

THE LEOPARD EVOLUTION

by John Devers

I've long been a big fan of Charles Darwin. His evolutionary theories of natural selection, common descent and gradualism challenged orthodoxy in their day and have been a compelling influence ever since. Experience, learning and adaption is also what has driven progress from the very earliest versions of human endeavour to the accelerated changes occurring in every corner of today's warp speed world. I found myself reflecting on these and some other meaning of life questions when I was abruptly transported back to the here and now by the traffic congestion on Brisbane's Gateway motorway as I picked my way towards a date on the water with a shining new star.



LEOPARD 40



top: Leopard 40 sailing.

inset: The author at the helm ... good visibility.

I was also reminded that some days don't turn out quite how you imagine and sometimes it's better that way because life has the capacity to surprise ... sometimes in the nicest and most rewarding of ways.

That's how it turned out as I approached the Moreton Bay marina in Queensland's biggest yacht basin to join Australasian Leopard representatives David and Rob, along with marine surveyor and industry legend

Don Lees for a sail on the brand new Leopard 40 (hull number three). I had in mind that a sail that day would be a bubbles and bickies affair with strong emphasis on a couple of favourite activities – kicking back with drink in hand and some idle chit chat to while away an hour or two on the water. What could be better than that?

Because I had reviewed the Leopard 44 and Leopard 39 a little under two years earlier, I was invited to jump aboard Leopard's new offering during the commissioning process ahead of being handed over to proud new owners Marius and Martelle Botha.

Manly's esplanade provides a dress circle view of boats of all types, almost as far as the eye can see. The Leopard was not hard to spot at the end of the finger closest to the shore, with its distinctive navy and gold trim colours applied to a hull shape best described as contemporary, confident and

capable. The forecast was for a full blown southerly change to push through in the afternoon and since this was to be a morning sail, I expected our sail around the islands would be more benign canter than full blooded gallop.

By the time I boarded, the decibel level of the halyard slap across the marina had escalated from that familiar background clink to a raucous cacophony. I was being advised that the southerly change wasn't waiting to accommodate the forecasters and my Leopard associates welcomed me saying the building conditions were perfect for demonstrating this new beauty's all round sailing capabilities.

Years of manoeuvring monohull yachts in and out of marina berths have left me with a built-in foreboding, especially with the wind up while getting in and out of confined spaces. The two 29hp Yanmar reverse facing engines with sail drive provided absolute precision control and outstanding manoeuvrability as we deftly exited the confines of the quite tight berth conditions and headed out on to the bay. I was about to see a demonstration of serious sailing capability that will

pitch this world class boat well beyond its competitive offerings, especially those that are better characterised as luxury accommodation afloat.

Clearing the leads, we put two reefs in the main and unfurled the generous headsail. We put the boat into the wind on a beat towards King Island in gusty conditions that quickly filled to a steady 20kts of southerly breeze as the strong cold front pushed in. Both the Thorpe and Huybers marks came up quickly with a couple of easily managed tacks before turning north to clear Green Island to port in conditions that by now had strengthened to a steady 25kts.

Impressions? Well, there were more than a few. Firstly it was turning into the kind of day that separates those hardy sailing souls from those who prefer their experiences on the water to be more of a social affair. There were just a couple of yachts out in what was by now the classic Moreton Bay chop. There was no mistaking the sight of hulls seriously heeled, bottoms on the rail, gunwales awash and as we passed by, plenty of focus on the job at hand. Meanwhile the big cat with the spots went about its business ironing out the



Forward facing galley and nav station.

chop and closing distances with speed over the ground around 8kts. I was reminded of just how fast this is while standing at the stern and staring hypnotically at the powerful wake as it barrelled from the back of the vessel's hulls and disappeared off into the distance.

Our 8kt average was maintained though most points of sail, and bettered on the reach towards St Helena Island before executing a no-fuss jibe and setting a new course to split the two islands. Another observation was just how easily managed this big 40 is, single handed by a competent sailor with everything including winches and sheets within easy reach of the helm and located exactly where you would want them to be. Everything is totally intuitive. There was no need to move about the boat and the electric winch is a boon, especially for raising the mainsail. While there were four of us on board for this blast on the bay with everyone wanting a turn at the helm, the remaining three turned out to be spectators for much of the time! The boat also impressed, offering up a steady, stable and predictable motion while tracking well in both manual and auto helm modes.

When it was time to return to the marina, wind strength had increased and was gusting well beyond the steady 25kts we had experienced for much of our sail. Our thoughts turned to berthing and this is where these big catamarans with their two engines so far apart deliver total predictability. With helm fixed, throttle control of the two engines was all that was required to gently guide the boat into its berth.

Comfortably settled with a good coffee, it was now time for a proper look around and to see what new spots this Leopard has to show off. There were definite differences in layout, look and feel from my last encounter with its ever so slightly bigger sibling, the 44. Leopard's South African manufacturer Robertson and Caine with their 30 year pedigree of building quality racers and cruisers, have harnessed their accumulated knowledge and experience to produce a vessel punching well above its weight in all respects.

