

St Francis 50 Boat Review

Review and Photographs by Neil Rusch



Seven Years Ago, almost to the day, Jim Brown gave a talk at the Miami Multihull Symposium. In a remarkable summary he traced the multihull heritage; where-we-come-from and where-we-are-going. As I write I have the story open in front of me (MULTIHULLS Magazine March/April 1998). In it Brown reaches back 3000 years – “the multihull configurations we have today are ancient.” He then looks out on the Miami Boat Show and sees a forest of masts. “We can look over at the monohull portion and see another grove of masts, and it’s a larger grove than ours, but they’re trees of a different species.” He concludes by summarizing the statistics – that multihulls, although by number smaller, represents 25% growth per year. This is most of the growth in the whole forest. He says, “We have the upside of the industry in our hands.”

In many respects Brown’s reading of the past and vision of the future has proven prophetic. Certainly in South Africa the sailboat market has done a 180-degree turn-about in 20 years. Statistically multihull manufacture now dominates the sailboat market. St Francis Marine began building catamarans 15 years ago and as such was part of the pioneering effort that would change the South African Boating industry forever. Was it a coincidence that 50 launchings later I was invited to review the first of the yard’s new range, the St Francis 50, having been there at the outset when they launched their first 40-footer?

Sisterships PEGASUS and APHRODITE

The previous catamaran built by the yard, which I reviewed in MULTIHULLS Nov./Dec. 2001, was the St Francis 48, *Pegasus*. When I was asked to review the St Francis 50, *Aphrodite*, the new flagship in the range, I expected her to be an extended version of the 48. I was wrong! She is a new boat *completely*, with redesigned hulls and a redesigned deck, taller mast and more powerful rig. I expect if you did put the 48 and the 50 side-by-side the visual differences would be subtle. This is because the styling and the design philosophy are consistent throughout the range – each and every model is noticeably a sistership.

The gain by moving from 48 to 50 feet has been considerable. I think the St Francis 50 is a quicker boat, not just for the extra two feet but because Angelo Lavranos, the designer, has paid attention to the buoyancy distribution and especially the run from the keels right the way aft. I say more about this later during the sailing trials, suffice it now to add that I eyeballed the underwater lines of the second boat in the factory and the lines are clean, offering minimal impediment to the flow of water.

A Sound Pedigree

This character of a design, namely the run, is not computer derived, it is intuitive. In this I am reminded of many conversations around the topic in the offices of *SA Yachting* magazine.

My former colleague, Brian Lello, then editor of the magazine and at the time a mentor to Angelo Lavranos, would repeatedly point to the work of Rickus van der Stadt, saying if you wanted to understand a fast boat, especially downwind, then study the lines drawn by van der Stadt. Lavranos must have paid attention because in 1979 he designed *Assegai*, which won the 2000-odd-mile South Atlantic race. This was followed by a string of winners, both line honors and handicap. Then, in 1992, he designed the St Francis 43. Sailed by the builder, Duncan Lethbridge, it won the multihull division of the Cape to Rio race. That's all history now but it does prove a pedigree. If there is one thing to say about the St Francis 50 it is simply this: I believe she has the magic – just read the hull lines!

After nine months of retooling for the new boat the builder, Duncan Lethbridge had this to say, "In hindsight we probably wouldn't have done it! It proved to be far more work than anticipated but once committed we carried it through. Now that it is finished the results are proving worth the effort."

Growing Larger

Other gains on the St Francis 50 are extra buoyancy which allows for an additional 200 kg of weight to be carried right aft. The decision to build a larger cat was quite simply the growing request for larger and heavier tenders. "The extra buoyancy we gain allows the owner to carry a large RIB without affecting the trim or performance of the catamaran. The 48-footer floated very well, it's just that the tenders are getting bigger and heavier," Lethbridge says.

Until the St Francis 50 all previous cats produced by the yard have had the diesel auxiliary drive the propellers through Saildrives. This was determined by the placement of the inboard diesel engines and the rudder position. In short, there was not enough space for a shaft drive. With an extra two feet of length this is now made possible.

Stepping Aboard

The maximum beam on *Aphrodite* remains 26' 3", exactly the same as on the St Francis 48 but nevertheless the outside living area from the saloon door through to the transom steps is vast and the area is covered by a solid bimini which is now pretty much standard. The mainsheet lines lead through the goalpost and, when sailing, the cockpit is uncluttered as a result.

