



The gift

Vagabundo II was the 21st birthday present whose restoration turned into a rite of passage for student boatbuilder Robbie Fabre and his friends.
Words and photographs by *Emily Harris*



Above: Owner, restorer and now skipper: Robbie Fabre at the helm

The water was getting darker and more mottled by the second, as the wind, blowing from the north, descended over the Gulf of Saint-Tropez at a rate of knots. Yacht *Vagabundo II*, the 42ft (12.8m) German Frers ketch built in 1945, was heeling over but not hard pressed. I'd been up the mast for 20 minutes waiting for more wind to ensure a good shot of pressure in her sails. It was uncomfortable – and then it all got a bit too much. My leg was pinched between a shroud and the spreader in order to make my two hands available for my camera; I'd got the shot but the mainsail had been eased in order to depower her, which wasn't great for me. The wind was getting up – my 'exit strategy' needed to be put into action.

Robbie Fabre, the 23-year-old skipper and new owner, delegated the job of easing the halyard in order to get me down, to his end-of-season crew, younger brother Henry and Tano Noblia (his regular crew having gone back to their universities in the UK after Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez), and I was on deck in a flash.

We were in company of the mistral – the dry, strong wind that blows offshore in the south of France. Robbie and crew all went from aviator sunglasses cool to getting soaked on the foredeck, knocked by every wave but not blinking an eye. This was a small fraction of what this

yacht may have experienced in her early life off Argentina during the war, when her home waters were not littered by mines, like Britain's, but clean, in the South Atlantic.

Her history is quite unusual for a Saint-Tropez classic. It is rich in racing, in particular the unofficial 1940s races that helped develop the endurance-based 1,200-mile, first Buenos Aires-Rio de Janeiro race in 1947, in which she came second overall. From these races her lines were chosen for the Frers-designed Boreal class.

Robbie and his crew were working hard together to get the foresail down and at least secured by a sail tie as the wind was becoming overwhelming. Meanwhile his mother Caroline was left in command of *Vagabundo*, also getting soaked but stoically helming us homeward.

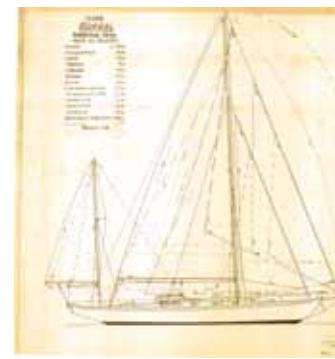
FAMILY OF SHIPOWNERS

The Fabre family, which has a history of shipping and ship-owning that dates back to the 15th century, lives in Bristol and has a house in Port Grimaud, near Saint-Tropez, where I had arrived the day before to meet them. Inside, Philippe Fabre sat in his round lower-level drawing room with a coffee in one hand and the other casually referencing the 20- or 30-something books, magazines, and naval drawings that were strewn over the coffee table in front of him. The family's vivid Fabre Shipping colonial-era posters, their bows floating proud,



Above and previous spread: The newly-restored *Vagabundo II* off Saint-Tropez
Right: White paint and varnished woodwork give a clean, light look below





