

HOMeward BOUND

The biggest and most expensive Menorquin ever built, Big Jac undertakes an epic voyage from Scotland to her spiritual home of Menorca in the Balearic Islands

Words Xanthe Marmion Photos Rollo Marmion



For Geoff and Piers, lifelong friends and business partners who both had houses in Menorca and a shared love of the water, owning a locally built Menorquin was the obvious next step. In Piers's view, they were both well-suited to this type of joint venture as he'd always dreamt up the most impractical of ideas and Geoff was gifted at fixing them.

Geoff took a little more convincing; as a passionate and experienced yachtsman he was initially dismissive of going down the motor boat route, but in mid 2016 even he was finally bewitched by the sturdy honesty and ageless style of the Menorquin range. The hunt was on. Timing was also spurred by significant birthdays for them both and the suggestion by one friend that they should call their prospective boat, *Twenty Summers Left*.

Made in small numbers on the island of Menorca by a family firm for over 100-years, and drawing on a lineage of small, tough, sail-powered fishing boats, the 'yachts' gradually evolved into the bigger semi-displacement motor craft they are today. Menorquins are not to everyone's taste but those who like their traditional lines, hefty build, wood-rich interiors and time-honed but fashion-dismissive style are just charmed by them.

Menorquins of all sorts, ages and sizes scatter the pontoons of Mahon harbour. Few attract envious glances from tourists but they raise a knowing smile from a particular tribe. Some are tired and pleasantly grubby, used for fishing trips or family picnics; others are well-fettled and even chic. All seem much loved. They have a select but passionate following beyond the Balearics too, mostly in Italy but some find their way to Turkey, even as far afield as Canada or the Great Lakes, and one found her way to Glasgow. ▶

The first sighting of Big Jac in Troon, Ayrshire, Scotland





Jac-ed up: a final inspection of the props and hull before the deal was sealed



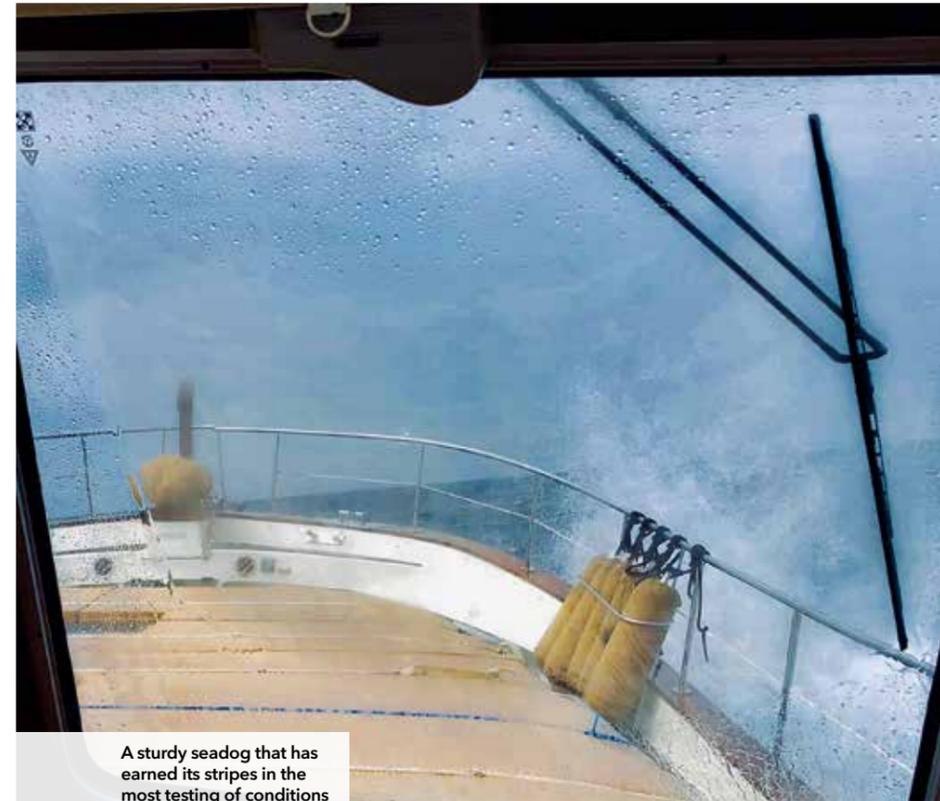
The discussions of the finer details of the condition of Big Jac seem to be cordial

Big Jac was laid down in 2006 and launched in 2007, reputedly the most expensive craft ever to leave the San Lluís factory. She was one of the last made before the recession that not only gripped the world, but also finally sunk the by then private equity-owned Menorquin. It's tempting to question whether the company, which had weathered the First World War, The Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War, would not still be going strong if the family had not sold out in 2006. Thankfully, the brand has now been reinvented as Sasga.

