

Final Exam

BY TOM LINSKEY

Is a cat the right boat for long-distance cruising? A bluewater couple's one-year investigation into cruising cats culminates in a weeklong evaluation of their chosen boat during a Caribbean charter



Harriet and Tom Linskey give the **DOLPHIN 460** a workout, getting a feel for visibility from the helm station (right), taking detailed notes and measurements (below), and dropping the hook (left) in various anchorages, including the Tobago Keys.



Harriet and I decided to set out on a bluewater cruise again, so we booked a charter. If that sentence just doesn't seem to make sense, let me explain. The first time we went bluewater cruising, from 1986 to 1992 aboard *freelance*, our 28-foot Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, we sailed 15,000 miles from California to Mexico, then to the South Pacific, New Zealand, Australia, and on to Japan. She was small, yes, but *freelance* was also strong

and able; the sturdy passagemaker with a full-length keel was a good fit for a young couple cruising on a shoestring. In the mid-1990s, we checked back into civilization, and for the past several years in New England we've been coastal cruising our J/32, *Independence*, a modern performance-cruising sloop that's nimble and fast—quite a contrast to the heavy-displacement, cutter-rigged *freelance*.

We've known for years that we'd go bluewater cruising again, but one question has

stumped us: What should our next boat be? What qualities did we want from the boat during a passage and while living aboard, cruising for years at a stretch? The intriguing possibilities of a cruising catamaran—lots of living space, the promise of speed, sailing flat on a passage and not rolling at anchor—as well as the potential drawbacks—the cost of a bigger boat, the capsize question, windward ability—had to be investigated. We began our search with a lot of ques-

tions. And by the time we scheduled our week on the 46-foot *Dolphin Dreamer*, a Dolphin 460 that's available through TMM in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the trip would be a charter test—call it the final exam of what we called our Next-Boat Studies.

Homework

Our cruising-cat research was extensive. We pored over all the multihull books, design drawings, and brochures we could find. We looked at used cats on the Internet and

in person. We gathered opinions from builders, designers, brokers, and owners of cruising cats. We went to boat shows and thumped the hulls of every two-hulled candidate. Other cruisers might well reach different conclusions, but we decided that the key features we wanted included daggerboards, good bridgedeck clearance for ocean sailing, relatively light weight, and slender hulls. We began circling closer and closer to the Dolphin 460, a boat aimed at private owner-

DAVID FENTRESS

TOM LINSKEY (TOP), HARRIET LINSKEY



T.L.'S CHARTER TEST KIT

ship and bluewater cruising. The boat fit our requirements, the standard accommodation plan worked for us—and the builder offered layout customization. At the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, the Dolphin's international distributor, Phillip Berman of The Multihull Company, had placed placards in strategic places inside the boat that posed this question: "What would you do with this space?" Visions of a home office, a library, a pantry, or a laundry room all flashed before our eyes.

Deciding that we needed to see the factory, we flew to Aracaju, Brazil, where the boats are built, and met the builder, Jr. Pimenta, and the designer, Philippe Pouvreau, the team behind Dolphin Catamarans. We returned home knowing that the boat is well built, but we still didn't know if our next bluewater boat should be a cat. Harriet and I had grown up cruising monohulls—a Pearson 35, a Pearson 39, a Coronado 25, a Yankee 30, and a Yankee 38—and the leap onto two unballasted hulls was daunting. We needed to go beyond the boat show, beyond a daysail around the harbor. The only way to know for sure if this boat, or any cat, was right for us would be to sail and handle the strange creature ourselves. We needed to experience what it's like to live aboard. We needed to poke around the engine rooms, the bilges, and the circuit-breaker panels, to run our flashlights over the backing plates of winches and cleats—to evaluate the boat in the light of our bluewater purposes. At TMM, we found

In addition to a tape measure (berths, heads, and equipment spaces are a game of inches) and the spec sheets of equipment we're considering (will the genset fit?), in our test kit Harriet and I brought the Dolphin's accommodation plan and sail plan, and the standard equipment, options, and price lists; the same materials for the other handful of boats we were looking at (there's no better time to compare and contrast layouts and gear than when you're surrounded by it); a camera

to take photos of details; a handheld GPS (to verify boat speed); and a couple of marine-hardware catalogs (how much is that shiny new electric self-tailing winch, anyway?).