VAGABUNDO II

DESIGNED
German Frers, 1945

BUILT
Domingo Catani,
San Isidro, Argentina

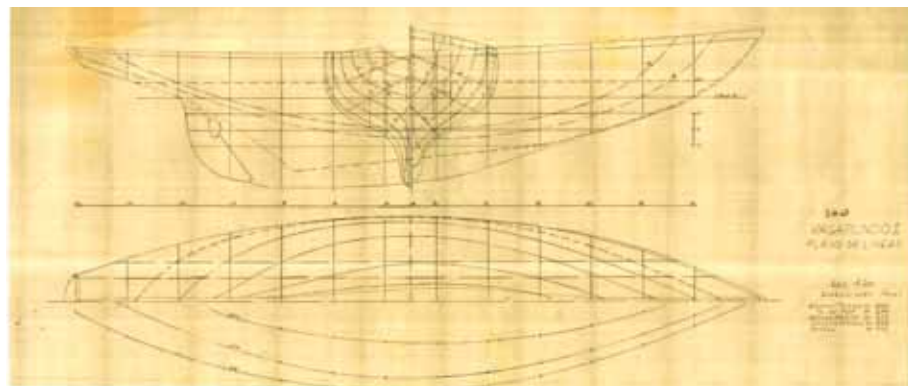
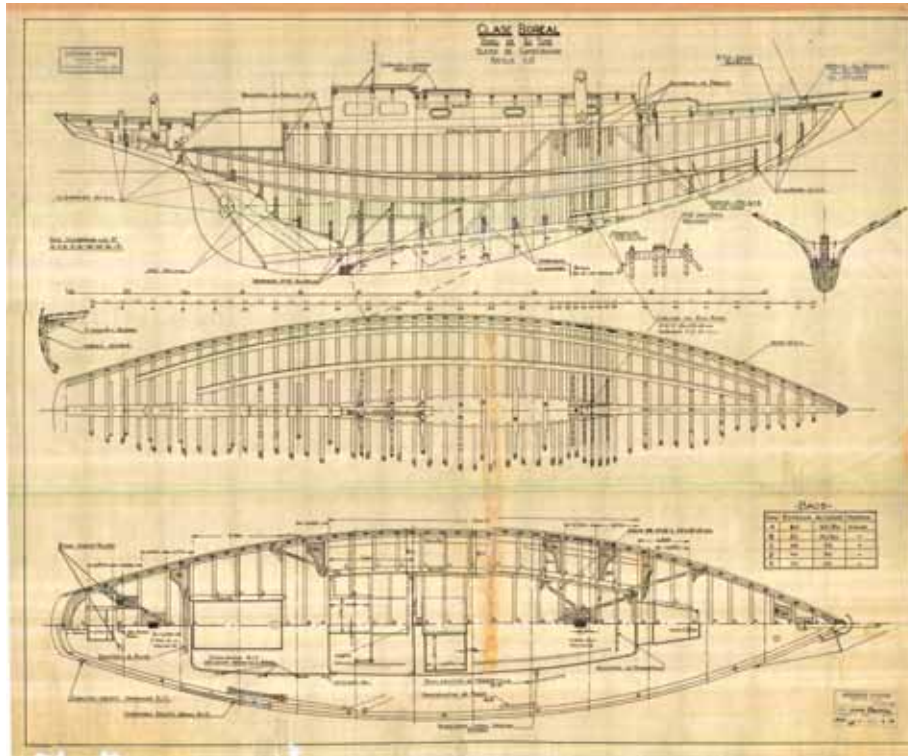
LENGTH OVERALL
42ft 4in (12.9m)

LENGTH WATERLINE
31ft 2in (9.5m)

BEAM
10ft 6in (3.2m)

DRAUGHT PLATE UP
5ft 7in (1.7m)

DRAUGHT PLATE DOWN
8ft (2.5m)



were displayed on every wall. Philippe's two sons had come in with warps coiled up in their hands. It had taken me an hour to work out that *Vagabundo II* was right outside – in their 'backyard', through the blinds, in the water! She lay near Philippe's other yacht *Freya*, a 47ft (14.3m) Bill Dixon sloop.

Considering Philippe has a collection of yachts, I wondered why the Fabres had acquired *Vagabundo II*. As we went to a café in his son Robbie's Boston Whaler, Philippe insisted that buying *Vagabundo* had been a mistake – he'd thought she was his father's friend's yacht *Escorpion*. He had come across the boat via telephone and email, through a friend who had found her in Port Cogolin, Saint-Tropez. This friend described her as being "the perfect boat for Robbie", and Philippe instinctively acquired her on the basis of seeing some photographs on his iPad computer.

BENEFICIAL MISTAKE

Philippe had been looking for a boat for his son Robbie's 21st birthday in 2010. His gift of a yacht was to develop Robbie's marine career, for him to experience the responsibility of owning and skippering a racing yacht as an extension of his future professional career in the design and build of sailing vessels. Robbie is currently enrolled at the International Boatbuilding Training

College, Lowestoft, after gaining qualifications in Marine Technology at Plymouth and Boat Design and Production at Falmouth. Although *Vagabundo* wasn't Philippe's friend's yacht, the family discovered her history and realised what a beneficial mistake she had been!