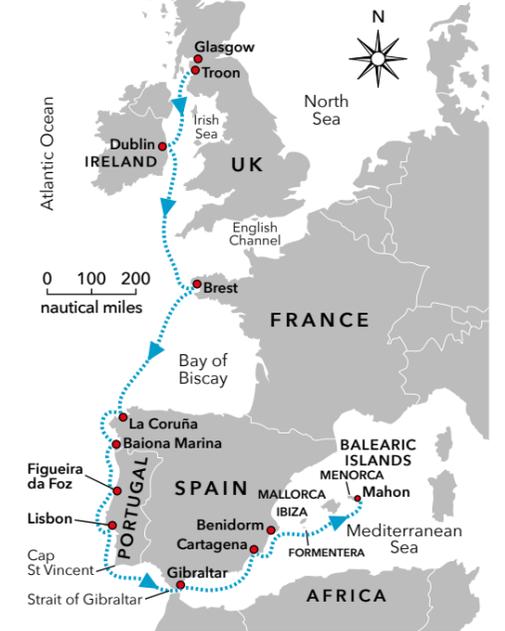
Big Jac is a bespoke-build 180 Fly, at the time the biggest model in the Menorquin range and one of only 11 made. She's really a swan song; one of the factory's last hurrahs. White-hulled, with a bespoke solid teak interior, she's fitted to 'owner's configuration', meaning two large ensuite cabins and a twin crew cabin forward. She's semi-displacement, powered by twin Volvo

Penta 675's, air-conditioned, teak-decked, festooned in wood and a hefty 37 tons dry. This includes washing and drying machines in a utility room, a dressing room in the master cabin, a 40hp Zodiac perched under the aft passerelle, and extended twin fuel tanks good for 600 miles.

But what on earth was she doing in Glasgow? Lifelong sailors Blair and Christina Nugent from Scotland cruised the Mediterranean with their family and then on into retirement. They had a succession of grand sailing yachts based out of Palma for many years and always had the idea that once sailing became too demanding they would buy a Menorquin. So, in 2012 they bought *Big Jac*. After a couple of years enjoying her in the Balearics they asked Iain Hunter, an experienced skipper from Arran, to deliver her to Troon, close to their home, with the plan of using her to cruise the Hebridean waters.



A sturdy seadog that has earned its stripes in the most testing of conditions



Menorquins are not to everyone's taste but those who like their traditional lines are charmed by them

And Scotland is where Geoff and Piers found her in 2017. She had been fastidiously maintained with no expense spared. She had not had much use in the previous two years with only 600 hours clocked and an engine room that still looked factory fresh.

Following a first inspection in October 2017 and some hull work to eradicate localised osmosis, they finally acquired her on 31 May last year. That just left the small issue of how to get her back from Troon to Mahon – a distance of 2,300nm. What follows is the story of their own epic delivery cruise as told by Piers.

THE VOYAGE

Given that Iain had already completed the same passage in the other direction two years previously, we engaged him to undertake the first part of the delivery run from Troon to Brest while we got to know our new boat. Iain and Geoff left Troon that same evening within hours of the bank transfers clearing – serviced, fuelled and with plenty of spares. Iain relayed his love

of the boat and shared his knowledge, while they made passage through a foggy Irish Sea using careful radar work and stopping once in Dublin to refuel her twin 1,900-litre tanks before making land in France 30 hours after departure.

On 2 June, I joined the boat in Brest with an extra crewmember, Stephen, leaving Iain and Bill, the watchkeeper for the Brest delivery run, to return home. With Stephen helping out Geoff and I were confident of completing the rest of our voyage without bringing in another professional skipper.

When delivering *Big Jac* for the Nugents Iain had done the journey from Mallorca to Scotland in a breakneck six days and eight hours, cruising at a steady 12 knots with three short refuelling stops. Us being made of lesser stuff and with the odd work commitment to factor into the equation, we decided to do it in stages, heading first from Brest to La Coruna and then across or around the Bay of Biscay, dependent on the weather.

