



BIG CAT HITS THE SPOT?

Leopard catamarans is one of the biggest producers of multihulls in the world. Does all that experience pay dividends? Sam Jefferson takes its new 52 for a spin to find out

Leopard Catamarans has a slightly unusual history that the poet Robert Frost would identify with. It was Frost who wrote the immortal lines 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.' This definitely applies to the South African boatbuilder Robertson and Caine who, until the late 1990s, was getting along quite happily as a medium sized boat builder when its work came to the attention of sailing holiday operator The Moorings. This company felt Robinson and Caine could make catamarans purpose built for its charter fleet. The result turbocharged the business and, in a matter of years, it became one of the biggest boatbuilders in the world and found itself on rather a different road.

If it was a sea change for the boatbuilder, it dealt with it manfully. A prime example would be the Leopard 50, launched in 2018, which has sold a quite staggering 246 units. The new Leopard 52 is the replacement for the 50 and is an all new design. It finds Leopard at something of a crossroads. The hideous experience of Covid 19 created shockwaves across the industry but hit charter fleets incredibly hard. As a result, manufacturers who previously specialised in supplying charter firms, have looked to diversify and make their boats more accessible to private customers.

This was the design brief for Robertson and Caine when it started to draw up a replacement for the 50, and the result is a catamaran that is no less spacious or robust than its predecessor design but one that has a touch more luxury about it and one that gives something of a nod to bluewater cruising. Another key factor was to boost performance and to this end the mast and boom have been lengthened compared to the old 50, while the boom has been lowered to make for easy access to the stack pack. This results in a 17 per cent increase in sail area on the wind, which points to improved performance in light airs. Nevertheless, this is first and foremost a comfortable cruiser and a versatile one at that. In order to cater for both charter and private markets, Leopard opted to offer multiple layout options – nothing so unusual in that – what is unusual is that it offer an eye watering SEVEN different layouts – good news for the customer, less so for the journalist who has to try and explain them all to the reader – more on that later. →



Anyway, viewed from the pontoons, this is a big, imposing boat and one that looks tailor made for anchoring off a Caribbean beach and heading ashore for a rum punch. Step aboard and you go up three steps into the cockpit which has an open lip allowing good access to the davits or drop down platform – this platform is an optional extra that has two electric motors that raise and lowers the boat into the water and can double as a central bathing platform – it is, however, a heavy and pricey extra at around 54,198 Euros. The rigid Bimini stretches right aft to provide good shade and protection. Forward of this you are relatively enclosed by the seating area which has a large L-shaped section to port. The whole area is enclosed by a large bench seat aft which runs athwartships. This has a bolster that can pivot

from side to side meaning you can sit facing forward or out to sea – it's a nice touch.

The cockpit has a wealth of fridges with one set to starboard under the helmsman's steps and a smaller one to port under the steps up to the flybridge. This is clearly a boat designed for those who enjoy the finer things in life and, to confirm this, there is a barbecue with a flip-up lid to starboard. That said, this perhaps isn't the best place to put a barbecue as it's a bit too far inboard and, with the wind in the wrong direction, there is a high risk you are going to gas your hungry crew. No matter, beyond this there is an entrance to the aft end of the starboard hull where there is a rather pleasant berth with great access to the bathing platforms for those who fancy tumbling out of bed straight into the sea – more on that later.

ABOVE LEFT
The chart table with a door leading to the forward deck

ABOVE RIGHT
Looking into the saloon from the cockpit

BELOW LEFT
All sail controls lead to the raised helm station

BELOW RIGHT
The sizeable cockpit with entrance to the port side owner's suite

Walk along the wide side decks and you find yourself on a big front deck which has a long rigid section and a short trampoline ahead of it. This rigid forward section further boosts volume and features a seating area for a sunlounger, plus a huge section of sunlounger space forward of it. The steps to the upper deck are to port and take you onto a large terrace that is well connected to the helm position, although the low boom means that you do have to be careful if you are standing up. Aft of this are four solid solar panels inset into the solid Bimini which is neat and provides 1600w of solar power. It is worth bearing in mind though that if you are out on the Bimini sorting out the mainsail, you will want to avoid standing on the panels.

