BESPOKE BY BLUEWATER



With a go-anywhere length and owners committed to extended cruising, there's nothing parochial about narrowboat *Essex Girl*

Length 58ft **Berths** 2+2 **Propulsion** Vetus 42hp diesel **Bluewater Boats** 01926 811699, *bluewaterboats.co.uk*



The short foredeck has an integral water tank under it.

NICOLE HARRINGTON AND RICHARD CLAPP HIRED BOATS for many years before considering getting a boat of their own as retirement approached. After deliberating over whether to buy new or second-hand, the couple eventually opted for the former, settling on a bespoke narrowboat that would incorporate (and avoid) some of the things that they had learned during their hiring experiences.

Quite local to the couple in Warwickshire is Bluewater Boats, a company that builds a wide range of craft, from narrowboats to Dutch barges for coastal cruising. Such boats are always constructed from the baseplate up by the company to its own designs, though some of its wide-beam designs come from renowned naval architects like Andrew Wolstenholme.

Having visited Bluewater's premises and discussed their ideas with company owners Dave and Sharon Warner, the couple decided to commission *Essex Girl*: a 58ft narrowboat designed for extended cruising and as a sociable space for guests.

Shell & exterior

Richard and Nicole decided on a boat with no forward cockpit but a very spacious aft deck – an ideal layout for having guests aboard. Right up in the bow, where you might normally expect a locker, is a screwed-down and sealed hatch into the integral water tank. Many boaters think that separate stainless steel tanks are the only way to hold fresh water, but integral tanks have the advantage of giving access for cleaning and remedying – though having been shot blasted and covered with two-part epoxy drinking water tank paint, it's unlikely that will be needed for years. In fact, the whole of the shell exterior has been shot blasted to SA2.5 standard, before being coated with two-pack epoxy paint systems, applied under controlled conditions. This gives an absolutely superb, hardwearing and deep gloss (for the cabin) finish, which should also last years.

The foredeck is actually quite easy to stand on for line handling, as there are raised stainless steel handrails running around the edge. These are very smart and provide excellent grip. They also avoid the rust traps of solid handrails, as well – and can provide a place to secure side fenders easily, if required. The cabin itself tapers towards the bow, which avoids a bluff aspect, and a pair of double-glazed sapele doors give emergency escape from the cabin, as well as looking good. There is a mix of portholes and deeper rectangular double-glazed windows along the cabin sides, with deep blue paintwork and gold coachlines. The cabin side paint is taken down to the gunwales and top bend – it's harder to touch in for scrapes but, as the paint finish is so tough, there are very few marks after almost a year hard cruising, apart from at the stern corners.

Up on the roof, low-profile Vetus stainless steel vents give good airflow, and there is a compact self-seeking Maxview VuQube 2 satellite system in a dome, plus a 4G/5G/wifi aerial. There are also three 160W solar panels adhered to the deck, plus a good pole-plank holder forward.

The aft deck is unusual but brilliantly practical. The stern is square, which gives more deck space, with a raised steel dodger that

















A A view of the stern deck of *Essex Girl*. **B** Rear seating has removable plush upholstery, while the locker has forward-facing LED lights in the base – great for tunnels as well as entertaining at night. **C** The integrated 12V fridge. **D** The breakfast bar is the central dining space and gives a lot of room in the galley. **E** The galley cupboards have an unusual colour choice, but it works, with black appliances against the iroko worktop. **F** The pull-out granite extension works well and does not need to be fully extended. **G** A small microwave sits above the Thetford oven and grill. **H** The bright interior is warmed by the oak and iroko finishes.









A A substantial washer/dryer is ideal for extended cruising. B Offset rear doors still allow for storage and the electrics cupboard. C The stainless steel diesel heater sits within a deep steel tray, with plenty of space around it. D The separating dry (composting) toilet provides back-up to the pump-out loo. E A compact but very useable toilet compartment by the aft steps is a real bonus. F A large comfortable sofa faces the TV, with plenty of open storage.

provides a solid backrest of a bench seat (with lots of storage under). The cabin sides end in a semi-cruiser style but there is only a bench seat (with gas bottles under) to starboard. This gives a really large area to stand, making it very sociable, and also allows the twin steel stable doors to be offset to starboard.