A small detail often speaks volumes and in this respect I noticed the precise balance on the stainless steel boarding ladder, which gives easy access to divers or swimmers onto the molded transom steps. There's just sufficient weight for the ladder to pivot on its hinge and sink, but not so much weight that it is difficult to lift and stow. In the same vein, the drawer joints are all dovetailed and in keeping with the rest of the joinery work. In the quest to save weight, interior panels and moldings are sandwiched and increasingly molded items are being constructed by using resin infusion techniques. The yard is gearing up so that in time larger items will be molded using this method.

The winch, anchor and bowsprit are all well thought out and refined to the point where each item is out of sight but functional when needed. In short, there's no windlass drum to snag the genoa sheet and there is no bowsprit on which to stub a toe.

This particular boat is built galley down, allowing for a wrap-around nav station on the bridge deck to port, and the saloon table and seating to starboard. The interior layout is flexible to the owner's requirements. This is an aspect of the yard, which St Francis Marine prides itself on.

Cockpit and wheel



Galley



Nav Station



Saloon



Bath and Shower



Sailing Performance

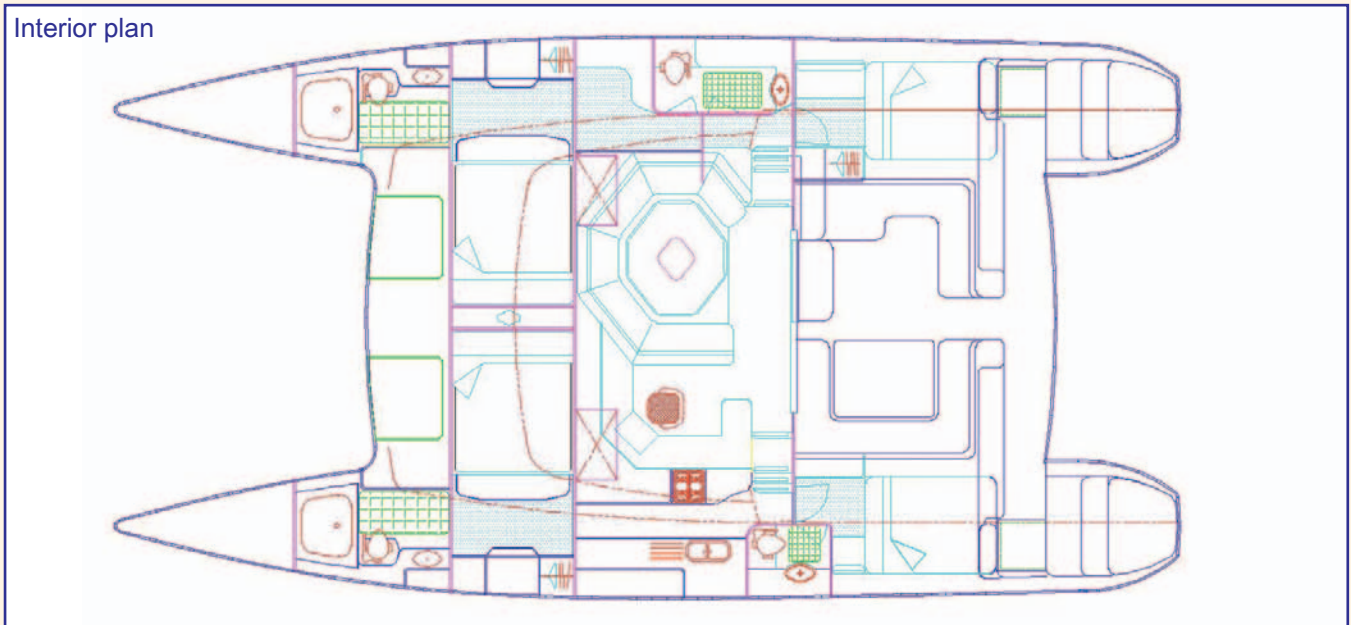
I sailed *Aphrodite* on two occasions, both times in very different conditions. Once at Cape St Francis and again, a week later, in Table Bay. In addition I was able to observe her at close range sailing in 30-plus knots of wind both under full sail and reefed. Furthermore, I also interviewed crew who had sailed her on a delivery to and from Cape Town when she made the trip to appear at the Cape Boat Show. This is significant because winds experienced were 50 during one way and as much as 60 knots on the return voyage. That's a sail test if ever there was one!