In the café Robbie reeled off particular jobs he undertook during the restoration. I had originally met Philippe and Robbie on one of the last few days of Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez, on the foredeck of *Vagabundo*, surrounded by his fellow marine graduates, and I'd experienced the heady sense of young team energy. Robbie's infectious enthusiasm made him seem as if he might just untie the lines without us noticing and nip out for a match race or a sail in the dark! Far from the Irish Bar antics that the other young crews preferred, he was telling yarns as if he'd been at sea for years.

The energy was still present as he described to me the work he carried out on *Vagabundo* once he'd transported her from Port Cogolin, near Saint-Tropez, to Southampton in December 2010, minus her rigging, but otherwise a seemingly perfect boat in need of a minor facelift and a few personal alterations to suit her new owner. She had been lying hidden and covered up in Port Cogolin for two years before the Fabres bought her. "On the surface, cosmetically she was just immaculate – she blossomed in our eyes, [but] on closer inspection the

sparkling interior hid the rot around the engine... After using every bluff in the book there was nothing to stop my friend (the determined surveyor) from bludgeoning his way through what was in my mind the perfect interior, with a power tool and no plot," said Robbie.

PREVIOUS REBUILD

From then on Robbie knew that *Vagabundo's* ceilings (the hull linings) would have to come out. Luckily the planking and frames had not proved to be in a similar state of decay. Her previous owners Miguel and Sonia Carril, who acquired her from their father Justo del Carril in 1976, rebuilt her as new in 2003 under the watchful eye of designer German Frers himself.

On completion they then took her cruising the Brazilian shore, reaching Rio and Bahia, and crossed the Atlantic to Argentario, Italy. They competed in the Panerai Argentario Sailing Week 2007 with Frers at the helm and came first overall in the 15m LOA classic division.

But though in terms of sea miles she was being successfully cruised and used, this period took its toll on *Vagabundo's* structural condition, exacerbated by the lack of ventilation when she was laid up in Port Cogolin. In addition, the angle at which the steering pulleys had been placed had caused movement in the cockpit sides and to the hull. Robbie fitted a stainless-steel structure to

Above: The predominantly white interior follows tradition; the boat is fitted out for comfortable cruising as well as racing



Above: *Vagabundo's* lines were adopted for the Boreal class

“Boatbuilding paralysis had set in. It was a pinnacle moment. We wanted to carry on but had run out of energy.”



Above: Deck crew: left and far right, friend Tano Noblia; centre (blond hair), Henry, Robbie's younger brother

stiffen that area and improve access to the cockpit sole and steering system. The Mediterranean's stern-to-mooring habit meant that movement had also occurred in the taffrail and had cracked the floor there. Stainless-steel bolts were inserted to the forward face of the taffrail and through the 75mm-deep quarter knees. Fairing to the capping rail and counter was started, and a cracked floor discovered and replaced.

Robbie had soon realised that if he was to correct the problems highlighted by the survey (many of them unexpected) and have *Vagabundo* ready to sail to the Med in June, he needed some help. The answer was to recruit fellow students from the IBTC at Lowestoft. They would commute to Southampton for long weekends (and sometimes longer), sleeping on board to make the most of their time and save money. Unfortunately the portholes had been removed at an early stage and sent away to be stripped, re-chromed and resealed. “Even our drinks would freeze overnight,” says Robbie.

The extremes of weather also affected *Vagabundo's* teak deck, which moved, meaning about half the seams needed raking out and resealing. It had also split in certain places and had to be routed and splined.

Another major job involved the 74hp Yanmar engine. Its waterlock and filter had to be made more accessible, but also the engine mounts needed investigating as they

set up an annoying knocking at certain RPMs. During that process, the engine was moved to the saloon, where it became the boys' bedside table.

The grey-water system was removed to gain access to keel bolts and limber holes. The refrigeration system was reorganised to run off domestic batteries, helped by a keel cooling system – so easing off strain on the engine when cruising, especially in the Med. The anchor locker was remodelled to a third of its size, and made to drain away to the grey-water system.

