



Where there's a will...

A world cruise ended in tragedy when Willem van Tuijl and his family were attacked by pirates and the 13-year-old was shot in the spine. Yet 11 years on and in a wheelchair, van Tuijl is thrilled to be afloat once more in a specially designed 53-footer

Our boat, *Maaïke-Saadet*, is different. You probably wouldn't notice at first, but look more closely and you'll see that our Bestevaer 53 is beamier than the original design. You might think this has something to do with the sailing, such as better downwind performance. The real reason, however, is very different.

I am the reason for the changes to the design. I'm 24 years old, a student of journalism and I lead an independent life. The fact that I study or build and play guitars has no influence on my parents' boat. Being wheelchair-dependent does. I have been a paraplegic since 2000. On land I move about fine – nothing gets in my way – but life afloat is a different story. Most of the changes to the boat relate to the width of my wheelchair. Now I can visit my parents at weekends and sometimes join them on sailing trips.

I have not always been in a wheelchair. It all

happened 11 years ago while I was sailing round the world with my parents on *Hayat*, our previous boat. Our family has a long history of sailing. My grandfather was a professional sailor in dredging and my father followed in his footsteps as a dynamic positioning operator in the offshore industry.

My father, Jacco, met my mother, Jannie, while sailing. She wasn't exactly a sailor to begin with, but she began to enjoy it more and more. Jacco had always dreamed of long cruises when he was young and with Jannie he found someone to share those dreams. Together they decided to act on the dream, but then there was me.

An education

First my parents built a boat. *Hayat* was a multi-chine steel double-ender, a good combination of strength and elegance. When she was finished, we lived aboard for a few years, while I went to primary school in our hometown, Enkhuizen. Going on an extended cruise posed all sorts of problems about my education and the lack of contact with kids the same age.

The education problem was solved with home-schooling packages and my mother's skill as a teacher, although the older I got, the harder it was for her. All my fault – I would constantly say I had to check if there was a fish on the line, then disappear for an hour at least.

The Bestevaer 53 has been subtly adapted for Willem's use. Above: from the sea there is no obvious difference, but the side decks have been widened to make room for a chair (right)



“ I am the reason for the changes in the design. On land I move about fine – nothing gets in my way – but life afloat is a different story. Most of the changes to the boat relate to the width of my wheelchair



I solved the problem of friends missing out on kids and when they let me choose between Patagonia (no kids, lots of rugged Nature) and the Caribbean (lots of kids, less Nature in the pure sense of the word), I surprised them by choosing Patagonia.

We set a departure date, sold the house and car and we left when I was eight. We sailed to England, Spain and then to the Canary Islands, the crossroads where I was given the choice of

our route. My decision of Patagonia delighted my parents because they really wanted to see Patagonia. Jacco's love for that area of the world was conditioned by the books he had read; books of solo sailors taking on the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, stories of places untouched by man.

I still think of Patagonia as the most beautiful place I have ever seen. I have fond memories of the cold barren lands, a place of wind-stripped rocks where lonely trees lay almost flat to the ground because of the constant force of Nature.

Our cruise took us to Alaska in winter 1998. We overwintered in Kodiak, an island slightly warmed by the warm Gulf Stream. This was an

opportunity for me to attend elementary school. I was different and foreign, so I was picked on quite a bit, but I made friends as well.

I learnt a lot too. One time, we had to make some money for a school trip to Hawaii, so I printed postcards with linoleum stamps. In Holland, I wouldn't have sold many, but it turned out the Alaskans really liked the cards and they sold faster than we could produce them. I raised the money required and the trip was a blast.



Snapshots from an earlier life, when the van Tuijls sailed round the world in their previous boat *Hayat*

After moving down the west coast of Canada, North America and Central America, we switched to the east side by traversing the Panama Canal. After five years, the trip was nearing its end and we were contemplating different options for the near-future. As it turned out, the decision was made for us.

Pirate attack

On 28 March 2000 we were attacked by pirates off the coast of Honduras/Nicaragua. We were moored on a submerged reef and my father Jacco and I were fishing in the rubber dinghy. When we returned we saw a wooden canoe moored beside *Hayat*. Something wasn't quite right. People were on our boat, but Jannie was nowhere to be seen.

We realised something was seriously wrong when we saw they had AK47s. They started shouting and shooting. They yelled at us to come closer and, confusingly, to stay away. We didn't know what to do, as they were shooting in the water around us. Most of the bullets hit the surface quite far from the dinghy.

I didn't know what hit me at first, but soon Jacco and I were in the water next to the deflated dinghy and the water was colouring red. The realisation that I couldn't move my legs came simultaneously. I knew I was paralysed.

An argument in Spanish ensued – my being shot was presumably not part of the perpetrators' plan. There was an indecisiveness and things looked quite

“ Jacco and I were in the water and it was colouring red. The realisation that I couldn't move my legs hit me. I knew I was paralysed

bad for a moment as we were approached by the canoe, with someone in the bow looking like he meant to attack us with a machete. Luckily the argument got turned around and the pirates left.

I was more worried about the sharks that would be attracted to the substantial amount of blood in the water. No sharks appeared and my parents hauled me aboard. Things didn't look good. All we could do was try to stop the bleeding. We didn't realise that the bullet had gone right through me. Both kidneys were pierced and my spinal cord was severed. My being alive was a miracle, to say the least. We only tried to stop the bleeding at the entry wound, we weren't aware of the exit wound.

