Pedal for the Planet

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OUTDOORS

Who dares, goes Around the world by bike and boat; the Ridgways take a tip from Captain Bligh

Two's company for three years: Steve Smith, left, and Jason Lewis test the water in the boat specially designed for their marathon trip

On a pedal boat made for two

Stephen Venables meets two men who have just set out to circumnavigate the globe entirely under their own steam

In a trailer heading south through France while Lewis and Smith follow their byzantine mountain bikes. Later this autumn, they will return the boat in Portugal and embark for the United States.

When I met Steve last week in a basement in Putney, south-west London, he was still sanding, painting, varnishing and polishing his craft. The object of all this attention looked like a large can—a great deal of effort, and a kind of beautiful piece of metal that looks like it was designed by a master craftsman.

To confirm with the environmental spirit of the expedition, it was built from timber supplied by the Ecological Trade Company—planks of Western red cedar, just a centimetre thick, nailed to a skeleton of mahogany and sheathed in a double veneer of epoxy Cachimbo.

The resulting hull is tough, light, streamlined and water-tight, guaranteed to sink itself after any capsize. All the supplies for the Atlantic crossing will be stored in the two chambers and the locker, and the latter is a watertight sleeping-compartment, with just enough room for one to lie in at full stretch. The central cockpit is protected by a sliding hatch of toughened polycarbonate. On its roof are solar panels to power radio and navigation equipment. Inside, the workings are beautifully simple: bicycle pedals, chain and gear box, transforming 60 revolutions of the pedaller's legs to 30 revolutions of the propeller shaft, which drives a specially cast aluminium propeller. There is also improvisation. The grips on the rudder bars are reinforced single-bend handles, the tiny stove gas is fashioned from an old bicycle paint can, and a variety of pots and pans are being tested to alleviate the discomfort of hundreds of hours in the saddle.