We found that there's no way better than living aboard for a week to assess equipment that's new to us, along with everything else that separates a good boat from a so-so boat: cabin ventilation, the placement of reading lights, engine access, ease of maintenance, and much more—in fact, there's something

of significance almost everywhere you look. For example, our week on the Dolphin was the first time we'd lived with a laminate cabin sole, and we liked it. The "teak and holly" looked good, the slightly textured surface provided sure footing, and we won't miss the varnishing duties (touching up the scratches and dings on the real thing is endless) and the inevitable water stains associated with a varnished sole.

Even if the model of cat you're considering isn't available in charter, the charter-test exercise, in our opinion, is well

worth doing. The amount you'll learn about an unfamiliar boat is invaluable, and the money you'll save in avoiding certain equipment or layouts can save you many times the cost of the charter. If you do buy a boat as a result of your charter test, you'll do it with the confidence that you've given it a thorough test. (Plus, a number of catamaran builders will spring for the cost of your charter.) If a charter test ends your investigation into cats, you've still enjoyed a week of sailing in turquoise waters. That's not a bad way to take a final exam. **T.L.**

A TEST CHARTER REQUIRES A FULL range of activities: Harriet (opposite page, below) works the twin engines while anchoring. Harriet and Tom, along with Kate Fentress (opposite page, top), relax in the shaded cockpit. Tom (left) investigates the engine room, then catches a power nap on the forward trampoline.

the only Dolphin available for charter. We pulled together our bag of cat questions and cat worries, packed a "boat-test kit" (see "T.L.'s Charter Test Kit," opposite page) along with our swim suits, asked Kate and David Fentress, sailing friends, to join us, and flew to the Caribbean for the final exam.

Expectations

When we met John West, the knowledgeable and cat-savvy manager of TMM's base in St. Vincent, and told him what we were up to, he noted that we weren't the first charterers who wanted to try out a cat. And he also noted that many monohull sailors, having done little research, arrive with unrealistic expectations. "I'm absolutely up front in telling them what each cat can and can't do, what they should expect in terms of performance, and what they should look for in terms of design and construction," West said. Bringing realistic expectations to a charter test means realizing that cats designed and built expressly for charter—they're heavier and have high-volume hulls, lower bridgedecks, and reduced sail area—are usually slower than boats intended for bluewater or coastal use by private owners. And all cats in charter, even a performance cat, may be somewhat "defanged" by smaller sails, fixed props, or a bottom that needs cleaning. (TMM obligingly scrubbed *Dolphin Dreamer* just before our charter test.)

Seaworthiness

The Worry: Seaworthiness, to Harriet and me, means that the boat that takes you to sea should bring you back—and be able to weather a storm in the process. The monohull (self-righting) versus catamaran (unsinkable) debate is circular and prone to bumper-sticker logic ("Ultimate stability for a cat? Upside down. Ultimate stability for a monohull? Bottom of the ocean."). Harriet and I understood, from studying design calculations of catamaran stability, that it would take an

DAVID FENTRESS (TOP), TOM LINSKEY

DAVID FENTRESS (TOP), HARRIET LINSKEY

extraordinary event to flip a big cruising cat. Even so, we were looking for reassurance on this crucial point.

The Reality: While you can't prove seaworthiness during a charter test, you can look for clues: strength in the right places, proper installation of and redundancy in systems, and the overall ability of the boat to hunker down and slog through tough conditions. We knew from our factory visit that the Dolphin is strong, but what about the capsize question? We pressed *Dolphin Dreamer* a bit during the charter; in 20-plus knots of breeze, with full main and genoa sheeted hard, the boat's stability was impressive. And reassuring. We began to realize that for cat cruising, a different brand of bluewater seamanship would be required—taking our foot off the throttle (i.e., reducing sail area) preemptively, employing a drogue earlier rather than later when running off, raising the daggerboards when hove to. We saw enough to reach the conclusion that with some beefed-up gear for storm management, a properly designed and built cruising cat is seaworthy.

Handling and Performance

The Worry: Would we be able to handle such a large—the Dolphin 460 measures 46 feet by 24 feet—craft with high windage in tight quarters? Would it tack satisfactorily? What about two-hulled feedback on the helm, the speed of response, and directional stability? How fast would this cruising cat, with its tanks full, laden with provisions, and loaded with amenities (genset, air conditioning, watermaker, and more), actually sail? Harriet and I don't need to be clipping along at 18 knots day and night (for doublehanded, mom-and-pop cruisers, things can happen rather fast at that speed). But the prospect of knocking off 250-mile 24-hour runs is heavenly. (During the 1991 Melbourne-to-Osaka Race, which covered 5,500 miles through the doldrums, variables, and trade winds, we averaged 4.25 knots on *freelance*. Our next boat needs to go a lot faster.)

