

LOOKING AT PURCHASING A CATAMARAN? BEEN THERE, DONE THAT!

by Paul Mann (October 2006)

This article is not intended to revisit the advantages/disadvantages of multihulls versus monohulls as these issues are documented in numerous papers. Rather, I intended to try to focus on factors that become important to me during the purchasing process and observations made since owning a catamaran. I'll also challenge some of the commonly expressed myths on aspects of catamaran sailing, especially from a cruising standpoint.

I can track my interest in catamarans back to 1978 when I took a year out to go sailing. During this time I spent four months on a Prout 45 Quasar catamaran cruising the northwest coast of France. The cat wasn't particularly quick and wouldn't have won any beauty contests but it must have held some attraction as I'd maintained a dream of owning a cat ever since.

To qualify my position, I wouldn't start to consider myself an expert in yachts of any type. However, I have spent upwards of 10,000nm sailing offshore and since arriving in NZ 15 years ago I've owned four yachts, all monohulls ranging in size from 26 to 35 foot. Along the way I've also gone right through the Coastguard boating qualifications and now hold the Ocean Yachtmaster certificate.

I own a Fountaine Pajot Lavezzi 40 sailing catamaran moored at Gulf Harbour on Auckland's North Shore. I took delivery of the boat in Queensland, Australia and sailed her home to NZ via Lord Howe Island in August 2006. Part of my observations were formed or confirmed during this voyage.

Prior to purchasing a catamaran I conducted the usual research, reading all available material I could find on the internet and in books and magazines. I also attended boat shows in Auckland, Sydney and Annapolis, USA viewing as many catamarans as I could.

At the end of the day the purchasing decision will often be based on emotion - "the boat just feels right". However, I believe you should be able to back this up with some logic. It became obvious to me early on that there are some fundamentals that that have to exist on my boat and some that definitely shouldn't. I recommend you compile your own list of 'must haves' and 'must avoids'. Mine included:

1. The galley must be up. Why have a cat and be stuck down below cooking? On many cats I viewed with the galley-down, you were unable to see out of the hull windows. Galley-up layouts are not only more social when at anchor but preferable for the cook who hasn't yet fully gained their sea legs whilst underway. We've also found that more often than not, part of our meal is prepared on the deck BBQ, which with the galley-up, becomes a convenient extension of the galley.

2. Excellent visibility around the boat from the helm station plus easy access to the helm. Some cats did have good visibility from the helm but the climb up to the helming position was painful. To me, visibility from the helm was more important than protection from the

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elements. Since owning the Lavezzi 40, this has proven to be more valid than I initially considered. Visibility is important when maneuvering the boat in a marina, but once underway most the time is spent on auto helm. If the weather is bad I can helm the boat from inside the saloon using the auto helm remote and still have good visibility through the saloon windows (I couldn't do this on most monohulls).

3. Must not have berths under the bridge deck. I hated the idea of having to climb up multiple steps to get into the berth and once up there, often not have sufficient room to sit up properly. I wouldn't want to have to negotiate those steps in the middle of the night when getting up to check the anchor.

4. The decks must be free of obstacles and easy to move around. This was very important for me and ruled out all the three-step deck designs. Not only did the boat have to be easy to move around the decks, just as important was the ease by which you access the decks. On some cats I saw, accessing the side decks from the cockpit was similar to negotiating an obstacle course.

5. The cat had to have the potential to sail well. This was the most difficult one to nail down. What did I mean by 'well'? A good starting point is to try to get hold of a polar diagram from the manufacturer. If available, this should give you a conservative indication of performance on all points of sail in a given wind strength. Ideally your test sail should be in winds of around 20 knots so you can get a good idea of speed, pointing ability and pounding.

6. The catamaran must have good resale value. Obviously a number of factors work towards determining the eventual price a secondhand cat will demand. A good starting point is to have a boat from a reputable manufacturer. The build and finish should be consistent, whereas this is not guaranteed with a kitset or a one-off custom boat. Also when selling a cat secondhand you are unlikely to sell into the bareboat charter market, so avoid buying a Charter configuration. An Owner version with one hull dedicated to their use will have higher secondhand value.

