

buying a catamaran at a boat show

by RICHARD WOODS

IDEALLY BEFORE BUYING A NEW OCEAN CRUISING CATAMARAN, ONE WOULD TEST ALL THE ALTERNATIVES IN ALL conditions. Obviously that's not very realistic, so in practice – after collecting information from web sites and brochures – one normally heads off to the nearest boat show. Most boat shows can be a bewildering experience, for the choice of multihulls is now as varied as it is for monohulls. Most people are familiar with monohull sailboats but, despite their recent popularity, catamarans are still an unknown quantity for most cruisers.

SOTO TRY AND REDUCE THE confusion, at a recent Annapolis boat show I visited all the multihulls on display and pretended I was a first time buyer on the lookout for an ocean cruising boat. The results were interesting, and I ended up with a very short list of boats that I'd want to test-sail.

So what did I look for?

Before even getting on board I looked between the hulls to make a quick check on the bridgedeck clearance. Could I get underneath when in an inflatable dinghy? If not, then the clearance would not be

enough for comfortable offshore cruising. Next I checked whether one could actually board the boat from the side as well as from the stern, since the US is just one of many places where it's unusual to moor stern-to (except at pack-'em-in-tight boat shows). I also tried to envisage boarding from a dinghy. You will want to show off your new boat to family and friends, so the acid test: "Could my mother get on board?"

Once on board I'd sit in the cockpit. Were the seats comfortable, did they have good backrests? Did they feel safe? When standing in the cockpit could I see

forward over the cabin top? Did I feel that I could fall out of the back?

Next I'd sit in the helmsman's seat. Could I see both bows and both sterns (essential for safe manoeuvring under power)? Could I get from the companionway door to the seat safely, even in a cross sea? Yes I know catamarans don't heel, but they do move around a lot when sailing offshore. I put a cross against boats where I had to 'go round the outside' to sit in the seat. While sitting there I'd imagine a tack. Could the crew handle the boat and winch the genoa without me getting in



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their way? Were there enough winches to be able to reef on either tack?

There is no doubt that a boat with daggerboards or centreboards will sail better on all points of sail and in all conditions than one relying on shallow keels (often called Low Aspect Ratio, LAR, keels). A catamaran with keels will sail better than boats that rely on the hull shape alone for lateral resistance. However, keels are simple and protect propellers, rudders and hulls when you beach the boat. So if you want boards, check how these vulnerable parts are protected.

Many boats will have a permanent bimini fitted, but can you still see the sails (especially the spinnaker) when at the helm? Can you still reach the reefing lines if they get tangled one dark night (they always do)? Do any lines run under the decks, and can you inspect them for chafe and easily replace them at sea if necessary?

So even before venturing below, my list of possibles had become considerably shorter, but at last I'd move inside.

I know that standing headroom and a big open space create a good first impression, particularly if there are already 10-12 people on board, but the way you move around a boat during real sailing is very different from one's first visit at a boat show. At a show, you race from saloon to heads to galley. Whereas when cruising, you go inside to sit down, to use the heads, sleep or cook. In fact you don't even cross the bridge deck from hull to hull very often. So I gave black marks to boats that had big open spaces without handholds – much like one would on a monohull in fact. Next I'd check the number of bunks. Say eight, in which case logically I'd expect that eight people could sit in the saloon, and that the galley would be big enough to cook a meal for eight.

The fact that most large cats fail this last test shows that most are built for the charter trade and not for family cruising. You don't choose to live in a hotel; you live in a house. Charter boats are only floating hotels, ie somewhere to spend a few nights while you see the sights. A basic coffee maker, microwave and mini-bar are enough for the coffees and breakfasts you're likely to 'cook'. But that's totally inadequate if you're actually going to spend some time aboard. Then you need a proper hob with oven, a double sink, fridge and separate freezer. Plus lots of stowage and counter space. And it all has to be useable while beating into a big sea.

There are two main saloon layouts, ie those with a 'galley up' and those with the galley in a hull. The former is popular with charter boats; cruisers favour the latter. I much prefer the galley in a hull. The worktops are usually bigger and there is more stowage space.

Furthermore, you can brace yourself better in a seaway and there is less motion. It's also safer as people moving round the boat don't brush past a hot stove or get in the cook's way. Another disadvantage of having a galley up layout is what do you put in the hull instead? On charter boats with four double ensuite cabins the heads replace the galley, but most galley up true cruising boats waste space in the hulls and also have a cramped saloon.

One of the great attractions of a catamaran is that you don't 'go below', you go 'inside'. Although it's nice to be able to see out when at anchor, it's essential to have all round vision when sitting inside so that you can be on watch under autopilot when on passage. Staying warm and dry transforms sailing and is one reason why I wouldn't now cruise on an open deck catamaran.

Few boats are large enough to have separate eating and lounging areas. So, although most saloon seats are comfortable when eating, they must also be comfortable when relaxing. Can you put your feet up, lean back and read a book? You can't if the saloon is one of the modern semicircular shapes.

Next, moving out of the saloon, is the heads compartment big enough to have a good shower? You definitely need imagination for this at a boat show, but turn round and pretend anyway. Could the mirror be used when shaving?