It took 20 hours for us to reach land and medical attention. While sailing towards the Honduran coast, we talked with medical experts and contacts via Ham radio. We were also in contact with the US military; they planned to pick us up in a helicopter, but the

A simple hoist using the boom means Willem can transfer himself and his wheelchair aboard, the cockpit is large and uncluttered and the tiller can be lifted out of the way



SPECIAL DESIGN



DG/youpix

Above: *Maaike-Saadet* is beamier than her sisterships and the shrouds are far outboard to allow Willem to move around the deck. Right: cleverly designed lift at the companionway

distance required a fuel refill. All this time I was conscious.

Upon reaching the coast I was transferred to a navy speedboat and taken ashore. A small van arrived – the ambulance also on duty as the town taxi. After a short stay at a medical station I was transferred to La Ceiba in a US military helicopter.

After having an operation on my kidneys in La Ceiba, I was flown to Dallas, Texas, to a children's medical centre for rehabilitation. Then we went to Miami to meet Jacco, who was sailing *Hayat* there with a friend from Holland. We bid her farewell. The boat was sold, we moved in with my aunt and uncle until we found an apartment and I began high school.

“ Before a decision was made, my parents asked if I was willing to be on a boat again after all that had happened. I was quite clear – yes

Because my spinal cord had been shredded by the shockwave after the bullet I was prone to neurological pain. Every so often I would feel like I had been stabbed in my knees or would experience a burning sensation under the soles of my feet. As the years passed, the pain became worse and worse. It prevented me from sleeping and studying. In fact, I had little quality of life.

But my parents persisted until a neurological surgeon in Rome performed an operation that has almost eradicated the pain. It also removed their time-consuming concerns – they cautiously began to dream again.

Used to life on a boat, my mother could not root herself in a house. She and my father daydreamed about living on a boat again, and when I started my studies and moved away, the possibilities grew.

On first returning to Holland, my father noticed a sketch of a new Gerard Dykstra design in a Dutch sailing magazine. It was love at first sight. The *Bestevaer 53* was different from standard glassfibre



builds. More than anything, the seaworthiness of the design caught his eye – Dykstra is an ocean sailor and he designed the boat for himself.

Before a decision was made, however, my parents asked if I was willing to be on a boat after all that had happened. I was quite clear – yes. If I hadn't agreed to stay on a boat every so often, my parents would have had a house and bought a smaller boat. But with my blessing the decision was made.

Increased beam

Still, some changes to the design were necessary if I were to sail with my parents. Jacco and Jannie met Gerard Dykstra himself to explain their needs.

The most substantial change was to increase the beam by 50cm to widen the side decks for my wheelchair. I can now roll to the other side via the foredeck. I can't completely reach the cockpit, but I can get close enough to transfer myself from my chair to one of the winches and down into the cockpit. My parents can then lift my chair down for me. To enable all this, we also had to modify the rigging, mounting all stays outboard so I could pass.

The increased beam of the boat required other design changes. For instance, the rudder balance is different from that of the original design. Another major change is the fully retractable hydraulic keel; nothing to do with me and all to realise Jacco's dreams. The ability to beach the boat has already been used quite often – the *Waddenzee* turns out to be a perfect practice ground. This area has strong tides and dries out in many areas at low tide. This



The folding doors of the heads mean Willem can wheel himself in and take a shower on a folding chair



makes it bountiful in Nature, with a great many seals; wonderful to visit, and very close to our homeport.

The lifting keel also allows us to cruise the Dutch inland waterways. We have done this ourselves and plan to take my grandparents, for whom sailing is a bit too rough, south via the waterways. Sometimes cruising destinations close to home can be surprisingly wonderful.

One aspect of the original design already suited us. Instead of a wheel, the design incorporates a telescopic tiller to create room in the cockpit. It can be hinged upwards for even more space. To enable me to manoeuvre in the cockpit, the table is removable.

The changes to the Dykstra design are not without consequences. The increased beam makes the boat slower than her sistership, for example. Yet the extra width provides more form stability, making *Maaik-Saadet* more comfortable, and the water ballast in the original design isn't necessary in our boat.

Smart elevator

Below decks, Jacco's design skills came to the fore. He redesigned the entire interior, so there would be plenty of space for me to move around freely. First of all though, I had to be able to access the main cabin. *Maaik-Saadet* has a standard companionway – when I'm not aboard it looks perfectly normal.

Yet hidden behind the woodwork is a simple, smart elevator comprising two stainless steel rods and brass bearings connected to a framework that supports a flat base. The bearings are connected to an electric motor at the bottom via pulleys at the top of

the steps – a simple remote control lets me move the plateau up and down.

All doors in the boat are 70cm wide, a little wider than my wheelchair. The door to the heads is the same width and is made of two parts, with extra hinges in the middle. These allow it to fold, so I can go in with the door folded and close the door behind me. I would be in the way of a normal door and the heads is too small for me to roll past the door. I can take a shower by sitting in a foldable cloth chair.

My berth is the pilot berth that opens into the main cabin; I can park my wheelchair against it and transfer easily into the berth. Because the berth has walls on all sides, I'm quite secure when sailing in rougher seas. When awake, I like to sit at the chart table as its angle can be altered. This way I can sit straight while sailing at an angle.

So far all the changes have proved to be sufficient and I regularly stay over for a weekend. Sailing still has its charms and is made possible by all the enhancements we made.

The new boat has also made us dream – what is the point of a bluewater boat if you are only sailing in the IJsselmeer or crossing the North Sea to England?

At the moment they remain dreams and not plans, but my father would one day love to circumnavigate both Americas. The highlight of the cruise would be to sail the North West Passage, and here the choice of a lifting keel that would allow us to beach the boat would come in handy. It would also enable us to sail close to shore, sometimes a necessity on this remote journey. Watch this space.



Top: Willem van Tuijl with his parents Jannie and Jacco at the saloon table. Above: Willem manoeuvres easily around the interior of the boat