peter & Sue Woods bringing their new HR 342 *Safir* down from Ellös. We arranged this meeting on the island of Ven, north of Copenhagen, not without some trepidation, having heard rumours of how fast the new boat would be compared to our "old" 34, *Shifta*. In the event, the results of our sailing together were inconclusive, with the new boat being clearly faster

off the wind, but the slight edge I thought we had to windward giving me heart for the August races.

We spent the high-season month of July returning via Poland and Germany after developing an urge to escape from Scandinavia to where we felt more at home and where the beer is cheaper. In spite of the harbours being fairly crowded, we had an immensely enjoyable time, meeting some lovely people, revisiting the superb North German Hanseatic cities and seeing some of their great "Brick Gothic" buildings at various stages of restoration and attending some fine concerts. Our pre-race training ended back near Neustadt for four days and we were joined by our daughter with her husband and two small children. The weather continued to be kind and we were rather surprised when the less-than-3-year-old viewed the mediaeval skyline of Wismar and said "can I go inside one of those big churches?" We duly obliged her.

## The Fun Starts

Eventually the day of reckoning arrived and we presented ourselves at the harbour office of Ancona, the large marina where HR Germany are based and the event would be held. Our first surprise was to find that there were no mooring-fees to pay – our 50 euros having gone towards this I suppose. At a brief reception we were first to arrive and were duly allotted race-number 1 and handed a number-plate, race pennant and a bag of goodies. In the evening there was to be our first briefing by Frank, a local sail maker, about the complicated (to us) race courses, followed by a

meal. We had previously met Hörst, the agent for HR locally, who organised the whole meeting and was racing in a demo 43. He took it upon himself to translate the instructions for us, rather mysteriously managing to concentrate the briefing which had taken half an hour into about one minute. Somewhat bemused, and a bit rusty about this racing lark, we were greatly reassured by one of the regatta rules which stated that anyone wishing to make a protest would be required to stand in a cold shower with no clothes on to be questioned by the race committee.

Meetings and meals took place in an exhibition-hall in the marina where a restaurant-owner from Lübeck had set up shop to provide a range of reasonably-priced meals and snacks as well as breakfast each day, when we had further briefings. We soon found ourselves sitting next to Eberhard and Marianna, owners of a 37, who took a lot of trouble to speak English and make us feel at home, as did the other people at our table.

### Let Battle Commence

The race-fleet of 24 boats ranging from 31s to 53s left harbour at ten o'clock, deferred from nine due to lack of wind, and took about half an hour to reach the race-course. Neustadt lies in a large bay which provides an ideal setting for racing, away from shipping and the main cruising routes. The fleet lazed around for three hours waiting for the expected wind to arrive for the first of two triangular races, with nothing to do but whistle for the wind and drink lots of water to compensate for the heat.

At last the message come through from Gundy, the committee-boat, that the first start would be at one o'clock. We started with the under-40ft fleet,



divided into spinnaker and non-spinnaker classes. In a light easterly I noticed that there was a bias on the line so chose to start on port tack at that end of the line. After a succession of deafening guns and a lot of activity on Gundy, my plan turned out fairly well as I had plenty of water to myself, and after dipping under a couple of sharp starters on starboard found *Shifta* in clear air and well placed.

I won't say the first beat was a triumph, but we more or less held our own, and I was learning to get the best out of the boat, returning to my usual seat-of-the-pants way of sailing rather than paying too much attention to the tell-tales or instruments. The rest of the race – two reaches, a beat and a run – passed without drama and at the end we knew there were boats ahead of us who shouldn't have been there. A RIB which had been buzzing around with a cameraman startled us when he roared up and handed us a bottle of bubbly which we gratefully took charge of.

The second race followed almost immediately after the first as it was already four o'clock. This time the line had been reset without bias and I managed to make a fair mess of the start, but found myself some clear air and succeeded in clawing back some of the lost ground from the first beat, being quite surprised that my 110% jib was holding its own against some fully-suited boats. This time the chaps in the RIB reckoned we must be hungry after the race and lobbed some meat balls and bread into our cockpit, and we ate them gratefully while dashing back for a quick shower before supper.



## CRUISING

### The Fleet

Our under-40ft non-spinnaker class was the largest, with 11 boats. Handicap adjustments were made for a number of factors such as size of jib, number of crew, absence of folding prop and so on. As well as class prizes there was to be an overall cup as well as some as yet unspecified fun-prizes. The keenest boats were in the spinnaker classes of course and these boats were fully crewed and had taken all surplus weight off - on the second morning I saw one owner on the foredeck before breakfast using a hacksaw to sever his anchor chain (without much useful effect I'm pleased to say). There were a number of 37s with and without spinnakers, but no 342s, which I think I was secretly pleased about as we had the rewarding sight of seeing the keener 34s running rings round most of the fleet.

### The Party Begins

The second race finished about six o'clock. In spite of the light winds I was pretty tired from my exertions as we have developed a routine for tacking where I do most of the sail-handling, while Alison assists, mainly dealing with the winch-handle as well as keeping a sharp lookout.

At supper we found Eberhard's nerves had scarcely recovered from the day's exertions, especially the close-quarters sailing at the starts which he was not used to, as this was his first attempt at racing. He had taken two steps to prepare himself



however. He had bought a book on racing which may or may not have been useful, though it did apparently have some advice on how to practice starts while walking in the woods – yes really! He had also bought a red protest flag which was clearly not going to be much use.