The solid aft dodger means that a conventional swan-neck tiller cannot be used, so an extended U-shaped one has been employed instead, with a slot in the base of the rear locker. There is a set of superb upholstered cushions and backrests for the two seats, with table fittings set into the deckboards and low-level LED lights for night (or tunnel) use.

Saloon

The offset cabin entry means a slightly more shallow electric cupboard, plus shelves, to starboard. However, this allows for a toilet compartment to be fitted to port, complete with its own compact washbasin and more storage. This space is excellent, allowing guests quick access to the loo without having to traipse through the boat, and can be used by anyone sleeping in the saloon. The owners have gone for a Compoost separating dry toilet here – which also serves as a back-up, should the pump-out loo in the main bathroom fail. The space is really practical, with even room for a bin, and an extractor fan keeps it well ventilated.

Just forward of the toilet compartment is a Refleks stainless steel drip-feed diesel stove, set in a deep black gloss steel tray. This is mounted just off centre rather than tucked in the corner, so both radiates and convects heat efficiently. There are also some neat anthracite designer radiators through the boat, running from a Webasto diesel heater.

The boat has oak-veneered ply below the gunwales, with grooved moisture-resistant MDF, painted white, on the cabin sides and roof, the latter in a tongue-and-groove style. Quality MR-MDF is as good, if not better, than ply in many situations, with the advantage that moisture cannot track between layers of wood as sometimes happens, even with





"Solid oak trim is used throughout, along with highly practical Karndean flooring"

good-quality ply, near doors or other possible sources of water ingress. Solid oak trim is used throughout the boat, along with highly practical Karndean flooring.

There is a large, extremely comfortable sofa facing a large TV, with the satellite and wifi systems hidden away. A useful shelf runs above the TV and there are five open shelves either side. The Roman blinds add a splash of detail to the interior, while two 230V wall lights have filament-style LED bulbs inside clear glass shades, which look stunning.

Galley

Another set of matching 230V lights, this time as pendants, are above the breakfast bar at the aft end of the galley, with two swivel stools providing comfortable perches. These lights also act as a form of subtle divider between the galley and saloon, without encroaching on space – and I do wonder why they are not used more often on boats. There is a side door to port, with inner glazed doors, which lets more light into this space during the day.

The worktop is stunning – oiled, solid iroko gives a very hardwearing surface that can easily be refinished. The L-shape to starboard, which also forms the breakfast bar, has enough space for a coffee machine, toaster and mug rack, with a three-burner glass hob nearer the window. To make the breakfast bar bigger, a sliding granite section pulls out across the passageway, which is very useful and required some very clever adaptation of the worktop. The extension is free-standing, so can be pulled out just as much as required.

The oven and grill are in a full-height unit forward, with a small microwave above. The deep stainless steel sink, with drainer grooves in the iroko, is to port with a neat splashback that matches the yellow-brown paint finish of the cupboards. Under the sink is a Hoover washer/dryer, which takes a massive 8kg for washing and 5kg drying – brilliant for extended cruises. Opposite, as well as the integrated 12V Shoreline fridge, is a slide-out chest freezer, plus more cupboard and drawer space.

Bathroom

The door to the bathroom is to port, with a frosted glass upper half that's opaque enough to give good privacy while allowing light dispersal through, which is useful. The bathroom takes up a little more boat length than many similar craft, which is one of the gains of not having a forward cockpit. Against the forward bulkhead is a deep rectangular shower tray, with bi-fold glass doors. This is very spacious, and it is lined with grey Lustrolite waterproof panels, which work well with the white cabin sides and the warmth of the woodwork. A Tecma macerator toilet pumps to a holding tank forward. There is a lot of legroom around the loo, which is placed against the starboard hull side, with easy access to the mechanical gubbins through panels around it. As with the other toilet compartment, there is space for a proper bin as well.

