

# Mellow cruising in a modern classic

Story and pictures by SEAN WOODS



**RELAXING on the water** has to be one of the best ways of dumping accumulated stress and regaining one's grip on life. It may be connected to the mysteries of *feng shui*, or perhaps it's more to do with the fact that when you're on a boat, no one can get to you.

But there's boating and there's boating. When you watch powerboats criss-crossing waterways like frenzied terriers chasing their tails, the word *relaxation* seems distinctly inappropriate.

Marine surveyor Peter Jacops reckons we are, um, missing the boat. All too often, he says, South Africans are unwilling or unable to look beyond the more obvious activities such as fishing, sailing and skiboating.

He explains: "There are many people out there who want to get out on to the water but are not interested in speed. I'm convinced there's a place in the market for a

safe, relaxing family boat that's suitable for lakes, rivers and sheltered bays."

To prove his point, Jacops recently set up the Whisper Boat Building Academy for deaf youth in Khayelitsha, near Cape Town, overseeing his students as they built the environmentally friendly – and decidedly luxurious – hybrid electric/diesel-powered Whisper Launch. It's the first Whisper in the country – and it fits the bill exactly.

As Jacops tells it: "The Whisper is reliable, safe and slow. In fact, it's purposely made slow, but with the reliability of a tugboat."

Retired Dutch TV talk show host Tineke de Nooij nods in fervent agreement. She's the proud owner of a Whisper dubbed *Luella*, and is the academy's first customer. Living on the banks of the

Berg River in Velddrif, on the Cape's west coast, she believes she now has the perfect solution.

De Nooij has sailed for most of her life, and when she was obliged to give up her 15-foot day sailer in Holland, it really hurt. In the beginning she would not even have considered a powerboat, but living beside the Berg River changed her perspective. For starters, having to continually tack upwind while avoiding the riverbanks can be hard work. And when you're 65 years old, albeit fit and strong, having to duck to avoid the boom each time it swings over is something of a pain. Says De Nooij: "With *Luella*, I get the best of both worlds – the convenience of a motor and the silent luxury of a yacht."

Stepping on to the *Whisper*, I stand on the gunwale to check its stability, and am impressed by how little movement is induced by my weight. We slip our mooring and, as both the incoming tide and breeze are meeting *Luella* on the bow, leave the jetty using the diesel engine.

However, as soon as we clear the river bank, the gentle chug of the two-cylinder 9,7 kW diesel makes way for the 2,2 kW electric motor. The silence is almost palpable, broken only by the gentle swish of the water against the hull. Says De Nooij: "I love the electric motor. I'm a passionate nature lover, and I enjoy the silence, the sounds of the birds, the sound of the water and the wind."

But that's not the only advantage offered by the hybrid powerplant: De Nooij's fuel bill is an absolute joke in boating terms. She spends at least one hour a day on the river, and when asked how far the 50-litre diesel tank takes her, she just shrugs, saying: "I've been riding the boat for a few weeks now, and the tank is still half full."

Another benefit is that the electric motor produces no polluting emissions and generates no wake; it's perfectly suited to environmentally sensitive

The hybrid-powered diesel-electric Whisper Launch is safe and slow, with the reputed reliability of a tugboat. Top: *Luella* suits De Nooij's agenda perfectly. Her idea of a good time is relaxing with friends and family, glass in hand. Bottom right: Because the *Whisper's* electric motor produces no polluting emissions and generates no wake, it's perfectly suited to environmentally sensitive waters.





**Clockwise from top:** Large, well-positioned windows in the spray hood provide plenty of forward vision for those seated at the helm. Seating eight in comfort, the cockpit's height of 68 cm provides sufficient passive safety for small children. The brushless 2,2 kW electric motor delivers a maximum speed of 4,8 knots (9 km/h).



waters. That alone makes the boat desirable, says De Nooij, but as far as she's concerned, *Luella's* greatest attribute is its ability to glide silently up to the flamingos and pelicans on the river without disturbing them and ruining her viewing pleasure.

Still holding firmly to the mahogany wheel, De Nooij reaches into her picnic basket, digs out some cheese and a bottle of rosé, and places them on the diesel's engine cover. She's perfectly relaxed, controlling the hydraulic steering with one hand and monitoring her wine consumption with the other. Smiling, she says: "I love it on the water... it reminds me of my childhood. This boat is my ultimate dream, and I can handle it easily by myself."



**The WBBA follows an active learning approach in which students master each skill through continuous practice.**

Suddenly we slow down. "Oh, we've hit a sandbank!" exclaims De Nooij. No problem. She briskly puts down her glass, slips the electric motor into neutral, and fires up the diesel. For about 15 seconds there's a dirty brown wake in our path as she powers through the shallow water, and then we're back in deep water again. She kills the diesel and we return to a state of blessed silence. Her glass hasn't spilled a drop.

*Luella* seats eight in comfort – and this suits De Nooij's agenda perfectly. Her idea of a good time is catching up with old friends and family, glass in hand, and having a good chat. "It's exactly what you need when you're not 25 years old any more."

The basic whisper Launch is highly customisable, and De Nooij chose the most luxurious version, giving her a large spray hood up front, a bimini (overhead sunshade) and a cockpit tent. It also comes with teak decking, an imported stainless steel alcohol-burning stove, and a basin. Even the seat heights were calculated to suit her physical dimensions. The table fitted between the forward benches lowers to make a sun bed, and all the bright work is marine-grade 316 stainless steel.

