

CATAMARANS

THE OBVIOUS CHOICE FOR CRUISING

| story **NICK BRETTINGHAM-MOORE**

The perennial debate over monohulls versus catamarans will probably never go away, but in some circumstances, I feel it is time to end the discussion in favour of catamarans. Before the monohull enthusiasts get too distressed it is important to specify a few conditions. In this instance, I refer to warm water cruising for extended periods or distances taking advantage of typical / traditional downwind routes. Sailors go sailing, cruisers go cruising, an important distinction. Cruisers actively try not to bash to windward, try not to stress the yacht and try to spend most time in anchorages. While sailing performance is always a concern it is really of little interest to me in the overall scheme of things. I have calculated that we have spent less than 1% of our time sailing – and of this time some 30% was motoring.





WE CARRY A 11FT CARIBE SEMI RIGID INFLATABLE WITH 15HP YAMAHA 4 STROKE OUTBOARD ON TWO CUSTOM SS DAVITS THAT I DESIGNED AND INSTALLED. THE OUTBOARD HAS NEVER BEEN OFF THE DINGHY IN 10 YEARS – KEEP IT SIMPLE!



So, a quick look at the statistics of catamaran capsizes will show you they are as rare as hen's teeth – in normal cruising locations, with well-prepared crews and conservative sailing techniques. In theory, the wave height must be greater than the beam of the catamaran to capsize, we have a 25ft beam and I think my family would throw me over if we were in seas that big. Two obvious points, as with a monohull, get as big a yacht as is feasible, financially, and physically and stay away from large waves – our biggest waves in 10 years cruising *Sonrisa* would have been about 8-10ft. I personally would not consider a catamaran of less than 35ft overall to go cruising, get a monohull if going smaller.



TOP: Ben, at six months, on watch.

ABOVE: A perfect living platform.

This article relates to my personal experiences over the last 30 years at sea in numerous types of yachts and monohulls, both motor and sailing, recreational and as a professional yacht captain over some 100,000 sea miles. My wife, Melissa and I left La Rochelle, France in our new Lagoon 440 (number 203) *Sonrisa*, in June 2007, with Benjamin at six months old and headed down to Portugal, crossed the Atlantic, cruised the Caribbean and transited the Panama Canal. In Costa Rica Huon, again six months old joined us as we cruised up to The Sea of Cortez, Mexico, where we have been 'stuck' since 2011. We cruise to see other places and cultures, not specifically to sail, it just so happens this is the best

way to achieve our plans in the most enjoyable manner. We have no time limit, so if we like a place we hang around, a catamaran, is by far, the best way to enjoy this type of cruising.

When I started building a yacht back in the 70's the idea of a cruising catamaran did not even register – a yacht that was more stable upside-down than right way up seemed pretty silly. Solid monohull designs, like the Westsail 32 and Nicholson 32 were de rigor, how times have changed. Look at the major charter bases in the Caribbean and Europe to see how prevalent catamarans have become. In the Costa Baja marina, where we are now based, Dream Yacht charters has a base, they have eight yachts, four sailing catamarans, two power cats and two monohulls. Some reasons for their popularity are blatantly obvious – stability, speed off the wind, shallow draught, and comfortable above sea level accommodation, while many others are subtler.

Just as with so many other decisions in life, preparation is the key and here I mean trying to work out just how you intend to go cruising, with who, and for how long, it's different horses for different courses and one needs to be brutally honest with yourself and your cruising partner. I refer to the typical cruising couple, possibly with children who wish to spend an extended (enjoyable!) cruise, say around Australia or to the Pacific Islands. The number of times the dream is principally with the husband, and the wife goes along, probably with reservations and after several months (or even a few) the whole project falls apart. The wrong type of yacht (home comforts?) or incompatibility in the confines of a small space being the major reasons for failure.

want – rolling, dark cramped accommodation, down in the bowels of the yacht. I enjoy surfing so stability at anchor, near the surf, was foremost in my mind – only a catamaran can do this. The yacht needed space for Melissa and our two boys, and the home comforts that would keep them happy to continue cruising for extended periods, so that I could achieve my dream of surfing in exotic locations. There is not a monohull in the 45ft range, that could provide the level of comfort, for a family of four, like *Sonrisa*.

