

# reviews & reports

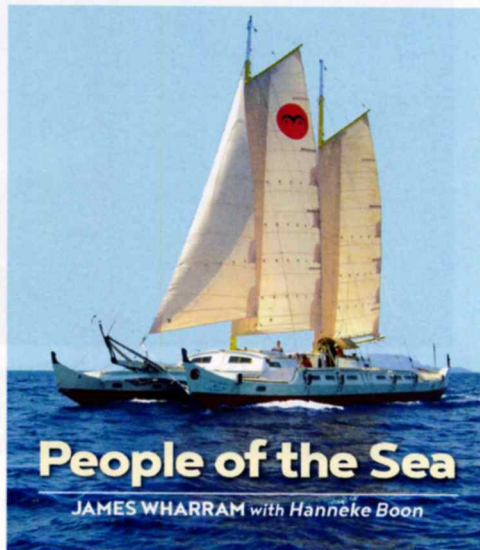
Boat gear, books, tools and technology; our regular series of impartial reviews.  
Our reviewer this time: Simon Holman

## PEOPLE OF THE SEA

by James Wharram with Hanneke Boon,  
pub. LodeStar Books, London  
ISBN13 97819072086504.  
Softback, 288pp, £25.00

This is designer James Wharram's second book; the first, *Two Girls, Two Catamarans*, was published in 1969 in the wake of his successful transatlantic voyage on his self-built catamaran *Tangaroa*, with his two girlfriends Ruth Merseburger and Jutta Schultze Rhonhof. It was 1955 when the unorthodox crew sailed out of Falmouth and into history and today 92-year-old James is still sailing his catamarans, with an extensive and devoted following and over 10,000 boat plans sold.

With its story of simple focus and tenacity, *People of the Sea* shares much with the classic stories of other early pioneers of sailing. I clearly recall the delight of discovering them for the first time as a teenager, just as the young James did in Manchester Central



Library. Here he first came across Éric de Bisschop's *The Voyage of the Kamiloa*, which outlined a theory of the movement of people around the Pacific in native craft, became a guiding influence in James's life and a 'lifelong love'.

James's interest in experimental archaeology grew. Recognising disparities between De Bisschop's beliefs and

Thor Heyerdahl's Kon-Tiki expedition theories, he resolved to prove his hero right and set out to build a boat of what was then a revolutionary new type inspired by ancient Polynesian design: the catamaran. Born into a time of uncertainty, change and possibilities, James is from a frugal and self-sufficient generation, which when faced with an obstacle had to create a solution with their own hands; a lesson for our own challenging times, perhaps.

Outspoken, direct, curious and committed, James has made a lifelong and consistent contribution to the field of small craft design and marine exploration, as well as directly contributing to the body of knowledge surrounding the migration of early peoples by sea. His designs for low cost, minimalist, seaworthy catamarans quickly became popular with owners, to whom James, Ruth and – for the past 50 years – Hanneke, with her design skills and delightful artwork, sold not just a set of plans but a way of life.

Like so much of James's life, this autobiography is candid and direct. James and his companions have long espoused values that are now increasingly widespread; a life of observation of the natural world, frugal use of resources and a light touch on the earth.

*People of the Sea* is a reminder of how far ahead of his time and relatively under celebrated James has been; to outsiders his unconventional lifestyle often obscuring his work. "I was a dreamer", says James of his ambitious vision and his life has been one of romance.

If ever there was a time for dreams, it must surely be now.

## Narai Mk IV

