

# Onboard

CRUISING • SEAMANSHIP • EQUIPMENT

PART ONE

## MAN ON THE RIVER

London to Istanbul in a small boat?  
*Steffan Meyric Hughes* meets an Italian  
eccentric who did it in a 19ft dinghy

Right: Full sail drifting on the French waterways  
Below: Lilies not far from those painted by Monet



First time I bought Giacomo de Stefano lunch on a cold, bright March day in 2010 at The Anchor in Faversham, it was because I thought he might, ever so politely, be starving. Bearded, bespectacled and clad in the woollen jumper of the idealist, he had spent the last night aboard his open lug yawl wrapped in his own sail as the mercury dipped below zero and cat ice crept up to hug his little boat in the darkness. The day before, young men in branded sportswear had assailed him with a shower of stones as he sailed on Oare Creek.

“Is this stone-throwing a popular pastime in Britain?” he asked me in all seriousness, as we sat by the pub’s fire, eating toasted sandwiches and enjoying the local handiwork of famous North Kent brewery Shepherd Neame.

Shortly after that, Giacomo nearly did die of a severe viral pneumonia that hospitalised him in Ramsgate and his home town of Venice, lasted six months and has left one lung permanently calcified. When CB editor Dan Houston and I sailed to Dunkirk with the Little Ships in 2010, I noticed Giacomo’s little boat *Clodia* still waiting for him in Ramsgate Marina. His grand voyage from Wargrave on the non-tidal Thames to Istanbul had been suspended before even crossing the Channel.

#### AN ORGANIC VOYAGE

In autumn 2012 (28 September, for the record), *Clodia* sailed into Istanbul, her skipper overwhelmed by tears of relief and jubilation. What took place during the intervening two-and-a-half years is a story the likes of which I’d never heard before.

Together, they’d sailed 3,200 miles (5,150km) across Europe through 12 countries and five capitals, 314 locks,

eight tunnels, across 18 aqueducts, and under more than 2,000 bridges. Giacomo had given more than 60 media interviews and appeared all over the world, including on Chinese television. When we met after the end of his journey, it was lunchtime again, this time near our office in central London, 10 minutes’ walk from the Thames.

“I wanted to start in London because of the amazing story of the pollution, the clean-up and how it has become one of the cleanest industrial rivers in the world,” Giacomo said, as we stood on Albert Bridge in the low-calorie winter sun, looking at the river. To him, the Thames is an example of good river management –

“What took place is a story the likes of which I’d never heard before”

something that might surprise Londoners, but a theory borne out by the terrible examples of mismanagement he would see during his voyage. Man on the River was, from the start, a voyage of environmental awareness – to raise

the profile of Europe’s rivers and their bankside dwellers. In the end, his journey through the 21st century became a statement against all the things tearing it apart.

In London, Giacomo admired not only the cleanliness of the murky brown river – he even spotted a trout swimming in a creek in Lewisham – but the way we throw our rubbish in bins in England. Over a lunch of fish and chips, and more beer – fittingly, London Pride this time – Giacomo relived his odyssey.

England turned out to be a mixed blessing for him. The intense cold of that winter gave him uncomfortable nights aboard *Clodia*, where he slept under his cream-coloured tent made from waterproof cotton of the sort once used to cover lorry trailer frames. By the time he had reached Ramsgate through 35-knot winds and seas that peaked at 25ft (7.6m), a malaise that had been troubling him since the Upper Thames became serious.

## “I’m too old to go to nightclubs and I must have smelled of the Danube”

His rowing companion at the time, Jacopo Epis, a strong Venetian who once ran a marathon in 2 hours and 34 minutes without training, took Giacomo to Ramsgate hospital, where pneumonia was diagnosed.

A recovery and a later relapse led to a spell in a Venetian hospital and six months’ recovery, some of it spent rowing a Mascareta, a traditional punt propelled like a gondola, to deliver organic vegetables grown by a friend. The English Channel was beginning to call, its voice louder than that of his doctor, who advised rest.