Ample storage space under the seats makes cruising a real pleasure, and a sturdy messenger rope surrounding the hull acts as a highly efficient bumper. De Nooij could also have chosen a fitted toi-

let with holding tank, a fridge, wine cooler, and even a braai, but waived these options.

The Whisper's story began when Belgian-born Jacops, an inspector for the European Certification Bureau, was exploring Port Owen by car with his yacht broker wife, Nicole. What they saw astounded them. There were plenty of homes at the water's edge, but no boats. Then, as they continued their drive, they kept coming across jetties loaded with families partaking in that great South African tradition – burning meat. Says Jacops: "I thought to myself, 'these guys don't know what a jetty's for – it's for mooring a boat, not braaing!'"

There and then, he and his wife began to work out a plan to import Whisper-type leisure craft, of which there are literally thousands in Holland. But once they became aware of the prohibitive costs involved, they got cold feet and shelved their ambitions.

At about the same time, Dutch marine engine manufacturer Vetus contacted Jacops and expressed an

interest in becoming involved in a worthy social upliftment programme. But it was only when he was conducting a survey at the Manta Boat factory in Pretoria that Jacops began to formulate a plan. The owner's deaf grandson and some of his friends were working on the factory floor, and although they were doing well, it was obvious they needed some educational assistance.

Aware that the local boatbuilding industry was desperate for skilled workers, he didn't need to be a rocket scientist to join the dots. "It struck me that a school at which we would teach deaf youths to build boats was definitely a worthy cause." Vetus agreed – and so did the local boatbuilding industry. In fact, the SA Navy has committed itself to employing every graduate the Whisper Boat Building Academy (WBBA) can produce! The Western Cape Provincial government has come to the party in a big way too.

Setting up the academy on the grounds of the Noluthando School for the Deaf in Khayelitsha presented Jacops with a number of challenges. For example, many companies felt unsafe making deliveries to the area, and finding a company to insure the WBBA was a real headache. But as Jacops says, "We wanted to show people that these guys can create more than just ornamental tin cars and woven baskets."

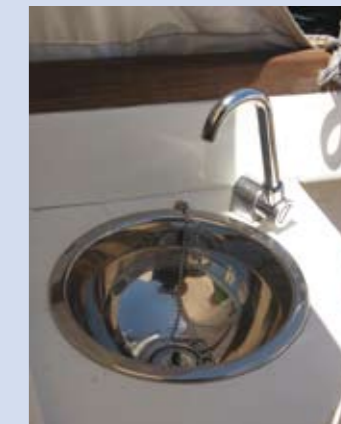
Initially, the academy's programme was



scheduled to run for just one year. But when they were approached at the end of the first year, the students elected to maximise their opportunity and stay for a second. The school follows an active learning approach in which students master each skill through continuous practice – and many leading personalities in the boating world have chipped in by teaching their particular specialities.

Safety is a recurring theme, featuring throughout the design and building process. The hull consists of a blend of full glass laminate and vinylester resin (chosen for its impressive anti-osmosis properties). The hull's shape, resembling a rounded banana with a flared bow, makes it virtually impossible to be tipped over. The cockpit's height of 68 cm provides sufficient passive safety for small children, and the interior can be traversed in total safety. The pronounced skeg aft protects both the rudder and propeller while at the same time providing excellent directional stability at low speeds.

Stringers below the deck divide the hull into boxes, and the voids are filled with buoyancy foam, with air tanks in



**Clockwise from below left:** Four 180-amp semi-traction batteries, stored in pairs under the aft side seats, provide enough juice for about six hours of silent cruising; there's an automatic fire extinguisher in the engine compartment, with backup from a portable unit; a stainless steel alcohol-burning stove and fresh water basin are among the mod-cons. **Bottom:** The diesel engine can be used to drive the electric motor, turning it into a dynamo to charge the batteries.

sides and bow providing extra buoyancy. There's an automatic fire extinguisher in the engine compartment, with backup from a portable unit. There are two bilge pumps, one automatic and another manual.

And finally, two fully independent engines. The brushless 2,2 kW electric motor delivers a maximum speed of 4,8 knots (9 km/h). Four 180-amp semi-traction batteries, stored in pairs under the aft side seats, provide enough juice for six hours of cruising at this speed (working on the assumption that the batteries accept an 80 per cent discharge). But if lower speeds are acceptable, the total motoring time will naturally be proportionally increased. A keel cooling system comes as standard.

The 8,1 kW diesel delivers an idling speed of 2,5 knots (4,6 km/h) and reaches a top speed of 6 knots (11 km/h). The propeller shaft runs from the diesel engine through the electric motor, with both engines driving the shaft. This means the diesel can be used to drive the electric engine, turning it into a dynamo

and charging the batteries on your way home, so you're ready for your next jaunt. A rugged, weatherproof shore charging socket is also fitted.

The Whisper Launch, a Bellus 580 designed by internationally recognised Dutch yacht designer Dick Koopmans Snr, can be fitted with a range of powerplants to suit one's needs. *Luella*, the top-of-the-range option, costs about R300 000. Depending on your choice of optional extras, you could get an electric version for around R150 000 or a straight diesel version for about R250 000. For more information, contact Peter Jacops on 021-790 5905 or visit [www.wbba.co.za](http://www.wbba.co.za) **PM**

**Specifications:**

<b>Length:</b>	6,1 m
<b>Beam:</b>	2,17 m
<b>Draft:</b>	0,55 m
<b>Engines:</b>	8,1 kW to 18,5 kW diesel, 2,2 kW electric or hybrid

**Whisper powertrain**