‘DINOSAUR’ CENTREBOARD

Progress on fixing the drop-down centreboard (which adds 75cm to the draught), however, was “nothing short of glacial”, according to Robbie. The operating motor was taken out to be reconditioned, but condemned as too far gone. After spending some time deliberating over a manual system, and deciding it would intrude too much into the accommodation, they decided to fit a new motor to the ‘dinosaur’ mechanism and revisit the job this winter.

Making the new sails meant an unscheduled drive to Port Grimaud to pick up the old ones and get measurements. Blocks were made to match and Harken tracks were replaced with more traditional, and longer, ones by Dryade. In March, the job of sanding back the varnish began: 16-hour shifts day after day by the IBTC



crew, and even after a good vacuuming their sleeping bags, as Robbie put it, “looked as if they had spent the night in the Atacama Desert.”

By now, burn-out at the end of a long weekend was the norm as Robbie and his friends, fuelled by a diet of Haribos and Red Bull, drove themselves on, until one weekend, as Robbie puts it, after arriving back at Lowestoft, “We were mere embers on the living-room floor. Boatbuilding paralysis had set in. It was a pinnacle moment. We wanted to carry on but had run out of energy.”

But it was also the turning of the tide. The portholes were ready for collection, new parts were ready to fit. Soon the boat was tidy and painting could begin. With a Royal Wedding and another Bank Holiday to provide more time, the day the shed was dismantled approached rapidly. The brief sea trials in Southampton revealed a healthy wooden-boat-problem list for the south of France where *Vagabundo II* would arrive in late June.

Robbie, who is so fired up by this project, seems to have no problem finding crew. During “the Voiles,” as he calls it, “we had sailors from several UK colleges and universities. They were close friends or at least, if they weren't they were girlfriends of boatbuilders!” He eagerly reels off his entourage: “Well there's Sam Masterman – my right-hand man – super reliable from



Above: View from the mast-top
Left: Crew on board
Below left: A tidy transom



Above, clockwise from top left: The signature curved companionway; Caroline Fabre, Robbie's mum, on the helm; under restoration in the tent at Southampton; restoration team slept aboard

Jersey, loves a bit of weather, he's my bosun. Atlantic Al, our trimmer, a graduate from Falmouth University who's started a sail loft in Fowey, Sail Shape Ltd. Then there's Fork Lift Al (named for his super strength) who is our Italian mastman studying at Lowestoft; William Holt, our resident dinghy sailor from Plymouth University; Peter Trevis who cycles from St Rafael – he had no money this year after having such a good time at Plymouth University on the Marine Tech course. Plus his girlfriend Rachel, the boat's resident mum."

The launch party in Port Grimaud, with family, friends and fireworks, was a celebration of Robbie's new ownership of this gleaming restored yacht, *Vagabundo II*.

SIGNATURE FEATURE

The most unique feature on board *Vagabundo* is her companionway, placed on the starboard side amidships. It's not a contrived recent feature though; it is the German Frers design signature. *Vagabundo II* was born out of a bout of depression Frers experienced after designing his second yacht for himself, *Fjord II*, which he reluctantly sold in 1943. He consequently shut himself away to draw *Vagabundo II*.

Down below, there are six berths which are complemented by good standing headroom and a practical galley which lies opposite the companionway

and contains vertical and quite industrial looking fridges with stainless-steel lids. These lids double up as clean worktops and emphasise that while the varnishing gives you a warm feeling about the boat, there is also a slightly utilitarian or at least, super practical feel to the décor.

Robbie supposes he needs eight crew onboard ideally. He talked about the things he wants to improve. The winches – he'd like to minimise them at some stage. There's a new switchboard, but the electric system itself is useless and he will be rewiring the boat in time. He also mentioned that the long wooden-boat-list wasn't completely fixed. His autopilot might need a tweak, it seems; sailing singlehanded through anchored Wally yachts in a mistral was not ideal. The centreboard motor is still jammed and seized in the down position. This was Robbie's excuse for not winning Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez – not being able to get the keel up when running was a disadvantage.

The crew's performance as an under-25-year-old crew, in what is quite a mature scene, has not just been fun, it seems to have put their training and their understanding of yacht construction, design and building into context. Awards like second prize in the Epoque Marconi Division of Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez can only spur on Robbie Fabre's hunger to bring his young crew back together for more racing (and more fixing?) next year. 🍷