

On test



FREEBIRD 50

First launched in 1990, the Freebird 50 has struggled to establish herself in the competitive multihull market. Now Northshore are carving a niche for her. Matthew Sheahan investigates

Lack of space must surely be the biggest single reason why multihull sailing has never been as popular in the UK as it has been in, say, France or America.

So it is surprising to find that an all-British catamaran is being taken seriously by established builders. The boat is the Freebird 50 and anyone who has an interest in multihulls will immediately point out that she is not a new boat. Indeed she is not.

The first Freebird was launched in 1990, with the second boat following later that year. Since then, the transition towards establishing

herself as a production 50-footer has been difficult. Competition in the multihull market is tough as the big players, many of them French, wrestle for the lucrative charter markets. Furthermore, a fire at her original builders' plant, Cornwall-based Modular Mouldings, made life more difficult.

Despite the problems and the number of people who have become involved in either building or marketing this boat, the Freebird 50 seems finally to have found a successful opening in the market.

Itchenor-based Northshore Yachts have



taken on the build project and we went down to Chichester Harbour to sail the latest example, just before she was exported.

ON DECK

Dedicated followers of the multihull scene will already know that this spacious 50ft cruising catamaran was, in fact, a development of a boat roughly half her size, the Firebird. Both boats were designed by one of the technical brains of Modular Mouldings, Toby Richardson, a man whose design philosophy is to begin with a blank sheet of paper and an open mind.

Working with Richardson, British Aerospace's chief stress engineer, Martyn Smith, provided the stress analysis for both boats and together they have produced an advanced specification for a modest-looking design.

Her looks betray her performance, almost to the extent that you become confused between the boat you sailed and the one you ▽

Generating her own wind, the Freebird 50 hums and accelerates with each gust, her performance a complete contrast to her modest looks

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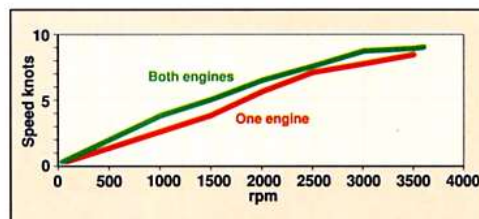
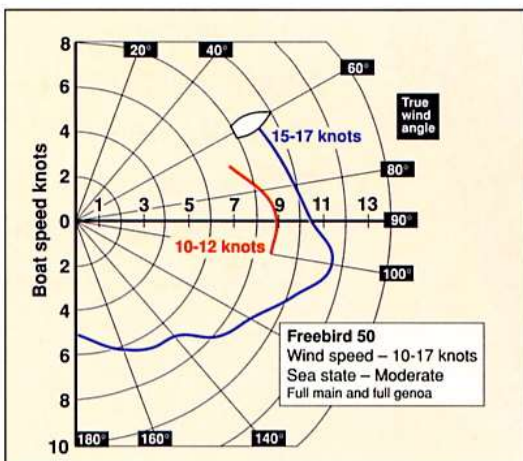
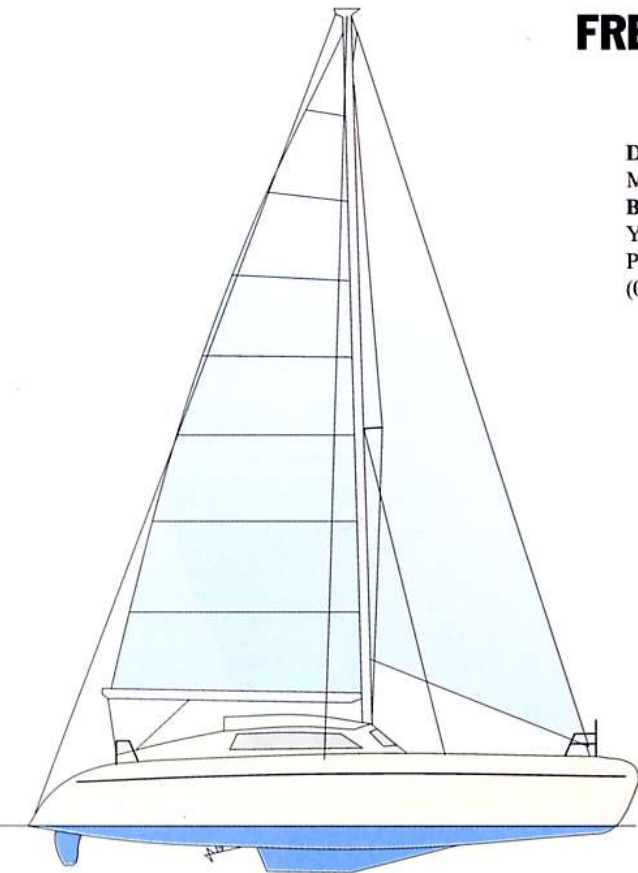
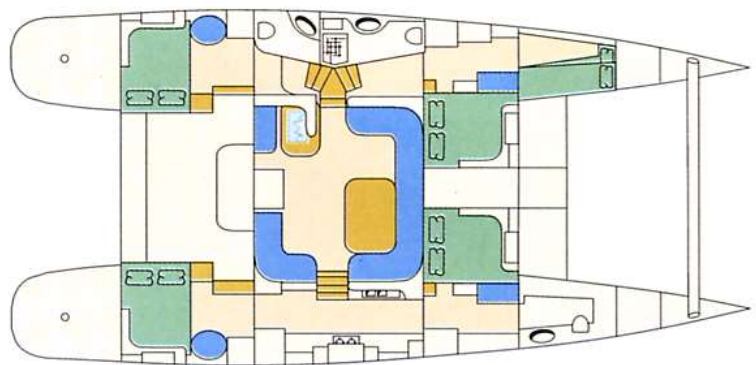
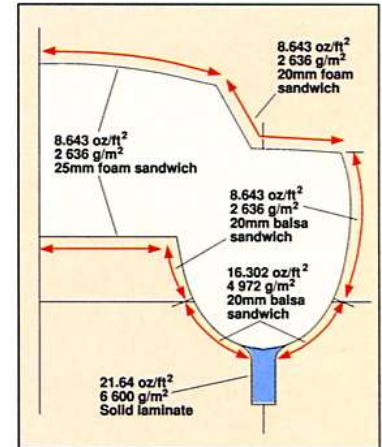
Marina Developments

