

It's a long way from Turbenthal

Aerial photography by HeliCam



Stealth 135, Bliss 2.



Duncanson 30 Nerida, which Roger salvaged off Koh Lon, & partially owned from 2005-2010.



Launching motor-cruiser Pitta.

Asia Catamarans' Roger Diggelmann was born and grew up in Turbenthal, a small village 30km northeast of Zurich in Switzerland. He went to the local school and finished high school in April of 1984. Most of his free time, he spent doing various sports, a lot of gymnastics, ski racing, cross country skiing, mountain biking and more. He was lucky that his parents were always very supportive, despite not having money to waste.

Roger's uncle had a 28-foot sailing boat on Lake Zurich; he gave Roger his first sailing experience when he was about 11-years-old. He instantly knew sailing was a sport he liked and one day he wanted to work in the yachting industry, one way or another.

After high school he started an apprenticeship as a carpenter in a small carpentry shop in the neighboring village of Wila, which he finished in spring 1987. He then took a job as a carpenter in his

home village until he had to do his military service in 1989.

After 14 of 17 weeks of service in the Swiss army, it became clear that his superiors tried to force him to climb the ladder within the army, which for him was a definite NO! He hated every minute of it but back then, they could force a person to continue to service, or face jail time.

He was prepared for that and had a way out. Since he was born with an extra vertebra in his lower back and was lacking proper discs between the two adjacent vertebrae, it wasn't hard to pretend to have severe back pain, and after a week of walking as in serious pain, he was sent to the local hospital for x-rays. Back at the base, he presented the images to his superiors and was discharged from service without much fuss. He was a happy man!

When he was sixteen, he watched a couple of

older friends preparing for a one-year voyage with a VW van, and once again, he instantly knew, that he would start travelling the world, as soon as he saved some money.

He kept working in carpentry for another year, purchased a Toyota minivan and soon, he and a friend were on their way to explore Scandinavia.

Equipped with mountain bikes, windsurfers and even a dinghy with an outboard but a pretty low budget, they had big plans for great adventures in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Soon it became obvious that Roger's travel partner was homesick and missing his girlfriend and therefore not much of a companion. They still managed to travel all the way up to the North Cape and enjoy the midnight sun in early May, but then he realized he had to continue on his own somehow. They then cruised back south and after two weeks arrived in Duesseldorf, Germany. Roger knew he couldn't afford the minivan on his own due to the lack of funds, so he grabbed his mountain bike off the rack, put all his essential stuff in a back pack, left his friend to drive the van home while Roger headed for Denmark. The weather wasn't on his side and having a pretty heavy pack on his back while travelling on a push bike wasn't ideal.

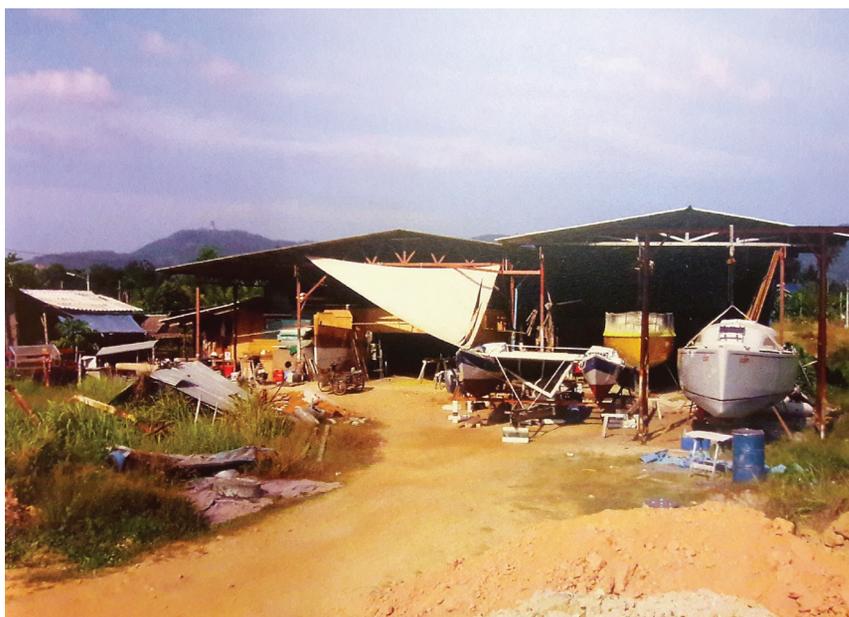
Once he got as far as Aarhus in Denmark, he decided to get rid of the bike. He just rode it to the train station and managed to send it back home for under US\$10.