7. Location and access to the engines was important. If possible, I wanted the engines to be out of the accommodation behind a watertight bulkhead. As I intend to do the routine maintenance on the engines myself and am not quite as flexible as I once was, the engine compartments had to have room to move around. Another consideration is whether to upgrade the size of the standard engines. The relative cost of doing this often makes it worthwhile.

8. As the vast majority of our time spent on the boat will be at anchor, the layout of the cockpit and bimini had to work. This is easy to overlook as you get caught up in performance or other design considerations. A catamaran's performance at anchor is probably one of the main reasons you are looking at a multihull rather than a monohull. Its stability when the tide turns and a swell develops is key, and to leverage this advantage you need a really functional cockpit layout. There needs to be a sturdy cockpit table with comfortable seating. The usability is further enhanced on a number of production cats by

the ease of serving from the galley. The bimini needs to provide shelter from the sun and options to be enclosed for shelter from wind and rain, especially in NZ. Also ensure you're able to walk on the bimini in order to easily reach the end of the boom to stow the mainsail and zip up the lazy bag,

9. Probably the most important consideration is to be clear on what use you will get out of the boat over the next two to three years. The natural inclination is to yearn for a bigger boat than you need or can logically justify, based on your likely usage. Not only will this be more expensive to purchase but the mooring, maintenance and running costs will also be higher.

10. One key safety factor that is often overlooked is the ability of the crew to easily handle the boat in all conditions. Larger boats need larger sails and if everything is working well and you're sailing conservatively, this is not usually a problem even with only a couple on board. However, if say a furling line breaks in the middle of the night just as the weather turns for the worse, you need to be capable of dropping the sail and getting it down below. Sometimes smaller is not only cheaper, it's safer.

Myths

a) Catamarans have to back the headsail in order to get through the wind when tacking. This is not true of modern catamarans. However, even if it was, what's wrong with doing this? When I sailed on some of the top racing monohulls in the world in the late 70s, we always backed the headsail when tacking.

b) Daggerboard cats are often portrayed as higher performers than mini keel cats. In certain conditions this can be true, particularly when going to windward in light conditions. However, for a cruiser this increased performance is unlikely to be noticed. It requires the attentive concentration of a helmsman to leverage this whereas the cruiser is more likely to be utilizing the auto helm. It's generally accepted that a cruising cat with daggerboards will seldom adjust the boards under normal cruising conditions. Often this can lead to problems with boards sticking due to marine growth in the daggerboard cases, which can be hard to antifoul and clean. Add to this the potential additional problems with movement of the boards in their cases, the hull space taken up with cases, the additional engineering and cost involved and the inability to easily beach a daggerboard cat, and daggerboards may no longer seem that attractive. The general manager of Fountaine Pajot told me the story of how in the early years they built identical cats, one with daggerboards and the other with mini keels. On all points of sail except close-hauled in light winds, the mini keel cat was faster.

c) Catamarans are always faster than monohulls.

This is not true. In light winds of up to 8 to 10 knots the additional wetted area of a catamaran will work against her. However in winds above this the cat should be equal to, or faster than, the equivalent sized cruising monohull. I say 'should' as the measurement will depend on many factors and often the comparison is not equitable. If you've done any racing you will know how important a clean bottom is in maximising the boat's speed potential and this has an even bigger impact on a cat.



Observations

On our Fountaine Pajot Lavezzi 40 we have often seen speeds in excess of 12 knots on the GPS, with 14 knots being the top speed to date. Over one 12-hour period we managed to average 10 knots without really pushing the boat. Given the right conditions, I'm sure we'll achieve higher speeds than this. It's really the ability to regularly be sailing at 8 knots on a steady platform that stands out for us. Also, in light conditions, motoring on one engine at 7 plus knots and using less than 3 litres per hour is great!