In my case, and having spent three years cruising the Western South Pacific with a previous wife, in a 33ft Ferro cement monohull I knew exactly what I didn't

Okay, let's get down to some evident specifics that I have observed over the past 10 years living on *Sonrisa*, notice, that these have nothing to do with sailing



ABOVE: La Rochelle, The dream arrives.

LEFT: Magic Mexican cruising.

capabilities. Size, in this case, does matter as obviously the most usable space one can fit into a given length will make life more enjoyable. We specifically chose the Lagoon 440 for this reason. A separate (away from the kids) flybridge steering / sailing station gives fantastic all round vision and in nearly all circumstances a perfect dry location. A fully covered aft lounging / dining area, large inside saloon / dining area, galley (three sinks) navigation station, forward cockpit and four double

conditions. We leave water bottles out when sailing, and in nearly all cases never worrying about careful stowage of the junk lying around. When sailing, we have yet to experience any concern of capsizing or coming anywhere near it – we sail very conservatively ensuring minimal breakages and maximum comfort.

We carry a 11ft Caribe semi rigid inflatable with 15hp Yamaha 4 stroke outboard on two custom SS davits

the manoeuvrability benefits. The reliability of modern marine diesels compared to times of old is quite incredible. After 10 years each engine on *Sonrisa* has around 1700 hours, apart from the usual oil changes at 150 hours and the odd fuel filter change they continue to run perfectly. Rarely do I run both engines at the same time, at some 1600rpm they consume around two litres per hour giving us some 5kts in calm conditions and a motoring range of well over a 1000 miles. I

prone to emitting fumes and diesel smells, let alone annoying when trying to service with crew. On *Sonrisa*, the engines are in separate watertight compartment aft (the propellers are aft of the rudders) so sound, fumes and heat are kept well away from accommodation and cabins.

We opted for a catamaran with the galley 'up' in the saloon rather than in one of the hulls. On a monohull,



cabins with their own heads (charter version), and finally two watertight forward storage / work cabins (deck access) and separate watertight engine compartments – try finding this on any other 45ft yacht!

While *Sonrisa* will occasionally develop a short athwartships jiggle in a beam sea (the effect of her beam and full hulls) rolling is just not an issue. In Costa Rica we were anchored some 100m from a magic 6ft left hander, whether beam on or facing the swell life was very comfortable. Since France, 'Francois' a metre high Ficus tree has sat happily on the table in the saloon, put down on the floor in only the most trying

WE OPTED FOR A CATAMARAN WITH THE GALLEY 'UP' IN THE SALOON RATHER THAN IN ONE OF THE HULLS

that I designed and installed. The outboard has never been off the dinghy in 10 years – keep it simple! The idea of removing the outboard for any sailing was just not an option. For long passages the tender sits on two substantial SS tubes with V brackets – thereby ensuring it did not bounce around. The davits are home to 6 x 130 watt solar panels – again this setup is only possible on a yacht with 25ft beam!

A, not so, apparent advantage of a catamaran is the number of self-draining lockers, of which we have five. The ability to carry large quantities of gasoline (120L) and propane tanks (5 x 10 lb) really extends one's cruising range. Living permanently on any normal sized yacht with two young children can be taxing at the best of times, the many independent areas where one can escape to for some peace and quiet should never be overlooked. Having guests in a monohull invariably means they traverse the normal lounge / dining areas to get to their accommodation and their proximity means muffled conversations at night, let alone any romantic endeavours. Our guests live in the opposite hull, where they come and go as they wish and can be as noisy as they want – and so can we!

Twin Yanmar 50hp engines really ensures safety of propulsion and electrical generation, not to mention

fitted two additional 130 AH alternators, so these with our nearly 1 KW of solar panels, 2 x 130 Watt wind generators, 2 Honda 1 KW generators, a towed water generator and 900 Ah of battery capacity means electrical generating problems have yet to arise.