He wanted to go back to Norway ASAP; he was sick of the windy flats of Denmark. So, he started walking towards Hirtshals, at the very top of the country to catch a ferry to Kristianssand in Norway. He then spent a couple of nights on a campground in Kristianssand and then took of through the mountains of southern Norway with Oslo as the next goal. A 10-day hike in the best weather possible, 19 hours of daylight, meeting only six people on the way, that became a very memorable journey.

But he needed to go back to work, and make more money to do more travelling.

In 1993, he decided it was time to leave the comforts of Europe and explore the more remote parts of the world. He always wanted to learn Spanish, so he figured Ecuador was a great place to do so. He managed to find a new travel buddy with very similar interests and so they boarded an Air France flight to Quito, Ecuador.

This time, they just had their mountain bikes with them. They lived with a local family in the Tumbaco valley at an altitude of 2,350 metres. Every morning, they got on the local bus, their bikes on the roof, and rode up to Quito to go to Spanish school from 8 to 12 am. Quito is at 2,850 metres, so every afternoon, they had a hell of a bike ride back down to Tumbaco. After doing homework they went back on the bikes and explored the surrounding mountains. Needless to say, this made them very fit, all that biking in the high altitude.



Composite Yacht Constructions in 2000.



Roger at the top of Mount Chimborazo, 6265 meters above sea level.



Hurricane about to launch.



Roger's first sailboat in the Lautoka Marina, Fiji, 1997.



Stealth 13.2, Stealth Mode.

They soon started hiking to 5,000 metres plus (with some serious headaches) on weekends and soon caught the bug to climb Cotopaxi (5,897m), one of the many volcanoes in the country, and probably the most famous.

After booking with a travel agent, renting all the gear, including boots, crampons, ice picks, ropes and so on, they jumped in a taxi and made their way up to base camp "Refugio del Cotopaxi" at about 4,800 metres. A stone hut, with a stone floor without a heat source welcomed them: they tried to get some sleep with no success, temperatures of -20 Celsius and the ongoing headaches just made it impossible to sleep.

At 1 am, they left the base camp with a guide and his helper. 100 metres below the summit the weather turned bad and it became obvious, that the guide was getting a degree of altitude sickness. As one does in the mountains, the group stays together at all times, they turned around and headed back for base camp.

Lesson learned. For his next attempt to summit a volcano, Roger was better prepared and found a real, certified mountain guide. This time he chose the Chimborazo, the highest mountain of Ecuador at 6,265 metres or thereabouts.

The weather was on his side this time and with a fantastic guide, they reached the top at 8am on a sunny day. The view was stunning and many of the high peaks in the Andes could be seen.

This convinced Roger that it was worth

heading further south, so after three months in Ecuador learning Spanish, they jumped on their mountain bikes and headed south for Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile.

Biking and hiking through those countries was tough but nothing short of extraordinary. In October of 1993, they reached Puerto Mont in Patagonia on the Chilean side, and there once again Roger parted ways with his travel companion and jumped on a ferry from Puerto Mont to Puerto Natales. His plan was to hike around the Cordillera Paine in the Torres del Paine National park, which turned in to a fantastic 6-day hike around the beautiful peaks of said Cordillera.

Funds nearing zero once again, it was time to head back north to Ecuador to catch the flight back to Switzerland. Seemed an easy task, but at that moment all staff from Lan Chile, the Chilean Airlines, decided to go on strike! Because of this, the trip north turned into a zig-zagging race against time, using every possible way of public transport existing, including chartering a Chesna just to cross Lago General Carrera, to reach Quito by 23 December 1993.

He just made it in time and with US\$25 to spare for the airport tax, he boarded the plane back to Switzerland.

In January 1994, Roger started working at Schindler & Scheibling in Uster, a company that specialized in building custom prefabricated wooden houses. He only took the job to raise funds to travel more, so he told the company he just wanted a job as a carpenter for 16 months.

On his birthday, January 3rd, he walked into the office at 7am, but instead of starting to work with a building team, he was led to a desk with a computer, and given a folder detailing a villa to be built with 1.2 million Swiss francs. The boss wished him luck and left.

This was the first time he sat in front of a computer screen and he had no idea how to even turn the machine on. Luckily, his friend Tom, who got him the job in the first place, had his desk next door and saved Roger from embarrassment. So, he dug into the challenge. Starting at 5am every morning, trying to stay on top of everything while learning CAD-software at the same time, he somehow managed to successfully finish his first project with a great team of eight carpenters.

The two bosses were great and paid him for every minute of overtime, even when he was just learning CAD. Sixteen months later, he was all cashed up and ready for his next adventure.

Meanwhile, Peter, another good friend, had sailed his PAROS, a Van de Stadt WIBO 930, all the way to Fiji in the South Pacific and invited Roger to join him for the trip to Brisbane, Australia.