With conditions looking settled we opted for the direct route and for 10 hours made passage on a gentle swell, the



ABOVE The crew go about their various duties of cleaning and cooking with good humour and, RIGHT, in Rollo's case, sitting in the 'lotus position' on the helm seat. The calm before the rough waters ahead

boat quiet and firmly planted. Under way it has the reassuring solidity of a 4x4 vehicle but perched on a green button-back leather captain's chair in the teak-lined wheelhouse, it also feels incongruously like a gentleman's club.

We set three-hour watches. After our first meal on board when the hotplate blew the generator circuit breaker, one of remarkably few gremlins, we settled into our new home and the rhythm of our passage.

We woke to a different rhythm altogether, a low sun under an ominously inky sky. The temperature had dropped, the wind on the starboard bow had picked up and the wipers were already fighting against a growing amount of spray. Geoff had the slightly hollow eyes of a long, stressful watch. As the sun dipped, everything was accentuated. The waves grew to 4m with the wind whipping trails of spray off the curling white tops.

Soon *Big Jac* was plunging her nose into the waves, the wheelhouse was locked down and water smacked the screens. She dug into the waves rather than slamming against them and kept up a steady 11 knots. Developing our core muscles with the pitch and yaw, we settled in for 20 hours of shift work by the glow of the instruments. This involved hourly engine inspections down the hatch with ear defenders, log updates and snatches of interrupted sleep.

VILLAINOUS

Critics of Menorquins like to say that these boats roll, and they certainly can. At 37 tonnes, the 180 is less susceptible than most but this weather would have tested any boat. She rolled and pitched and corkscrewed, but the sensation was of her punching through the waves rather than being pushed about by them, her deep keel and sheer weight keeping her mostly on the rails. It was reassuring to realise she was far tougher than we were. Her wheelhouse may look like a village cricket pavilion but there's no doubting her remarkably assured seaworthiness. After 20 hours of this treatment we knew we hadn't just bought a Mediterranean bathing platform, but a seriously resilient vessel with a hull appropriately rated for the Atlantic. She never missed a beat.

While *La Coruna* seemed to take a very long time to emerge from a radar patch into view, when we finally berthed we felt a certain elation at the crossing of such a villainous patch of water. After a restorative beer, Geoff ran for a plane while we hosed down the boat, ate fabulous tapas in the old town and fell into the deepest of sleeps before heading for the airport ourselves, leaving *Big Jac* to slumber.

Ten days later we were back armed with fresh crew in the shape of my son Rollo and his friend Tom. We flew out on June 14 and early next morning were first on the fuel berth, heading once



A pod of dolphins keeps the crew of *Big Jac* company on the voyage to Menorca

We felt as safe as houses... She showed us her toughness and her remarkably assured seaworthiness



again to the open sea. The weather was unseasonably cold and wet, heavily overcast and with no hint of summer warmth. It felt like October. However, by lunchtime the sun was lancing through the clouds even if we were still more concerned with the three-metre swell, which had swung directly onto our stern. Thankfully, *Big Jac* seemed to be enjoying the ride, surfing down the waves and accelerating up to 17 knots.

We couldn't raise Baiona marina on its VHF channel at 8pm but in the small, pretty harbour right on the Spanish Portuguese border, we found a berth next to a gleaming new Fleming 72. We brought her in, with me at the helm for my first close manoeuvre, struggling a bit with *Big Jac's* momentum and the rapid power surge of her big props. We washed her and ourselves down and then walked into the old town for sustenance and a Spain Portugal football match.

Over dinner, we decided to make Menorca in four days, and Piers booked a flight to London accordingly. That meant two night-passages, the first that night. We left the restaurant and headed back to sea.

Geoff set course for Figueira some 130 miles down the Portuguese coast. No moon, plenty of swell, lots of clutter on the radar, and the wheelhouse washed only by the red night light. Ahead of us lay a fair length of Portugal – to Lisbon, around Cap St Vincent at Europe's south-west edge, on to Gibraltar for a tax-light refuel and then 540 miles to Menorca. Easy!

By 9am we were moving past the huge empty beaches of the Figueira peninsula and by 10am we were threading through the harbour entrance and up the substantial channels past ore

depositories, massive cranes and dozens of weekend fishermen perched high on the walls. We berthed at the fuel station in the small marina, taking on sufficient fuel to get to Gibraltar with a safe margin, almost 1,000 litres, before getting permission to secure her for a couple of hours while we bought provisions.