The first time I sailed *Aphrodite* was in a squall. We slipped out of the marina easily enough, but soon we were facing a fast increasing wind with a fairly flat sea. Traveling slow or fast (9 to 10 knots was easy on a reach) I noticed the clean flat wake with no water being dragged along. My impression, as the squall hit, was that there was no need to reef. *Aphrodite* absorbed the extra wind with full main and genoa. Simply and without fuss she translated this into additional knots on the speed. At 12.5 tons she's not a heavy cat given her size but nevertheless 12.5 tons are 12.5 tons and, as such, the boat is not easily thrown about and there's a degree of comfort provided as a result.

Table Bay wind was light and we even wondered whether the spinnaker would hold in the gentle breeze. I have observed how these big cats generate their own wind but it is always a surprise just how easily they do move on a whisper of wind. *Aphrodite* was no exception.

The next day was a blast – 30 knots plus. On a beam reach she just flew, spray appearing once or twice from the lee bow. I was fortunate enough to watch this performance from a stable platform and could see *Aphrodite* was overpowered under full main and full genoa. The rudder on the windward hull was just making an appearance (but not the keel) before the skipper bore off. They told me afterwards they were doing 19 knots. Later with one slab in the main and the wind holding steady, in excess of 30, *Aphrodite* was in her element with the right amount of sail area for the wind strength. My 14-year old daughter was aboard at the time and she thought what she experienced was par for the course. The skipper was probably less relaxed, because what had happened was that instruction to ease the sheet was misconstrued and *Aphrodite* took off like a bolting horse. What this did, once again, was convince me just how seakindly the St

Interior plan



Francis boats are – the freeboard, full bow, reserve buoyancy – are a safety feature and a security, even for the novice.

60 Knots!

What follows is my interview with the delivery skipper. In his own words this is his account of the trip round Cape Agulhas:

“On the return voyage the wind swung around to a very strong westerly. We experienced 60 knots of wind and the accompanying big seas. As you know sailing up the coast with a west wind is a wind against current situation (the Mozambique current flowing in the opposite direction down the east coast of southern Africa). As a result we had horrific seas. Besides myself there was one other experienced crew, the others being there for the ride more than anything else. At no time did they feel threatened, although the two of us with experience realized it was probably the worst conditions we would ever sail in. At one stage we recorded a burst of 26.2 knots! For the boat and for us it was exploring new territory. Never before had we run before 60 knots with huge following seas under reduced sail. She has a lot of freeboard. At no stage was she burying the bows even though she was at that point in time overtaking the waves. The strategy was to reduce sail progressively as the wind increased. At no stage did we deploy drogues, although it did cross my mind. I expect if the conditions had got worse we would have put out drogues.”

Final Word

After a testament like that what more can one say except to add that the St Francis 50 is not an extreme yacht. She carries

all the mod-cons – air conditioner, ice-maker, deep-freeze, genset, washing machine, sitz-bath, large-screen DVD and a modern galley with all home conveniences. In spite of this her seaworthiness is beyond question.

I have only one grumble. I struggled with the sensitivity, or lack thereof, of the hydraulic steering. I much prefer the more direct “feel” of cable drive. But, all in all, I would have absolutely no hesitation in selecting the St Francis 50 to take my family cruising; she is a passage-maker and a real home.

SPECIFICATIONS

Overall length.....	50'
Waterline length.....	47'
Beam.....	26' 3"
Draft.....	4' 2"
Displacement.....	25 558 lbs (12.5 ton)
Mast height.....	70' 6" (off water)
Mast height.....	64' (off deck)
Standard Aux.....	2 x 54 hp inboard diesel
Mainsail.....	947 ft ²
Genoa.....	602 ft ²
Total area.....	1,377 ft ²
Spinnaker standard	1,862 ft ²
Screacher Code 0	1,120 ft ²
Staysail	204 ft ²
Fuel	200 gal
Fresh water	360 gal
Payload	9,500 lbs MM

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