A dream came true; he was finally going offshore.

Somehow, Peter mixed up the best crossing times and Roger soon received a letter, saying they would have to postpone till April of 1996, because it was hurricane season in the South Pacific and that he needed to come back to Switzerland himself to do a bit more work to pay for repairs on the boat.

Roger and his girlfriend Sonja had already quit their jobs, cancelled their house-rental, and were eager to travel, so working for another six months was out of question. Roger was a bit lost and didn't know what to do next. One day, on his way home after a few beers with friends, (maybe a few too many!), he had the silly idea, that Fiji, even though it was somewhere in the middle of the South Pacific, could be reached by bicycle after doing some touring through Europe and the USA. He proposed the idea as a joke to his girlfriend, expecting her to say, "Get some sleep, you drunk idiot". Instead, her eyes lit up and she said: "What a great idea, let's do it!" He swallowed twice and went to bed, thinking she would change her mind overnight.

Next morning, Sonja was still convinced that it was a great idea. After sobering up, he also warmed to the idea and they began to plan. Within two weeks, they had their mountain bikes converted into mountain-touring bikes, shopped all the necessary gear, and on 6 Sept 1995, after a healthy breakfast with their parents and some friends, they left Turbenthal, with the goal of reaching San Diego.



Launching Hurricane for Asia Catamarans.

They had no idea what to expect and were kind of expecting to give up pretty soon. They made plans to start out slowly (40-60kms per day), but as always, nothing went according to plan. On day two, they decided it was time to pay a quick visit to some friends in southwestern Switzerland. There were only two mountain passes between them and they thought, sure, no worries, we can do that. 120km later, the 2 passes traversed, with their tongues hanging out, they reached their friend's house in Fully, a village in the province of Wallis.

This was a good lesson learned, they needed to pace themselves much better if they wanted to succeed with their plan. After two days of recovery and lots of delicious white wine and cheese fondue, putting power back into those muscles, they said goodbye to their friends and headed in the direction of Annecy in France. Pacing was improved and indeed at the end of November they reached Lisbon and dipped their front wheels into the Atlantic Ocean, after a great trip through France, Andorra, Spain and Portugal. 2900km in about 50 days including rest days – a very good and comfortable starting pace.

They chose Orlando, Florida, as their starting point to cross the United States. Once they arrived and after reassembling and repacking their bicycles, the challenge began, it was a different world!

After the quiet and slow, relaxing life of Southern Europe, getting used to the busy American Lifestyle with Disneyland, Universal Studios, 8-litre chevy trucks and huge trailer rigs was quite a switch. They felt like ants being attacked by an army of aardvarks! Quickly, they searched for an affordable place to stay and spent the next four days acclimatizing to the new surroundings.

Once more comfortable with the new surroundings they headed out of Orlando after

dipping their back wheels into the Atlantic Ocean for the second stretch all the way to San Diego.

What a trip! Eight states: Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, over 8,000kms with all the detours, after who knows how many flat tires, near collisions with trucks, tons of smelly cadavers along the way, many encounters with local people, some smarter than others, endless straights in the Texan desert, plenty of fast-food meals, -16 degrees Celsius in the Black Mountains (even -6 degrees in New Orleans), and lots of unforgettable experiences with nice people, but not a drop of rain since Lisbon. They reached San Diego in April 1996, dipping their front wheels into the Pacific Ocean - of course!

What to do now? That was the big question! Cycling had become such a big part of their lives; it was hard to imagine not doing it every day. They had agreed to meet with Peter from PAROS on May 6 at Los Angeles Airport, so they decided to rent a car and slowly cruise up the coast. It was weird, a nice trip, but all they could think of was, "Wouldn't it be nice to do this on the push bike?" They thought they must have gone nuts!

The reunion with Peter was wonderful, stories were shared endlessly, they had so much to talk about that they almost forgot what they were here for. Shopping at West Marine! It was like kids in a toy store, except the parents' wallets were not there.

Equipped with just the most necessary items they boarded a plane to Papeete in Tahiti, where they visited local friends and had plenty of time to get used to the new lifestyle.

After three weeks of pirogue rowing, BBQs on the motus of Bora Bora, wasting a few dollars in the casino, drinking free booze all day, and meeting the most wonderful people, Raa, their local host and his family, organized a farewell party for them, which nearly made them miss their flight to Fiji – because it left at 2AM, not PM – they were finally on the way to PAROS, their home for the next 12 months.

What was meant to be a three-to-four-week refit on PAROS, turned into a nine-week nightmare including a 96-knot hurricane called "Ian", which ironically arrived the day after their friend named "Jan" flew in from Switzerland, to join them on the first cruise after re-launch. Instead of cruising, they cleaned up the mess and launched PAROS just as Jan had to leave again.