Against the forward bulkhead is a granite-topped unit, with open shelves (including dedicated storage for the two porthole stoppers) and a cupboard, with a large washbasin above. There is a superb heated mirror, with LED surround lighting that is both on the surface of the mirror, and illuminates from behind, giving a visual appearance of depth and, because it does not steam up, the sense of a much bigger bathroom. There is an unusual towel radiator in here too, constructed with a series of bent pipes, which is certainly an alternative to the usual bland chrome affair.

Bedroom

The wide double bed has its head against the forward bulkhead, which is good as its occupants are likely to have their heads lower than their feet (as boats at rest usually trim level or bow-up). Although almost full width, there is a narrow lower shelf either side, which means the edges of the duvet are not scrunched up against the hull side.

Under the bed is the waste tank, along with the bow-thruster and its batteries – but there is still space for two deep drawers. Like the back of the boat, low-level air is ducted from high-level external vents into the cabin and, very importantly, the cabin bilge. Not only is this the most likely place for any gas leak to accumulate, but having a properly ventilated bilge can reduce moisture build-up and prevent corrosion.

The aft bulkhead is for storage, with the upper half being a good sized hanging wardrobe, with four drawers underneath. Two portholes, glazed bow doors and well-placed LED lighting, plus the light spill from the bathroom door, make this a very cosy space. There is even room for a laundry basket on the floor – something often neglected at the planning stage. Fire extinguishers are sensibly placed throughout the boat, and combined CO/smoke alarms are in both the saloon and bedroom.

Services

Two phenolic ply hatches give access to the engine room – the smaller aft one allows a quick check of the weed hatch. The Vetus M4.45 is a well-proven engine, with recent updates that make it more user friendly, such as the water-cooled cast aluminium top cover that reduces engine noise and temperature. The skin tanks are oversized; there is a tank either side, coupled by a welded box to the baseplate. This will ensure the engine could, if needed, run flat-out without overheating for extending periods of time. The engine also heats the 55-litre horizontal calorifier in the engine room. There is a



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standard lagged exhaust fitted, and there is good ventilation into the engine space. A four-bladed prop is used, and the stern gland is water lubricated, with a PRM 150 hydraulically operated gearbox for longevity.

The engine has a 100-amp AGM starter battery charged by its own alternator, and the larger domestic unit charges four 140Ah AGM Vetus batteries. The 75kgf Vetus Pro bow-thruster has two 100Ah AGM batteries of its own. The Victron 3,000W inverter/charger supports the electric system, while 480W of solar panels can provide most, if not all, the domestic needs when tied up for a day or two during summer. All of the circuitry is well labelled, with each wire having a printed tag at the circuit breaker panel and throughout the boat. All pipework has similar labelling as well, which is incredibly useful for maintenance in the future.

Handling & underway

The engine runs quietly, despite a normal silencer and no sound insulation. The Morse control, bow-thruster and horn/headlight switches are on the pedestal to port formed by the seat locker, and fall easily to hand. We reversed *Essex Girl* out of its berth at Calcutt Marina on a fairly gusty day, and turned without having to use the bow-thruster, all under tick-over. The prop has been sized to give good cruising speeds at lower engine revolutions – so 1,200rpm was a reasonable pace, with 1,350rpm getting us up to around 4mph.

Aided by the well-designed hull and square stern, the boat pulls very little wash.



The big shower in the bathroom.



The macerator loo has plenty of space around it and easy access to the plumbing.