The Reality: A cat's twin engines make handling the boat under power, even in windy, tight situations, a more successful endeavor than what we've experienced with a monohull. Harriet got the hang of two-handed throttle jockeying—one engine in forward, one in reverse to swing the bow, walk the stern, spin the boat. Under sail, the cat tacked as we expected: slowly. Sailing closehauled with the daggerboards down, the Dolphin made sur-

prisingly little leeway, and in 15 to 18 knots of wind we marched along at 8.5 to 9.5 knots—at only 3 degrees of heel. Reaching, we sailed at 9 to 11 knots under main and genoa. Putting on my sailmaker's hat for a moment (I made sails for 15 years, specializing in spinnaker design, including asymmetric kites for cats), I estimate that with a screecher (a large, light-air genoa) in trade-wind conditions, the boat will reach at around 12 knots, and with an asymmetric spinnaker, it will hit more than 15 knots. That's certainly fast enough to zip us across an ocean. But how often Harriet and I want to be flying large sails is another question altogether.

If you've grown up sailing monohulls, steering a cruising cat will be disappointing. On a cat, the moment-by-moment pulse transmitted through the wheel of a performance cruising monohull is missing or muted. The helm response is there, but it's delayed. For our bluewater purposes, that's all right—we prefer to let the autopilot steer. For long-distance sailing, what we want is directional stability, which, by virtue of its narrow, widely separated hulls, a cruising catamaran naturally delivers.

Liveboard Life

The Worry: Space, space, space! With so much room on a cruising cat, how can there possibly be a problem with livability? All the way across the Pacific Ocean on little *freelance*, there was enough stowage (deep bilges!) but there wasn't much living area. Harriet and I adjusted: We kept things tidy, and we kept junk from accumulating and overtaking our space. And so for us, there's almost too much space on a cat. "I love all the space in the galley, the saloon, and the cabins, but a catamaran just doesn't feel cozy," Harriet had said as we'd stepped off one of the cats at the Annapolis boat show. I knew what she meant. We'd come to equate the feeling of being belowdecks on a monohull—that snugness that makes you want to curl up with a book and a mug of hot chocolate—with the magic of life afloat. In galley-up cats such as the Dolphin, there's a loss of privacy in the galley and saloon, especially at night with the cabin lights on. What to do about this "coziness quotient?"

The Reality: After a week aboard *Dolphin Dreamer*, we grew into the large living spaces of a cat—two hanging lockers in the master cabin, lots of clothes stowage and dressing area, the large head/vanity and the huge shower, and the 24 feet of separation between the owner's hull and

the guest hull that bestows true privacy. I doubt, after living in this homelike environment, that we can go back. But at times, given the Dolphin's wraparound Lexan saloon windows, we did feel like we were in a display case. The solution came when Weebee and Peter Brown showed us their Dolphin 460, *Muse*, in Admiralty Bay, at Bequia, during our charter week. To reduce the fishbowl effect, they'd had covers of Phifertex mesh made for *Muse*'s saloon windows, and these can be snapped on when needed: Weebee and Peter can see out, neighbors can't see in, and the sun's glare is cut by 70 percent.

Construction and Systems

The Worry: Because of our factory visit, we knew all about the Dolphin's construction—knowledge which cleared the way for us to proceed to the final exam. (If you're contemplating a charter test, visiting the boatbuilder first is a good idea.) As for systems, compared with *freelance*, a big cruising cat is complicated. Our monohull was so keep-it-simple-stupid that we didn't even have a knotmeter (we trailed a Walker log) or a fathometer (when was the last time you swung a lead line?). While *freelance* was a bit too basic, all of the cruising cats we'd seen were systems heavy. Was that a given? Would coping with a big cat's complication rule our lives?

The Reality: Yep, a big cat is fairly elaborate: two engines, many more lights and bilge pumps, an intimidating distribution panel, and what seems like miles of wiring. But come to think of it, when you compare it with *freelance*, our J/32, *Independence*, is complicated—networked electronics that include a radar and a chart plotter, a hydraulic backstay, and a fully battened mainsail with ball-bearing luff cars. Technology has moved on, Harriet and I with it. When we go bluewater cruising again, we'll be more affected by technology; sometimes we'll be annoyed, but usually we'll be grateful. As the Mr. Fixit of our bluewater team, I'll have to get up to speed on the mysteries of electronics, battery charging, and much more to successfully manage a big cat. And I'll have to ask for help when I need it.