By May 2011, Jacopo the strong Venetian, determined for adventure, had walked home from Ramsgate to Venice and Giacomo had found a new travelling companion, Brazilian sailor Bruno Porto. They were ready to go. His doctor, ever the optimist, had one last warning – “if you go, you’ll die” – and soon after, Giacomo was sailing from Ramsgate to Gravelines, through a sparkling blue sea and kind winds.

“It was perfect,” he remembers. “Thirty-two miles in nine hours. I was in heaven. I simply couldn’t believe I was on the water again. Bruno told me: ‘We’ll go and you won’t die’. He saved my life – and the trip.”

Giacomo’s body and philosophy had changed. Not only had he lost and regained 4½ stone (29kg), but his view was that, “we are moving to a world where the absolute ego does not dominate anymore. The new driving force is the word ‘us’. I now have to consider the opportunity to share the journey, should I have to stop again.”

His statements can occasionally sound like those of the philosophical zealot, but even from our two meetings, it is clear that they are just part of the patina worn by a sensible man who has realised that he is living in a world gone mad, a world so keen to consume that it is beginning to consume itself. His dinghy-sailing textbooks include *Walden: Or, Life in the Woods* and *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, but his asceticism is not, as you might imagine, at the expense of a sense of humour.

He told me that throughout the journey, he saw many beautiful women but his only companions were fishermen with missing teeth. “I’m too old to go to nightclubs,” he confessed, “and I must have smelled of the Danube – a glorious smell to me, of course, but not to everyone.”

### FASTLY SLOW ON THE FRENCH CANALS

Missing a high-water lock into the French canal system at Gravelines nearly imposed a week’s wait, until a farmer with a tractor arrived to tow *Clodia* out of the water and into the canal. With that, and the Channel behind him, the main chapter of Giacomo’s journey to the Black Sea by rivers and canals had begun. Soon, he and Bruno settled into a rhythm of rowing or sailing an average of 19 miles (30km) a day, a pace that Giacomo found too fast – or “fastly slow” in his own words.

As they made their way through the wine regions of Champagne and Moselle, France in late spring was bursting into life, and they were able to pluck wild



*Clockwise from far left: Rowing Clodia at 2.5mph was “effortless” thanks to the very thin blades; sailing towards Gravelines; Giacomo waking up to a Samaritan’s breakfast; a food parcel left by friends – the journey was done on what Giacomo calls ‘gift economy’*





cherries from overhanging boughs as they sailed down corridors of tree-lined water, teeming with freshwater crabs, trout, char and bass.

At Napoleon's Riqueval Tunnel, 3.5M (5,671m) long, *Clodia* joined a line of five river cruisers and hitched a ride on a subterranean electric towing chain, Giacomo and Bruno using the chance to sleep for an hour under the sails as they moved slowly through a dripping, echoing darkness. Soon after that, one of many chance encounters near the Port de Vaudemanges resulted in a pot-luck supper of prawns and spaghetti cooked for 10 on board *Clodia* and eaten on the grassy banks of the canal.