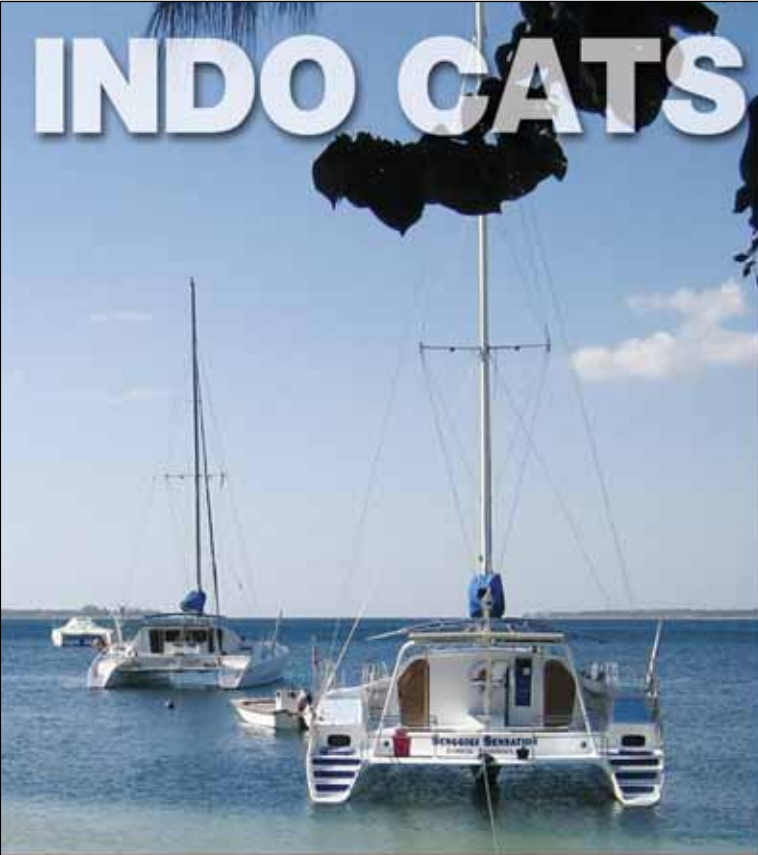
Imagine lying in a bunk on a Sunday morning. Your partner brings you a cup of coffee. Have you got some way to put it

down safely? Most boats claim to have a 'vanity unit', but does it have a fold down flap and useable mirror? If not, you won't find it easy applying makeup. How about stowage for your fancy non-sailing clothes, warm clothes when in hot climates and spare bedding? Then what about the Christmas tree, sewing machine, vacuum cleaner, you name it. Cruising boats are homes and what you have in your loft must be put on your boat somewhere.

I know everyone uses a GPS chart plotter these days, but many people still like a paper chart to route plan. So is there a usable chart table? I don't think you should need to use the saloon table on a 40' cat. Does the area round the navigation area allow space for radar, SSB, weather fax, PC? Never mind TV, stereo etc. You're going to read a lot of books when living aboard, something you don't do on vacation. We have over eight feet of bookshelves on our own catamaran, and it's not really enough. But unlike most boats we do have plenty of stowage for big pilot books.

After years of living on board catamarans, the one thing I've never had, yet would want on my ideal cruiser is an office or workshop. Sure you can use the chart table, but where do you keep tools or office 'stuff'?

Everything I've said so far relates to DESIGN. I haven't yet offered any advice on what to look for when it comes to build quality. But here are some quick pointers to see whether the boat has been carefully built.




LOMBOK

ICL (formerly Composite Cats Marine) are currently building quality catamarans for 15 to 20% less than current Australian prices. (Import duties and GST inclusive).

Mark Pescott and Ross Blair are bringing their collective 60 years of multihull building and sailing experience with them and will be actively involved in the construction and designing of some of the best cruising and racing catamarans in Australasia.

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Check whether there is excess sealer round deck fittings. Cautiously run your hand inside lockers – especially near the gunwales and other inaccessible areas to check for rough glass. Always check under bunk lockers to check that all plywood has been well painted. Pull on a couple of stanchions to test deck strength. Are the hull stripes carefully aligned or do they wobble up and down. Do the strips of 'carefully selected' Teak trim meet with equal care. Nothing very important in isolation, but all are simple indicators of good quality control.

Now that you're down to only one or two boats, what next? Well, you wouldn't buy a car without driving it would you? Just because a boat looks fast doesn't mean to say it is. It still amazes me that so many people choose a boat without a test sail, however brief. Fortunately, immediately following the Annapolis show are the multihull demo days; two days when you can actually sail the boats on your short list – even if only for a couple of hours. Possibly equally important to sailing your shortlisted boats is that you can sail another boat and watch 'your' boat sailing.

Nearly every builder (and for that matter many reviewers) say something like "our boat is the fastest for its size". So it's actually very interesting to see the boats out on these Demo Days. Those that have confidence in their boat's performance tend to sail near each other. Those who sail away from the rest of the fleet are the slow ones. After all if you really had a fast boat you'd want to show off against your competition wouldn't you? It was often surprising to see which were the slow ones.

Assuming you are sailing a 35-40ft catamaran in flat water and 15kts true wind, this is what you should look for:

- You should be able to sail to windward at seven knots plus and less than 90° between tacks, and to sail in double figures off wind;
- There should be no noise from under the bridgedeck;
- You should be able to sail and even tack with the genoa rolled up (although its quite likely you will need to have mainsail eased);
- If you let go of the helm the boat should sail itself.

Apart from the speed offwind these comments apply to monohulls as well of course. There really is no excuse these days to have a cruising catamaran that is cranky to sail or one that doesn't beat a similar length monohull to windward.

In brief, if a cat cannot do all this then it's a dog.

Personally I am not a fan of large boats. Think about what you need, not just what you want. I find it hard to justify owning a boat over 40ft for anything except commercial chartering. Smaller boats are more fun to sail, simpler to own and cheaper to buy and maintain. You can go to the same places, walk the same white beaches and see the same sunsets as those on larger boats. So don't go for the biggest boat you can afford, instead go for quality – after all that's what you do when buying a car or a stereo system.

I hope these pointers help you be more discerning in your choice of boat. But just remember that, as always, the final decision becomes a personal, subjective view even if the short list has been decided on logic.

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