Every new catamaran in the Leopard range contains all the top features that sailors look for, including blue water capability, high bridge deck clearance, great sailing performance, solid construction, a superb anchoring system, excellent ventilation, high quality equipment, large tank capacities and a hard top on all models. Accordingly, Leopard has optioned this new 40 with the very best equipment and warranty support globally. Twenty nine horsepower Yanmar motors, Raymarine electronics, Lewmar winches are respected brands in all markets around the world and of course standard equipment can be enhanced by a range of quality optional items including generator, air-conditioning and water-makers. The end result is that once again the bar has been well and truly raised when it comes to cruising catamarans.

This new model was a real surprise in that its internal volume is much closer to the 44 rather than the 39 it replaces. And I'm sure that the amazing 25% increase in volume over the 39 is further enhanced by the foredeck access directly from the saloon. A new

forward facing galley and navigation station and a comfortable L-shaped lounge located in the aft section of the saloon add to the sense of a big living space. There's plenty of ventilation throughout the vessel and the elevated starboard helm station provides a good line of sight to all four hull quarters.

The galley is also an L-shaped configuration featuring Corian bench surfaces, energy-saving drawer fridge and freezer and a deep stainless sink. An Eno three burner gas hob and oven delivers the cooking function and there's an abundance of cupboard space.

The dedicated owner's suite is to starboard and can be closed off with an innovative sliding door arrangement. The step-in double bed is aft and the large bath suite forward consisting of shower and electric head is separated by the vanity and office space amidships. Portside, the layout features the double berths fore and aft separated by the bathroom in a convenient central location. There is plenty of headroom and Lewmar hatches, electric fans and opening port lights ensure plenty of light and ventilation throughout the vessel.

Our surveyor's perspectives echoed the sentiment that everywhere you look, there's the hard evidence of robust build, clever design, smart systems and quality finishes. These are the hallmarks of all Leopard catamarans and the 40 is no exception. Features like the flush hatches, uncluttered deck, and engine access all the way aft make for easy access and maintenance. The Lewmar windlass and rode is fully enclosed so safe for everyone and the easy operation of the davit system for lowering and lifting the tender at the press of a button can't help but impress ... especially all those who've done it the hard way.

Combine all this with a softly curved brow adding to the handsome aesthetic while offering good sun

protection and a design that offers spectacular visibility for maintaining watch from anywhere on the vessel and it was clear why the expert was impressed. The deep lockers and flow coat finish in all stowage spaces was a nice touch, as was the multi-function foredeck for sitting, lounging or entertaining.



Dedicated owner's suite with an abundance of storage.



Owner-side bathroom.

SUMMARY

This is Darwin's proposition at work in our world. More than 30 years of design and construction evolution delivering a real pay-off for the buyers of this boat. There's a strong sense that every detail has been carefully thought through by smart people who have paid a lot of attention, not only to the feedback from owners of earlier models, but to the expectations of a new generation of buyers looking for the complete package of comfort, convenience, sailing performance and value. There is absolutely no doubt that this stunner will quickly make its mark and set a new benchmark in this hotly contested segment of the market.

This Leopard sails away ex-factory Capetown at around \$US420,000 with multiple pricing and delivery options. Talk to David and his team for more information about the many choices on offer.

1300 661 321 www.leopardcatamarans.com



Aft cockpit and stainless davit.



Interior saloon thru to aft cockpit.



Cockpit and helmstation.



LEOPARD40

New owners Marius and Martelle Botha are smitten by their new Leopard 40. Together with daughters Cara and Mariselle, they plan to christen the boat *Carma* and berth it at Shute Harbour within easy striking distance of their medical practice in Mackay and with perfect access to all the cruising options on offer throughout the Whitsundays and beyond. Diving, fishing, swimming, exploring, collecting shells and generally making the most of their new boat are all firmly on their agenda.

I caught up with Marius and asked him about the new boat in their life. Here are some of his perspectives:



"I've made a careful study of the Leopard catamarans over an extended period. I feel like I've got to know them very well and I've always been impressed by their design and build quality. Their designers have made it their business to lead with innovation rather than follow.

They were one of the first catamaran manufacturers to lead all lines to the helm station and this is done in a logical, intuitive and entirely practical way. There is always a grab rail exactly where you need it. We love the walk through to the forward deck area. We know we will be spending a lot of time lying at anchor so a user friendly layout for entertaining and relaxing was an important consideration for us.

We had the opportunity to step onto three boats in the Leopard line-up – the 40, 44 and 48. We were amazed at how little difference there was in internal volume between the 40 and the 44. It was very hard to tell the difference. The generous space, intelligent layout, light and visibility are all excellent features but it's the sailing performance in rough conditions that sets all the Leopards apart. It's a massive confidence boost. I know how rough South African waters can be and conditions in this part of the world at times can be equally challenging. Leopard's designers and construction people have always responded to this reality and the result is a range of boats that perform as you would want in all conditions.

In three words, we love it ... and we're more than a bit excited. No surprise that three words wouldn't do it, so let's make it 10!"