Assessing the systems of the cat that you're charter testing may seem straightforward—either something works or it doesn't. But if you can investigate beyond the immediate glitch to find out why something doesn't work, you'll learn about how the boat's systems are designed and installed. And if you ask the base



THE LINSKEYS' FIRST CRUISING BOAT, a 28-foot Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter, took them throughout the Pacific in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For their next cruise, the space and speed of a catamaran have come calling.

manager or service manager for deep background on a boat, you can learn even more. In his 11 years at TMM, West has sailed, repaired, and maintained cats from a wide range of builders. I asked for his advice on the maintenance history and responsiveness of various builders to warranty and out-of-warranty issues, and his detailed answers were highly illuminating.

Sailhandling Issues

The Worry: We knew that to go bluewater cruising in a cat, we'd be stepping up to a larger boat. The design parameters of a cat (hull beam and freeboard, bridgedeck clearance, and enough mass and weight to calm down the ride in a seaway) seem to work better in boats longer than 40 feet. For Harriet and me, that means handling the Dolphin's 775-square-foot mainsail—and compared with the J/32's 320-square-foot main, the loads are well out of our sailhandling comfort zone. But other couples are able to handle large sails. We'd just have to learn how to do it.

The Reality: Communication, more than muscle, seemed to be the key to handling the sails during our charter test. Because the most onerous task on a big cat is hoisting the fully battened mainsail, *Dolphin Dreamer* has an electric-powered mainsail-halyard winch—it's not a necessity, but nearly so. Yet even when the sail loads were hefty, I was struck by how being able to work on a nonrolling, nonheeling

deck makes sailhandling safer than on a monohull. On the Dolphin, the "foredeck" is wide—24 feet of netting—and the mainsail, if it gets fouled during hoisting or reefing, is easily accessible from the cabin top and the hardtop bimini. The 150-percent genoa, though, demands more arm strength than 5-foot-2-inch Harriet can apply; a nonoverlapping jib, with a self-tacking boom and a 2:1 jib sheet, could be the answer. We should have tried flying and furling the screecher and the asymmetric spinnaker, but instead we took it easy. Kate and David lounged on the trampoline, cooled by mist from the bow waves. Harriet took a nap. I steered, trying to see into our cruising future.

The Crystal Ball

During our charter test we tried to measure and quantify everything: the speed of the boat under power, the layout of the engine rooms, galley countertop space, the ergonomics of the saloon seats, the non-skid on the transom steps. I spent hours with a tape measure trying to figure out if my sketches of a home office and a washer/dryer installation made sense. We came home from our charter test with two notebooks full of measurements, including pages and pages of sweat-stained notes peppered with exclamation points and question marks and rough drawings.

But much of our evaluation of the boat, and the prospect of bluewater cruising in a

catamaran, took place below the radar. On an emotional level, what did Harriet and I really feel about this boat, and about cats? To be honest, our connection with cats doesn't deliver the soul-stirring aesthetic pleasures we enjoyed with *freelance* or the buzz of steering *Independence* upwind in a 15-knot sea breeze. With a cruising cat, beauty is found in the boat's functionality. For cruising, cats just make a lot of sense.

Harriet, more cautious than I am, still isn't comfortable with the large sailhandling loads of a boat this size. And she has cat questions about heavy weather and heaving to, the answers to which we'll probably find only through trial and error. And buying a big cat takes a serious hunk of money; Harriet's more conservative than I am on that one, too. A big cruising cat is, like a house, one of life's major purchases. But given our year's worth of study into cruising cats followed by the final exam of our charter test, we now possess a body of knowledge that's far wider and deeper than all of what we knew when we bought our last home. (If only we could've given our house the pre-purchase scrutiny of a charter test.)

During the charter test, we gazed into the crystal ball. Our bluewater experiences on *freelance* had been life changing. We'll never be in that place in our lives again, discovering what it's like to sail across an ocean, just the two of us, for the first time. But we know that our next bluewater boat has to be more and has to do more. It has to be faster, so that we can cross oceans in less time and get out of the way of weather systems when we need to. It has to be more of a home, a real home afloat—possessing not only lots of living, lounging, entertainment, and stowage space but also enough room for "his and hers" computer workstations where we can keep our various projects (work, family, friends) percolating. To accomplish all this, we'll need a boat that's a lot bigger and faster than our first ride. A cruising cat, from what we've discovered in our investigations and our final exam, is the way to go.

For Harriet and me, the Dolphin 460 passed the final exam. Sure, we have a list of things we'd like to change. What cruising sailor doesn't have lists upon lists upon lists? But I have a feeling that if our bluewater dream will be riding on a boat with two hulls, the Dolphin 460 could be the one.

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