

# LIFE ARGUS



Alan Wood on board



Their view from the yacht

## Life on the ocean waves became a reality for this family of five who went to live off grid

Many of us dream of leaving our busy stressful lives and sailing off into the sunset but not many of us actually do it. Alan and Irenka Wood tell Ericka Waller how they pulled it off.

ALAN and Irenka Wood had dreams of travelling the world taking their three children with them.

But - unlike most of us - one day they actually did it.

They rented out their home in Rottingdean, sold their car and all their possessions to buy a 20-year old yacht and have set off sailing around the world with their three children Rowan, 11, Darroch, eight and Yewan, five.

They have given up all their creature comforts and will be home-schooling, growing their own food and living on a budget below the poverty line.

Irenka, 46, said: "We're finally fulfilling our dream of upping sticks to go sailing the world."

"The story of our journey began with the biggest and most difficult step of all - uprooting ourselves from our safe and comfortable life in Brighton.

"We sold most of our belongings, closed the

business, rented out the house and took the kids out of school.

"Now, with a deep commitment to autonomous and sustainable living and a desire to live life to the full, we've started a new life.

"Our dream of exploring the world's oceans has taken more than ten years in the making. "We have planned, saved and sacrificed so much over the years to realise our dream."

The boat cost 150,000 euros and the family will live on a strict budget of 500 euros a month for at least two years.

The budget must cover food, clothes, fuel, maintenance, repairs, marina fees, water, transport, insurance and schooling.

The family left on October 1 and has already been around the North Ionian and South Ionian Islands and visited Parga and Paxos where they got caught in their first storm.

They then travelled south to Lefkas, Vounaki, Sitvota and into Frikas on Ithaca.

Next they plan to head to Turkey, France,

then the Canaries for the big sail across the Atlantic, the Caribbean and central America.

The couple met when they were both working as skippers for a holiday company.

Their holiday romance blossomed into marriage.

Alan, 49, said: "Not many people start again from the very place they left 13 years previously and count it as a major achievement."

"But that's what we've done. We met while working as flotilla skippers for Neilson Active Holidays in Greece.

"We lived off bread and beer, partied every night and shacked up on various yachts and islands around the Ionian and Adriatic Sea.

"This week we're returning to the very same pontoon we met on 13 years ago, but this time we're married, have our three young kids and we're arriving on our very own yacht.

"We shared a dream all those years ago - to go sailing around the world - an unlikely ambition on minimum wage and a drinking hab-



Irenka Wood with Ewen, Rowan and Darroch

it that would shame a rugby team, but dreams should always be on the edge of impossibility. That's what makes them so alluring."

While they may be experienced sailors, there are still going to be various challenges ahead for them.

Alan, a bespoke furniture designer who owns Rat and Pallet in Brighton, said: "When you're offshore, you can't just pick up the phone to a plumber or electrician, or pop to the village shop to stock up on forgotten groceries."

"Everything has to be stored or made on-board from electricity to water, from bread to the kids' favourite - chocolate pudding. But the thought of seeing different countries, wildlife and cultures is a massive draw for us."

"The idea of living autonomously without a school and without the resources that we have at a click of a button is admittedly, nerve-racking."

"The teachers at St Margaret's in Rot-

tingdean do a wonderful job and our kids flourish there.

"Providing that same level of education and support for them will be extremely difficult but I'm hoping the world will become their classroom and that they'll learn from different cultures and meet other boat kids from all over the world."

When asked how the children are adapting to life at sea, Alan said: "Our eldest daughter would have started secondary school this year."

"Pictures of her friends appear on social media with their new uniforms and classmates and she finds it difficult at times."

"She posted a picture of her old friends online last week and tagged them all in the hope of keeping in touch, but was asked to take it down by her old BFF (best friend forever) because apparently she 'has a new BFF now'."

"That stung her and we had the first homesick tears on board."

"But after a morning of home schooling she spends the rest of the day mostly swimming or paddle boarding in the various coves and lagoons with her brothers or other boat kids and slowly things aren't seeming all that bad."

"She spends far less time online now and most of the day on or in the sea instead and her smile and confidence grows by the day."

"Our middle son Darroch is eight and has never really been a 'people' person and is more at home amongst the local wildlife."

"His scientific knowledge of the natural world is, well, unnatural and he even knows the type of neurotoxin produced by the local bearded fireworms."

"Our youngest son has always been very sociable and has made friends with the auto-helm (the yacht's motor)."

"He calls it 'Otto' and talks to it when sailing."

"He also drew a face on a wooden spoon,

made it his best friend and they're inseparable now, keeping each other occupied for hours - shades of Tom Hanks in Castaway perhaps?"

"Locally the dangers are urchins, jellyfish and fireworms, hitting rocks and fuel pumps not working."

Another risk the family faces is storms. They recently got caught up in one in Paxos and battled 55mph winds while anchored.

"There's the risk of the children falling overboard or getting stuck in the winches."

But Irenka and Alan said it's all worth it.

He said: "Are we mechanics? No. Are we teachers? No. Are we riggers, sailmakers or electricians? No. We're dreamers, adventurers and owners of our own destiny."

"We live off grid and every day has its challenges but we feel we own and control our life now. We live on a budget that would be considered close to the poverty line."