Although the flybridge is right next to the helm and you can easily chat to the skipper, there





is no walkway through between the two areas. This was a deliberate choice by Leopard who wanted to clearly delineate the two areas while also making it easy for the skipper to socialise with the passengers. I suppose you could clamber over but the sensible thing to do is descend back down into the cockpit and take the set of steps to starboard back up to the helm position. There are four steps up to the helm position, which is well connected to the seating area in the cockpit, however, these steps are somewhat open and, if you had kids, you'd want to close it off as there is a risk of falling down straight into the cockpit. Doubtless this will be remedied. Seated behind the wheel on a well dimensioned bench that can accommodate

two with ease, you enjoy really good all round vision for both sail handling and manoeuvring and you are also well protected by the solid Bimini. In terms of sail controls, there are two electric winches as standard and the helm station has all the running rigging leading back to it including the Code 0, and this is good and very clever but you do have to be careful to keep your ropes organised or you can end up in a bit of a tangle. Handling the mainsail on these big catamarans can be a headache but on the 52 the boom is relatively low – although there are still three steps on the mast and you do need to climb a little to free off the halyard and open the lazy bag. The mainsheet is set right aft on a bridle.

ABOVE LEFT

The Leopard 52 in its natural environment

BELOW

The solid foredeck carried well forward opens up yet more space for relaxing

Charter ownership

Leopard is the among supplier of choice for multihulls to The Moorings and also Sunsail. Both of these tour operators are part of the Travelopia Group, a conglomerate owned by KKR who have 578 billion worth of assets. We all love a faceless holding company worth billions but the great benefit if you choose to be part of Sunsail or The Moorings. Charter ownership scheme is that all that cash offers huge amounts of financial stability.

Being part of such a massive group has other benefits – The Moorings has a massive maintenance network for its boats spread across the planet and, because everything is standardised on a Leopard, the parts are all readily available even in out of the way spots and if you go for charter ownership then a 24 hour callout service for breakdowns is available.

If you are interested in a 52, then charter ownership options below, could be worth considering.

Option 1 – buy the boat outright

Benefits include:

- No payment of maintenance or mooring fees
- Insurance included
- 30-plus bases worldwide
- When you have the boat in the programme you get up to 8% of the purchase price per month – if you buy the boat
- At the end of the fixed term plan you can sell boat via moorings brokerage. keep it or part exchange it for a new model.

Option 2 – Buy 45% of boat

Benefits include:

- No income but you get 12 weeks of use of the boat
- At the end you either give boat back and get 20% of purchase price back or pay the 20% of purchase price at the end and the boat is yours
- You can also upgrade when you charter for a bigger boat or downsize

● *More information at moorings.com*





Down below

Sliding patio-style doors mean that the interior is seamlessly connected to the exterior which means in fine weather you have a huge outdoor/indoor living space. Step into the saloon and you have the galley down the starboard side with a pair of entrances for the starboard hull breaking it up. It's worth noting that this is an all electric kitchen – no gas cooker – but with 5KW worth of batteries, even on the full diesel version, there's plenty of electric power. In terms of galley layout, there is a huge fridge/freezer and then an oven and induction hob set forward of this. It's perhaps not ideal for cooking in a big seaway as there aren't many brace points, although forward of this, the sink is enclosed in a U-shaped section with a small sink plus dishwasher and lots of worktop space. There are plenty of cupboards plus huge amounts of storage under the floor. The styling is perhaps more functional than many but does not feel cheap. On the starboard side there is an L-shaped saloon seating area with a big table that can both swivel and folds out. Forward of this is a decent sized chart table/ office space which faces forward and offers

a great view if you fancy doing your nav from inside. There is also a doorway offset to port that takes you out onto the front deck.