They were given five days by the authorities to get PAROS out of the country, since she was already on her third extension. So off they went in a hurry, heading for Port Vila in Vanu-

atu. But finally, Roger was offshore for the first time!

Crossing the South Pacific, or at least part of it; another unforgettable journey! All the islands and the people were just incredible. Three weeks in Tahiti and Bora Bora, 10 weeks in Fiji, three months in Vanuatu, three months in New Caledonia, and finally almost four months in Australia, another entire story to tell.

In Brisbane, Peter was given, together with his girlfriend Jenny, a 45-foot wooden sloop (teak on teak), called Blue Shadow as a present. So, he decided to sell PAROS in Brisbane. This happened fairly quickly, so Roger had to look for a new "home". Luckily, the now former owner of Blue Shadow, 62-year-old Christian from Belgium, was still on board, and since Jenny and Peter had to travel home to sort some stuff, Roger was welcome to join Christian on Blue Shadow for the time being. Together they sailed Blue Shadow down to Sydney; Christian wanted to keep on going, but Roger, who had wisely put a 10 AUD bet on the trifecta in the Melbourne Cup, and won, had other plans.

Cashed up again, he parted ways with Christian and flew back to New Caledonia, to once more, feel and live the magic of the South Pacific Islands. After two weeks living like a king in paradise, it was once again time to head back home to Switzerland.

Roger then worked again for a bit, but plans were already in place, that he would join Blue Shadow again in Phuket for the journey to Cape Town. So, on 9 September 1999 at 9am, a plane from Zurich landed at Phuket Airport with Roger on board. And that was the beginning of it all.

Plans change as usual, and Jenny in the meantime gave birth to a little boy named Jules. He was born in April 1999 in Phuket. The decision was made, that instead of sailing to Cape Town, they would leave Blue Shadow in Phuket for a year and have Roger look after her, giving him the freedom to take her anywhere he wanted, as long they would be back within a year.

Roger soon felt at home in Phuket, decided to stay in the area and started to get to know more people.

He got involved with the Ao Chalong Yacht club and started taking part in Club and Platu racing. Not having much else to do, other than taking care of Blue Shadow and taking her to Langkawi occasionally, he started to do some work on other boats. After a while it became clear, that this was his opportunity to fulfill his dream and start working in the yachting industry.

By the time the owners of Blue Shadow came back to Phuket, he made his mind up and



A young Roger on Blue Shadow in Boat Lagoon in 1997.



Stealth 135, Bliss 2, under Code Zero.

founded, with his last 60,000 baht, a company called “Composite Yacht Constructions”.

So, on 12 April 2001, he had company documents and a work permit in his hands, but a pretty empty bank account.

Being a carpenter by trade, but not a very good businessman, he was struggling to earn enough to make a decent living. He was lucky to be supported by his then girlfriend and lots of people from the local expat community.

He kept being persistent, since giving up was not an option, and even went back to Switzerland a couple of times to work for a few weeks, so he could finance his company in Phuket. Since there was no lack of work in Phuket, things started to look better, bit by bit.

In 2003, he was approached by a couple from South Africa, who asked him if he could actually “build” a boat. His answer was “yes, of course” and soon, with the help of yet another expat, with experience in the boat building area, a plan was drawn (on a paper towel at the Ao Chalong Yacht Club) to build a shallow draft motor cruiser, to do tours up in the Bay area.

This needed new premises, which Roger found in the Palai area of Phuket, renting the space for three years. He erected an 8 x 12 metre shed, laying the base for what became Asia Catamarans at a later stage. The motor cruiser was built and launched in July of 2004 and can still be seen, moored in Chalong Bay today, in pretty good nick.

After that, he was given the chance to build more and more boats:

- two 30ft James Wharram Tikis
- A 43-foot Jacques Fioleau designed cruising cat
- A 12-metre day dive boat
- A 40-foot Toni Grainger cruising cat
- Three Andaman Cabriolets

While building the Andaman Cabriolets, Roger was introduced to Alan Carwardine, as he was involved in the design of those boats. As time went by, Roger and Alan became good friends and Alan, who loved the idea of living in Phuket, became a partner in Roger’s business.

They changed the name to Asia Catamarans and never looked back: 32 Stealth Catamarans, both power and sail, have been launched to this date and the next one is due to hit the water at the end of February/early March.

Alan has now retired and Roger has brought in Zam Bevan, who he incidentally first met back in 2008, when the first Cabriolets were being built, to help keep Asia Catamarans moving into the future.

Roger would like to give a big THANK YOU to all of Asia Catamarans’ costumers and the countless people who have supported him on the way to where he is now. It’s a long way from Turbenthal, but may the story continue (www.asiacatamarans.com).