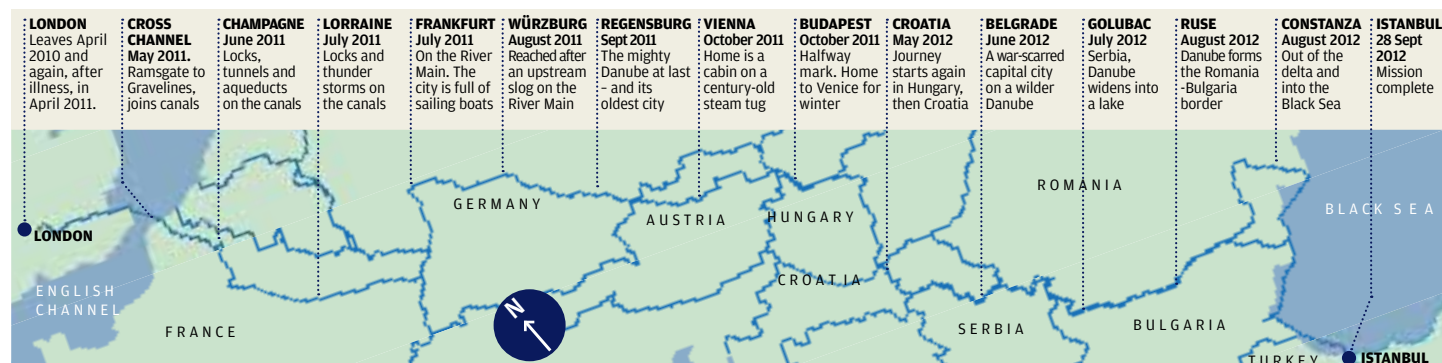
The Rhine was approaching, and with it, the usual stories of terror perpetrated by canal-dwellers upon those who would travel great rivers: giant waves, monster

currents, huge cargo ships with no lookout, six-storey, man-eating locks and police itching to imprison small-boat sailors in dark cells and throw away the keys.

In reality, the barges are fast – about 11 knots (20kph) – but their captains are alert. For someone used to Venice, where motorboats zigzag across the canals at great speeds and with seemingly no discipline, it was fine. The locks, at up to 890ft (270m) long and 50ft (15m) deep, lived up to their fearsome reputation, *Clodia* once sharing with four other ships, the smallest of which was 200ft (60m) long. And the only interest the police had in Giacomo and Bruno was in learning more about their trip.

By Strasbourg, the two men had passed 272 locks in 620 miles (1,000km), with the Châlons-Nancy stretch providing six tunnels and 110 locks in just 6M (10km).

**Above left:** With practice and a weather-cocking mizzen sail, sailing into and out of locks became possible  
**Top and above:** Various photographers accompanied Giacomo to get shots like these





**Top:** Mario Brunello plays Bach's *Cello Suite*, using *Clodia* as a soundbox

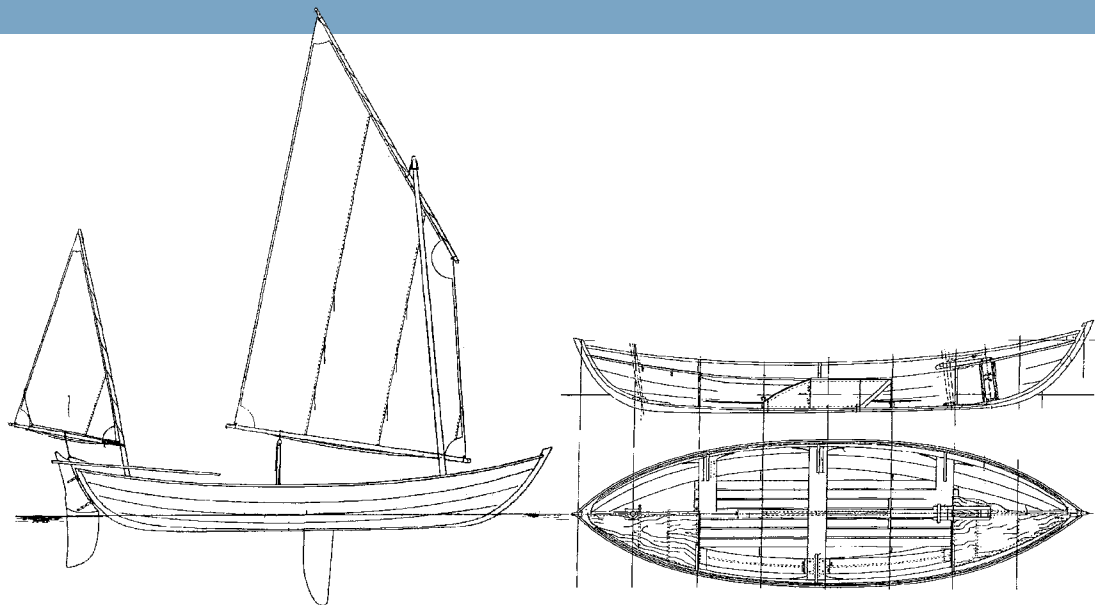
**Above:** The lock at Richecourt in Lorraine, France, was 50ft 6in (15.4m) high with a 30-minute rise