We walked into the old town, intrigued that it describes itself as 'The Venice of Portugal'. We weren't convinced that there had been many competing for this title, but Figueira does have something appealing about it. Most striking is the way it faces and embraces the sea, with vast stone paved promenades overlooking the most expansive beaches any of us had seen. They fringe the town and dominate almost every view. Posters illustrated that Figueira had been connected to Patagonia [in Argentina and Chile] before the earth's tectonic plates had shifted. This might explain the far away feel of the place. ▶



ABOVE A fuel stop in Figueira on the coast of Portugal before heading south to Gibraltar (RIGHT), but not before the engine has had a thorough inspection (CENTRE). It can get a bit dark down there, so a head torch is a useful aid



We chugged through the inky calm waters towards our impromptu welcoming party



Out of the water in Mahon for another inspection



After her arduous passage to Menorca the Menorquin is put to more traditional Med use

It also explains the 1,200-metre deep Nazaré canyon off the coast. It is said that this fault on the ocean floor creates waves of 100ft, so it was with some trepidation that we set out to sea again, following the coast ten or so miles out as evening drew in. Once again the sky clouded over and the weather report of bright sun and 29° in Lisbon seemed otherworldly. Soon the swell grew, overlaid with an uncomfortable chop. Really big waves closed the rearward view as they bore down on us and *Big Jac* twisted, slowed to 8 knots with her prow high in the air before accelerating to 16 knots down the face of the wave.

CHANGED PLANS

Supper was abandoned in favour of hurried sandwiches, though some crew were afflicted with queasiness. We all looked forward to calmer waters further south. The worst moment came as the heavy sea pinched through the channel between the Berlengas islands and the Lisbon coast. For three hours huge rollers pushed on our beam, twisting our passage, and we lost headway, slowing twice for container ships sharing the same corridor.

But we made it and were soon tracking around the coast of southern Spain before closing in on our goal of the Balearics. We stopped at a small port 40 miles south of Cartagena to buy fuel but were turned away. Apparently we'd had the temerity to dock at the commercial fuel berth as the one for pleasure craft sat in only two metres of water and was too small for *Big Jac*. We made the decision to set sail for Cartagena, running on fumes.

We arrived in the early evening and left Geoff to argue with the automated bowser at the fuel station. Tom and Rollo headed into the old city with Geoff's demand for beer and bananas ringing in their ears. They duly returned to the boat with the aforementioned and we enjoyed a fried fish dinner at the yacht club before we set sail again.

We rounded the headland as the sun went down and took a heading that led us close to Benidorm. We could almost smell the

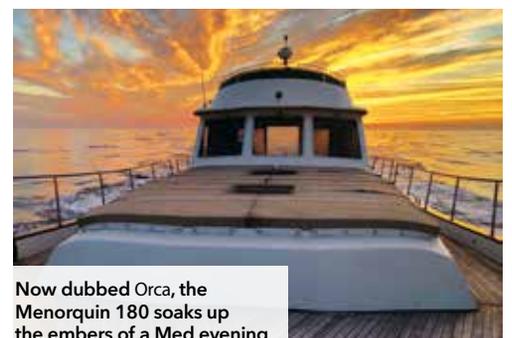
stale beer and found ourselves craving a full English breakfast. Rollo took the next watch as the sun came up, revealing Formentera in the distance, the smallest of the Balearics located on the southern skirts of Ibiza. The plan was to stop for a swim and get the tender running but as we had made such good headway we decided to press on to Mallorca.

However, as evening approached, the plan changed again. With the bit between our teeth, we decided to keep going and make landfall in Menorca in time for a late beer. Decision made, our spirits were high as we left Mallorca behind us. However, the next few hours seemed to take an age as we crawled towards our destination, which sat stubbornly on the horizon as the day faded into night.

A welcoming party had been arranged for us at Bar Paupa in Binibequer, a favourite watering hole. We snaked our way through the mooring buoys and picked up the one closest to the bar. The tender was dropped into the water and after some coaxing the belaboured outboard coughed into life. We chugged through the inky calm waters towards our impromptu welcoming party and several well-earned beers.

The next thing anyone remembers was a cacophony of alarms going off far too early. The boat had to be lifted out for a survey a few hours later. We were underway once again. With slightly bleary heads but with a great sense of achievement, we passed the marker buoys and arrived in Mahon at about 9am. Mission accomplished.

Orca is available for charter out of Mahon. **Contact** menorcacruising@gmail.com



Now dubbed Orca, the Menorquin 180 soaks up the embers of a Med evening