



SKIP NOVAK

A CATAMARAN IS FASTER, SAFER AND MORE COMFORTABLE THAN ANYTHING WITH A SINGLE HULL – BUT YOU HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION

Even if you don't believe your own eyes, there is no doubt – if the statistics are to be believed – that catamarans are taking the sailing world by storm in both racing and cruising offshore, and certainly inshore in stadium events.

Having raced and made long passages on high-performance maxi cats, I can certainly attest to their allure. They are faster, safer and more comfortable than anything with a single hull.

Faster is easily understood, but it is justifiable to question the safety aspect. An offshore catamaran or trimaran can turn upside-down with a moment's lack of concentration. Up until that point, consider that, compared with a monohull, you are much higher above the water and by and large waves pass under the net and the cross beams.

Sail handling is a dream, compared with grappling with sails tangled up in the lifelines on the foredeck of a

monohull heeled at 20°. Drop the foresail halyard and the sail falls onto the net. Reefing the main is also easy by comparison, as you stroll around on a flat platform tweaking this and that.

Look at the images from the Volvo Ocean Race and then compare them to the pictures from any offshore multihull

where the crew are riding above the water rather than in it. And if the whole shebang does go upside-down the crew can still live in the hulls, and in fact plans for communication, power generation, cooking, watermaking and all else are taken into account in the inverted configuration.

Survival upside-down

Monohull keel failures, which seem to occur with alarming frequency, often leave holes in the boat – she floats, but survival until rescue can be a more desperate situation. In ocean racing terms at least, when you add

up speed, safety and comfort it seems multihulls are a more intelligent approach.

I have less experience of cruising catamarans. One holiday in the Seychelles, though, was enough to convince me that this is the only way to go, at least for the tropics. We had two families of four on a 43ft cat, each to their own hull, with two heads in each. The other family were non-sailors, which made absolutely no difference to managing the holiday nor to their enjoyment, as it was, as some readers have pointed out, like living on a floating caravan.

Testing the theory

We were there to enjoy the islands, to do so by sail, but the sailing was secondary. By contrast, just to test this conclusion, our family is cruising the Falkland Islands and Tierra del Fuego with another family, eight all-up, this December/January. *Pelagic* is an old-style, narrow 54-footer. If you don't see my next column you can assume we have all killed each other.

Is it the sailing or the destination that is of prime interest? If the latter, the catamaran formula wins hands down. Granted, most charter cats sail like dogs, are in the main chartered by less experienced sailors and ultimately very safe inter-island. It would take a tropical storm Force 9, if not a hurricane, to overturn them.

Hence the rise of the performance cruising catamaran; ultra-light, all souped up with a powerful rig and minimum scantlings, but still sporting a living room with a picture window and en-suite bedrooms. These are different animals requiring skilled hands to keep them on the right side of heaven.

I see the dilemma. If you are a sailor with a racing background, this is the perfect toy to 'cruise'. But it might be a contradiction in terms – cruising at 25 knots is not relaxing, no matter what anyone tells you. Letting the ocean slide by at eight to ten knots is more like it.

In the hands of less than skilled people who are not paying attention every second to wind, waves and trim, these performance cruising catamarans can be on the right side of hell in a jiffy.

That would be a performance indeed.



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