During the last haul out, three years ago I reverted to the normal through hull fitting and valve, completely shutting off the original inlets. All the problems have, thankfully, disappeared.

Monohulls have heavy keels to drag around, and therefore few of our length will draw less than 2m. Many tropical cruising areas have shallow anchorages where every centimetre of depth counts, we draw just on a metre, even fully loaded (overloaded?) which means, on occasions I can walk up to the stern and hop aboard. The Lagoon 440 has two, relatively long, empty keels which means she sits comfortably on a cradle or beach without supports. While centreboard catamarans will go faster to windward, the lack of protection when beaching or hauling out is always a concern. In 10 years cruising not a drop of saltwater has entered the deep bilges afforded by the hollow keels.

Monohulls of our length invariable have their engine amidships within the accommodation – noisy and

ABOVE FROM LEFT:

Sonrisa guest cabin.

Comfortable saloon.

Tranquil Atlantic crossing.

Easy living with space.

even with a bridge deck saloon there is normally small windows down in the hull, and a steep set of stairs to go below – an important point to consider when living with small children aboard. On *Sonrisa* all the living space is well above the waterline, with large vertical windows this space is airy and bright and all on one level from the outside aft dining area into the saloon and galley – the cook is part of the action along with the rest of the family, who are always visible. When sailing with the saloon forward curtains pulled back I can comfortably enjoy a meal aft and still see well ahead.

So, there are a few cons associated with a catamaran, probably the most talked about is the requirement to use a double width marina berth. With the rapid rise in numbers of catamarans around many marinas now



ABOVE: La Rochelle fitting out.

specifically allocate end berths or will allow a catamaran to use a double berth at reduced prices. In the five years cruising before Mexico, we very rarely visited a marina (real cruising!), surprisingly in Costa Baja marina, La Paz, we have enjoyed a double berth at a single berth rate. Catamarans do suffer performance issues when overloaded (like monohulls), so we accept



TOP: Lisbon, before the Atlantic crossing.

ABOVE: Marina Costa Baja, La Paz, Mexico.

this because of our lifestyle and family requirements, otherwise get a larger yacht! Catamarans do tend to slam under the bridge deck when beating to windward in short seas – however by picking downwind routes, not having a schedule and the ability to alter course to alternative ports all reduce this to a minimum, particularly when actual sailing is such a small part of the experience.

Our Lagoon 440, while designed as a charter catamaran and I understand being the most numerous model produced by the Beneteau company has exceeded all of our expectations as a comfortable and safe cruising platform over the past 10 years of continuous living aboard with two young boys – I have no doubt that this would not have been achievable in a similar sized monohull.

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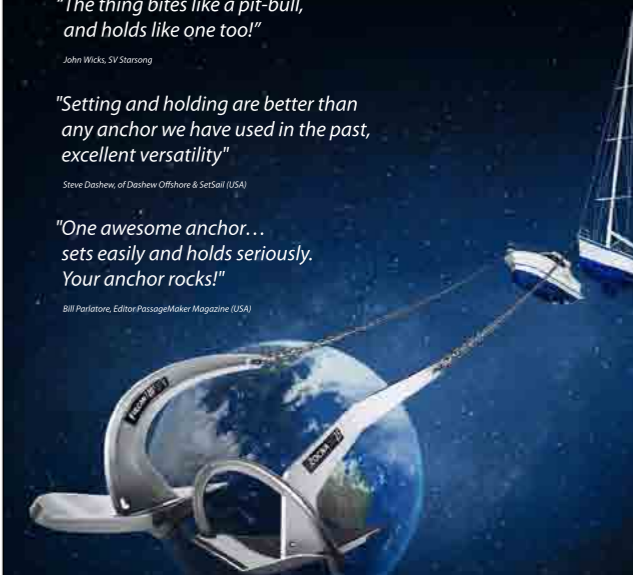
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