In Alsace, stopping at French towns with names like Vendenheim, Giacomo no longer knew which country he was in, once flying the German courtesy flag while still in France. But he did know how to sail into and out of locks without oars.

### WILD APPLES AND THE CALL OF THE WIND

Later, on the River Main in Germany, there were sandy camping beaches and wild apples. Frankfurt, one of the hubs of world capitalism, was a place of fleets of sailing boats. By September, *Clodia* was on the Danube, the great river that would bear her all the way to the Black Sea. At first, it was mean and canalised, its meanders embanked into straight lines. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht once wrote that: "We speak often of the violence of a river, but never of the banks that contain it".

At times like these, Giacomo found time to ponder some of the things eating the planet – like cars. One-tonne machines to convey a payload of perhaps one small man – 150lb (70kg). *Clodia*, 290lb (130kg), and carrying two large men and their supplies – that's 600lb (270kg), is propelled by wind or oar. Speed, though



## Clodia

Light, slim double-enders are the weapon of choice for cruising solo on rivers and canals, as I discovered sailing around London in 2009 on a Swallow Boats Storm 15. Their two disadvantages – a low maximum speed and uneconomical use of space – are compensated by their ease of propulsion, making for a modest, easily-handled rig and easy rowing performance. Iain Oughtred's Ness Yawl is one of the most popular of his designs with 196 plans sold. "It does well in raids," Iain says. "It's not dramatically fast, but it's good in every scenario – and it looks good." Raid organiser Charles-Henri le Moing bought one as soon as he saw it.

Giacomo's boat, *Clodia*, was built by English boatbuilder Roland Poltock and is a slight variant of the design in terms of the plank run, with six per side instead of the usual four. *Clodia* is built of modern marine ply with salvaged wood from a 15th-century Venetian palazzo for some of her timbers. She is lug-rigged (some are bermudan).

She was 'launched' into a concert hall early in 2010 to a special musical performance of Bach's *Cello Suite*, played by cellist Mario Brunello; wooden boats make great acoustic soundboxes. When she arrived as freight on London's Upper Thames, *Clodia* was not quite finished, but thanks to the generosity and time of boatbuilder Colin Henwood and partner Lucie, who put Giacomo and Jacopo up (see last month's CB) and lent them tools, *Clodia* was soon ready to go.

## NESS YAWL

LENGTH OVERALL  
19ft 2in (5.8m)

BEAM  
5ft 3in (1.6m)

DISPLACEMENT  
275lb  
(125kg)

SAIL AREA  
102sqft  
(9.5m<sup>2</sup>)

desirable, is the hardest and most damaging thing to contrive. For Giacomo, who prefers to travel rather than arrive, the average daily run of 19 miles was too fast.

By the time autumn was closing in, the river was wilder, Bruno had left, and Giacomo was alone again travelling through Germany, then cocooned in the Austrian capital Vienna. "My seafaring friends – you will not believe where I am," he blogged that October. He was in a tiny cabin below the surface of the river, on a 1914 steam tug called *Frederic Mistral*, often used by Emperor Franz Josef I. The present-day liveaboard owner, a retired ship captain, offered the cabin for as long as Giacomo wished to stay, but he needed to be moving again.

All too quickly, autumn was ending and he had to reach the Hungarian capital Budapest just 43 miles (70km) away before travelling home to Venice for the winter. Western Europe was over. Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Turkey, the great, wild Danube Delta and the Black Sea were beckoning.

Read part II of *Man on the River* next month  
[www.manontheriver.com](http://www.manontheriver.com)