Before the day's results were released we were surprised to see and hear a gentleman in a kilt come in and play his bagpipes. Hörst had also borrowed a kilt and was looking very splendid. This was all in order to introduce the serious part of the evening which consisted of a blind whisky-tasting competition, the results of which were to be held in evidence for later use. We had to taste four whiskies and match them to four names on an entry sheet – one per boat. A description of each whisky was read out, but as this was in German it wasn't much help to me, so, although I could easily



identify the Islay malt and blended whisky, the two highland malts caused me some trouble, being rather similar. Our table-partners assumed that I

## “we were surprised to see a gentleman in a kilt”

must be something of an expert so I did my best to mislead them, though I need hardly have bothered as I got the highland malts wrong anyway. When the sailing results were announced we were quite pleased as *Shifta* was placed as well as we could have hoped, with fifth in class in the first race and equal third in the second.

### It's a long way

For the second day's races we were set a thirty-five mile course extending to near Travemünde, with several reaches across the bay. A good force four promised more lively racing and the windward leg went reasonably for us and we got to the first mark before the large boats which had started ten minutes behind could catch up and take our wind. Three reaches were less successful as the boats with longer waterlines and cruising-chutes roared past, but the greater distance allowed the fleet to spread out more and there wasn't much to do except trim the boat as well as possible and point her in the right general direction.

The closest we got to another boat was when I saw one of our rivals just ahead sailing too close to a gybe-mark, so, while Alison firmly shut her eyes, I gybed inside him at the mark, soon leaving him behind, temporarily at least. When we approached the same mark for the last time a black cloud came up from the south-east; the wind dropped to almost nothing and what there was now came from ahead. With some of the faster boats already round the mark, this was the time to be patient, as a race is never over until everyone has crossed the line. More by luck than anything else, when the wind returned from its original direction we were quite well placed and had overtaken, or rather drifted past, several boats. The frustrating conditions continued for the last five miles to the finish, and with boats scattered over a wide area we had no idea at all of how we'd done.

### Now where does this bit go?

The evening followed a similar pattern to the last, starting with us trying to calm

Eberhard's nerves. The night's competition turned out to be a bit alarming. A two-speed sheet-winch was brought in and someone demonstrated how to dismantle and reassemble it. Then we were told that someone from each boat would be required to do the same against the clock. After watching a couple of contestants I thought I should get it over with and fumbled my through the next couple of minutes with Hörst standing by with his stopwatch. Luckily for me there were people who had never taken a winch apart, but even so I was amazed to find myself ending up in fourth place overall and winning a Lewmar service kit for my pains, Eberhard getting a similar prize for coming last. In the day's race we had come third, only twelve seconds ahead of one of the dreaded 38s.

### Up and down, up and down

The last day of racing (Saturday) promised to be just as arduous as the others, with an up-and-down course for two races, which sounded like a recipe for complete chaos; boats going in different directions on the same water. With a biased line, I tried a port tack start again, only to find myself facing a starboard tack boat that was almost stationary after arriving too early and sailing down the line. I was forced to tack just in his lee. Fortunately I couldn't understand what he was shouting, though in retrospect I don't think he should have been where he was and so I consoled myself on the first beat with the image of him standing in the cold shower being interrogated by Hörst and Petra.

With a force three westerly wind we seemed to go well on the first beat, leaving the 37s behind, and arrived second at the mark behind the sharpest 34, getting a round of applause when we passed the committee-boat with a shout of "well-done" from Frank's wife Katrin, though the acclaim seemed a little premature. The race involved a lot of poling-out which was quite tiring in the hot sun, though





enlivened by Katrin and friends doing a Hawaiian dance on Gundy, and we held on to finish second in class. The second race followed the same course and was less successful for us, though we had the pleasure of getting in the way of Hörst's 43, forcing him to tack away after a close encounter.

### How did we do?

With no more competitions, we were ready to enjoy the last gala evening, whatever the results; it was only fun anyway wasn't it? Eberhard was cheerful too, maybe because he had crossed the line in the last race ahead of us for the first time. We stocked ourselves up with large glasses of wine and waited for Hörst to announce the results. In the end we were very happy to get 4th in class, for which we received an engraved glass, but my winch-work, only slightly let down by my whisky-tasting, brought us up to 2nd overall in the fun trophy and I collected a bottle of champagne as well as another flourish from the band. The Rassy Cup for winning boat overall was awarded to the ecstatic owner of a 42, a pleasant old fellow called something like Edgar and his wife Alexandra who danced their way onto the floor, leading the way for others to celebrate into the night long after we had returned to *Shifta*.

### And in conclusion...

**First the sailing.** There is no doubt that the boats which prepared best and tried hardest were the most successful. The leading boats had shed a lot of weight, which was not an option for us although we left two bikes ashore with the liferaft and tried to make sure our tanks were low. Good sails clearly matter and there was some smart cloth around. There were some surprises. The old 38s went very well, pointing high and being quite fast off the wind. Boats with spinnakers did not always recoup their handicap disadvantage. Most surprisingly to me, in-mast furling mains seemed to suffer little on the water, though many were sophisticated ones with vertical battens.

**The fun factor.** I don't know what impression I've given, but what remains in our minds is the warmth of the welcome we were given and the fact that the whole rally was a hoot from beginning to end. Alison and I are agreed that (although we have attended some excellent rallies) we can't remember three days when we had such a whale of a time, and in such agreeable company.

**Coming home.** Late August is a bit late for getting back, with westerly winds likely, so that's what we got, but never mind, it was worth it.