WW VERDICT

Essex Girl is a very well-designed and executed boat, without the outrageous bling that the name might suggest! The interior is clever – fitting a second loo into a 58ft boat is no mean feat, but is enabled by the unusual, and exceptionally practical, stern deck design. It's a very comfortable boat that feels a lot bigger than it is – not having a forward cockpit is a sensible decision for a cruising couple, and having the saloon aft, with galley amidships, is a very practical choice here, making the boat very sociable.

Having the steel properly shot blasted and coated with high-quality two-pack paints means much reduced maintenance for years to come. The standard of installation of the electrical and plumbing systems, including such things as pressure loss/level gauges on the gas cylinders, is excellent and well thought out.

Given the boat is almost a year old, bar a few scratches on the stern quarters, it looks brand new – and clearly the owners look after it.

The tiller arm is longer than normal, to overcome the additional resistance of the more unusual design. However, it is not a heavy tiller, and the careful rudder design, with a degree of rake in the stock, means it will self-centre when cruising but also hold a position easily – you can take your hand off the tiller and it will keep on track. The boat handles very well and was easy to turn, without needing the bow-thruster – though when we tried out the thruster, it readily kicked across the bow, without drawing in any air and ventilating. The engine installation is very smooth, with no vibration through the tiller or within the boat itself.

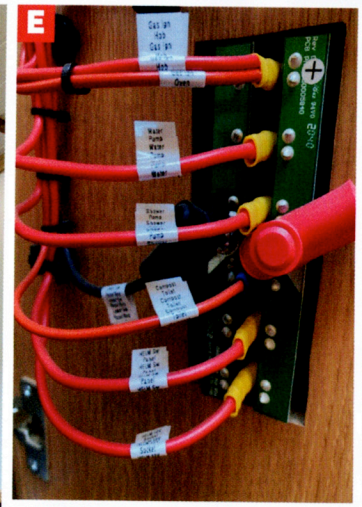


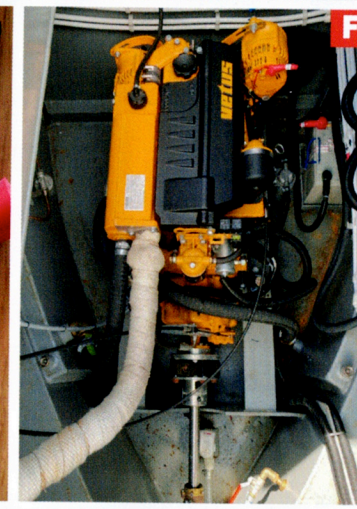


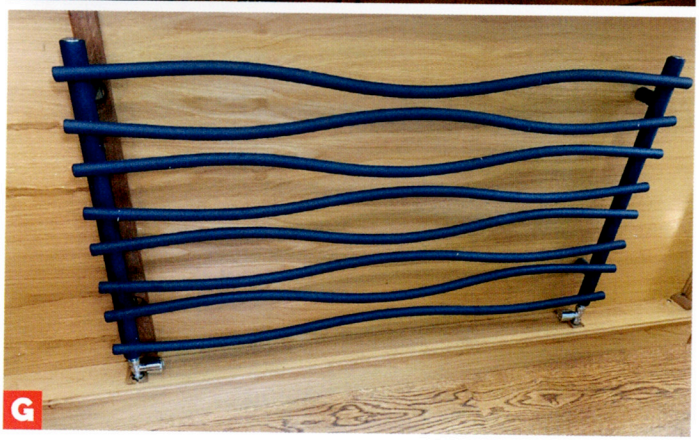














A Low-level ventilation is properly ducted from higher levels into the cabin and bilge. **B** Storage is well thought out in the bedroom, including enough floor space for a laundry basket. **C** A very well-designed vanity unit with a heated and backlit mirror. **D** The large forward berth has space either side to allow the duvet to lie properly – and more storage underneath. **E** All cables and pipework are properly labelled. **F** The Vetus 42hp engine has twin cooling tanks. **G** An unusual but practical bathroom towel radiator. **H** The AGM main battery bank is very well installed, with the starter battery in a tray on the baseplate.

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