

Trawler rally to cross the Atlantic

A fleet of passagemakers will cruise from Florida to Gibraltar on this Nordhavn-organized voyage

By Jim Flannery

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Boatbuilder Nordhavn, popularizer of passagemaking in powerboats, is organizing a trans-Atlantic trawler rally — a first of its kind, which the builder hopes will encourage more people to realize their dream to venture across the ocean in a boat built for exactly that purpose.

“This has been done many times for sailboats, but it has not been done before for powerboats — a rally across the Atlantic,” says Jim Leishman, vice president of Pacific Asian Enterprises, the Dana Point, Calif., builder of the Nordhavn line of bluewater passagemakers.

The powerboat fleet — Nordhavn has reserved space for 33 boats — will rendezvous at the Bahia Mar Yachting Center in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., May 10, 2004, for a 10-day orientation in ocean voyaging. They will set out for Gibraltar May 20, stopping en route at the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club in Hamilton, Bermuda, and Horta Marina in the Azores. Their aim: to cruise a summer or more in the Mediterranean. The boats return on their own schedule. They can come back across the Atlantic on their own bottoms, or as freight on Dockwise Express or another of the transports that carry pleasure yachts across oceans.

As Leishman suspected, the rally has fueled interest in ocean passagemaking; at least 28 entries have paid down deposits confirming participation in the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally.

Leishman says the idea for the rally began to germinate during his 2001-02

circumnavigation on Nordhavn's new 40-footer, a full-displacement expedition boat built in the style of a commercial trawler. Leishman voyaged 1,500 miles across the Indian Ocean, from Thailand to the Maldives Islands off India, in company with a Nordhavn 62. He says having a boat in radio and radar range the entire way was comforting because he knew help was near if anything happened.

“I thought about escorting a bunch of trawlers across the water, and that was the beginning of the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally,” he says.

Leishman plans to send the fleet across in two groups, so the boats can stay in tight formation during the 3,800-mile trans-Atlantic voyage: first, small boats with a cruising speed of about 7 knots, then larger ones that cruise at 8.5 knots.

Nordhavn will send three escorts with the fleet, a company-operated Nordhavn 57 built especially for the rally and two Nordhavn 62s, whose owners volunteered to come along as escorts. Nordhavn plans to bring along mechanics, technicians, and a doctor, and will provide port arrangements and weather routing. The escort boats will be fitted to tow a vessel, if necessary, and they will carry emergency fuel. Repair staff will be on-call for diesel, electrical, steering, watermaker and other breakdowns. Tow crews can help a broken-down boat in many situations, “But everyone has to realize there is a limit to the service we can provide,” Leishman says. “If we get into a violent gale, each participant has to fend for



A fleet of Nordhavns and other passagemakers will undertake a voyage designed to give their owners a taste of adventure.

himself. ... When things get tough, you have to be ready to be self-sufficient.”

With that in mind, the 10-day orientation at Bahia Mar will offer seminars to prepare rally crews for a safe passage. Leishman says boats must meet strict standards. They will have to have a range of at least 2,500 miles with no fuel on deck, and a minimum speed of 7 knots in calm water. Skippers of non-Nordhavn vessels (and there will be some in the fleet) must provide a letter from the builder or designer that the boats are suitable for the passage. They must have auxiliary propulsion that can move the boat at 4 knots in calm water, in case the main engine goes down. They also must have had a recent survey.

Nordhavn this year celebrated the 10th anniversary of the introduction of its flagship 62-foot expedition boat.

“We built sailboats for many years, Mason sailboats,” Leishman says. They were good bluewater passagemakers, and the company still builds them on request. Leishman says many who bought PAE's Masons were retirees whose families were grown and who now hankered for a bluewater adventure. They wanted to sail across oceans. Few, in fact, did.

“Without years and years of experience, the success ratio of actually doing it was dismal,” Leishman says. “For a lot of people it was just too much. They wound up selling their boats, not using them.”

He says PAE built the Nordhavn passagemakers as a powerboat alternative to bluewater sailing. He says three owners of Nordhavn 46s have circumnavigated; he sailed around the world in a 40-footer; and seven or eight Nordhavn skippers have cruised the Pacific. Leishman expects a half-dozen circumnavigations in the next few years in Nordhavns.

The company builds passagemakers from 35 to 72 feet. Leishman considers all Nordhavn models bigger than 35 feet capable of an Atlantic crossing.

“People buy them, go off and run them from Alaska to Maine, and cross oceans with them,” he says. Leishman expects this pioneering trans-Atlantic event to clear the way for more rallies taking powerboat cruisers across oceans in fleets. He says he has been contacted by a number of parties interested in organizing rallies to other destinations.

Milt Baker, a retired Coast Guard officer and former owner of Bluewater Books and Charts in Fort Lauderdale, has put together a Web guide to Mediterranean cruising and all the ports of call that the rally fleet will visit, at www.bluewaternav.com.

“This is the trawler event of the decade,” says Leishman. “There has been nothing like it before, nothing even close. It's going to be a wonderful adventure for the people who participate.” www.nordhavn.com