Layout options

If the galley/saloon area is simple enough, that's where the simplicity ends because the range of options available frankly made my head swim. So take a deep breath and I will attempt to run you through the various layout options: the starboard hull is the owner's suite with big cabin aft and large heads ahead of that. Forward is a separate entrance to another large double with the bed set latitudinally across – BUT you can have a third cabin which uses the space taken by the massive heads in the owner's suite. Nevertheless, you still access this from the forward entrance meaning the owner's suite always has a separate cabin. In the port hull, the test boat had a large double suite aft with a big heads and shower plus a utility room with washing machine. However, you can have a big double forward set longitudinally plus the big one aft. Another option is a small crew cabin aft with its own dedicated crew room and with bunk beds and separate entrance. There are a number of

ABOVE LEFT

A sizeable double berth aft on the starboard side

ABOVE RIGHT

The athwartships berth set forward in the starboard hull

BELOW LEFT

The utility room/workshop which was part of the layout option on the test boat

BELOW RIGHT

Under sail off St Raphael on a day that offered very varied conditions

other permutations which I'm going to put in a list as it just gets too bewildering. These are: a) A utility room aft and two doubles. b) Two utility rooms and three cabins c) A utility room forward and charter crew cabin d) Five double cabins and no utility rooms. On top of that there's an option of a skipper's cabin at the bow with its own heads. Clear as mud? Perhaps the best solution is to look at Leopard's own brochure for this one as there are just so many permutations.

Under sail

I tested the 52 on a very typical Med day which started with absolutely no wind and no prospect of wind, and concluded with an entirely unexpected 17kts of breeze that seemed to come from nowhere. At the start of the test, the wind was very fickle and we made about 3.5kts hard on the wind which was neither surprising nor inspiring. Easing off the wind, things suddenly picked up and we were making 9kts on a beam reach in 15kts of breeze which isn't half bad. The steering wasn't the most exciting and I soon found myself reaching →



Boat test – Leopard 52

for the autohelm which seemed much more competent than me. In terms of sail handling, this was very easy. Everything was to hand and this was great but you did have to be a little careful to keep things organised to ensure you didn't get into a kerfuffle. The electric winches were a real boon and the push button controls were set into the floor which was both good and bad because they freed up your hands but there was a bit of a risk of stepping on them by mistake. The breeze continued to build and, hard on the wind in 12-14kts, we were hitting 7kts without too much effort.

At this point it's also worth mentioning the motorisation of this boat. You can choose from either twin 57hp or 80hp diesel engines but there is also the option of a hybrid electric set-up which is what we had on the test boat. The system chosen by Leopard is supplied by French company Jool, a subsidiary of Fountaine Pajot. This consists of two 25 kW electric motors and two 27 kWh lithium batteries, augmented by the 1600W of solar panels.

When motoring at a speed of 5kts, each motor consumes 4 kW. On battery power alone, the onboard computer indicated an autonomy of over five hours, no doubt boosted by the beautiful sunny day. Naturally, with the support of the generator, the autonomy is massive. Leaving the marina and before hoisting the sails we hit 8kts but the range plummeted. However, with the diesel generator offering backup, you clearly have ample power to get out of a tight corner. Obviously, the electric version is more expensive (in the region of 200,000 Euros) but the upgraded package includes lithium batteries plus the generator.



SAM'S VERDICT

The Leopard 52 is clearly produced by a boatbuilder that knows its market and has perfected its product for that market. Under sail, the boat is a competent performer without being thrilling. It would do just fine on the Atlantic run and beyond though. Yet the great boon of this boat is the sheer size of it and

the high levels of comfort and space. It's a boat that serves both charter and private clients well and it offers a very competitive price compared to rivals.

BLUE WATER: ★★★★★

LOOKS: ★★★★★

COMFORT: ★★★★★

THE SPEC

Builder: Robertson & Caine

Architects: Simonis Voogd Design

Length overall: 51'8" (15.75 m)

Waterline length: 50'3" (15.31 m)

Beam: 26'9" (8.16 m)

Draft: 5'4" (1.62 m)

Air draft: 81'1" (24.71 m)

Light displacement: 45,232 lbs (20.52 t)

Mainsail: 1,055/1,141 sq ft (98/106 sq m)

Genoa: 757 sq ft (70.3 sq m)

Engines: 2 x 57 HP

Fuel: 237 US gal (900 l)

Water: 185 US gal (700 l)

Price: €899,000 ex-tax

www.leopardcatamarans.com