Technical data

FREEBIRD 50

Designed by: Toby Richardson and Martyn Smith

Built and marketed by: Northshore Yachts Ltd, Itchenor, West Sussex
PO20 7AY. Tel: (01243) 512611. Fax: (01243) 511473.

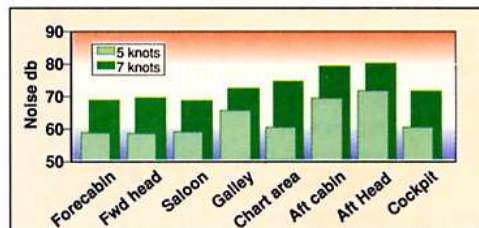


Polar diagram: Shows the optimum close-hauled angle to the true wind. Also shows speed attained on all courses. Important – consider in conjunction with the true wind speed during the test.

Sail area: displacement ratio: This ratio gives some indication of power available. Higher numbers = greater performance.

$$\frac{\text{SA(ft}^2\text{)}}{(\text{Displacement (lb)} \div 64)^{0.66}}$$

Displacement:waterline length: Performance indicator. Low numbers = higher performance. $(\text{Displacement (lb)} \div 2240) (0.01 \times \text{LWL (ft)})^3$



COMPARABLE BOATS	FREEBIRD 50		PROUT 50		PRIVILEGE 51		LAGOON 47	
LOA	50ft 0in	15.24m	49ft 0in	14.94m	51ft 7in	15.72m	46ft 3in	14.10m
LWL	48ft 0in	14.63m	46ft 3in	14.10m	46ft 7in	14.20m	42ft 8in	13.00m
Beam	25ft 0in	7.62m	23ft 6in	7.16m	26ft 5in	8.05m	24ft 11in	7.59m
Draught	3ft 6in	1.07m	3ft 4in	1.02m	4ft 5in	1.35m	3ft 11in	1.19m
Disp	27,558lb	12,500kg	24,251lb	11,000kg	25,300lb	11,476kg	19,842lb	9,000kg
Ballast	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sail area	1,195ft ²	111.12m ²	1,147ft ²	106.67m ²	1,377ft ²	128.06m ²	1,001ft ²	93.09m ²
Berths	8-9		8		11		8	
Engine	Twin Yanmar 3GM 76hp 57kW		Twin Volvo 2040 Saildrives 80hp 60kW		Twin Yanmar 54hp 40kW		Twin Yanmar 54hp 40kW	
Water	250gal	1,136lt	200gal	909lt	231gal	1,050lt	154gal	700lt
Fuel	200gal	909lt	100gal	455lt	153gal	696lt	79gal	359lt
Sail area:disp	20.95		21.91		25.57		21.85	
Disp:LWL	111.22		109.42		111.72		114.03	
Price (ex VAT)	£350,000		£325,000		£337,419		£292,468	

On test



From the comfortable armchair-type helmsman's seating, visibility is good enough to see all four corners of the boat, even with the sails up

RIG AND SAILS

As with most craft of 50ft and above, describing a standard boat is virtually impossible as each example is a reflection of her owner's preferences. So far each Freebird has been different in almost every aspect.

Hull No 5 was Northshore's second Freebird 50, (the first being an open-decked charter boat), and the owner wanted to exploit the boat's performance potential. The large fully battened mainsail reflected his wishes. Distribution between the fore and aft sails is pretty even, with a 550ft² (51m²) mainsail and a 650ft² (60m²) furling genoa. The spinnaker is an asymmetric, with an area of 1,000ft² (93m²).

Simplicity throughout was also Northshore's objective. The mast is a double-spreader rig in a diamond configuration, using conventional masthead capshrouds run out to the gunwale, abaft midships, to provide lateral and fore and aft support. ▷

are looking at. She is so unassuming in appearance, you simply do not expect what is clearly a cruising multihull to generate her own wind in light airs and hum with all the enthusiasm of a racing multihull at speed.

A closer look at her lines, though, does provide some clues. Despite her high freeboard, she has particularly fine entry at the bows for a cruising boat. When she is viewed in plan form, it can be clearly seen that the bow sections open out smoothly and without distortion, to form high performance slender hulls. In profile, her gently raked bows provide plenty of reserve buoyancy. The upper section of the bow is in keeping with modern performance bow profiles and curves aft to deflect spray.

If staring at her bow sections has you thinking of racing multihulls, her hull and superstructure further aft will bring you back in touch with the spirit of her design. Five rectangular portholes are set into her topsides, above which her coachroof occupies approximately half the available space between the mast foot and the transom.

Partly because of its sheer size and partly because the halyards are all operated from the mast, the cockpit is clutter-free. Self-tailing Lewmar halyard winches are mounted on the mast section and consequently the mainsail reef lines are also operated from this area. This means that, apart from the sheets, very few lines venture back into the cockpit other than those that you would normally need to adjust while underway. This allows for a huge, protected cockpit area.

A single forward strut and an inner forestay provide fore and aft stability. All stays are in 1x19 stainless steel wire with a discontinuous system for the diamond stays



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On test



Lewmar opening hatches form coachroof windows



The enormous foredeck area is easy to work

ACCOMMODATION

The second you walk through the French window-type doors into the saloon from the cockpit, it is not difficult to see why people quickly get hooked on multihulls. Easy access, superb visibility and simply heaps of space are three factors that leave most monohull designs standing. A cynic might point out that the initial sense of space given by the saloon, is soon brought into perspective when you wander through the narrow hulls to get to the sleeping accommodation. Not so with the Freebird 50.

Somehow, the designers of this boat have managed to keep the hulls slender and yet still provide so much living space in the four double cabins that each can have its own en-suite facilities. There is even more space forward in the hulls where twin berths are available for charter crew accommodation.

The galley is similarly proportioned and is situated amidships in the starboard hull. In keeping with the rest of the boat's layout, stowage space is good, as is the amount of worktop space.

Aboard our test boat, *Bossonova*, a combination of cherry and maple had been used to produce the joiner work throughout. These light-coloured timbers added to the feeling of space. All the joinery is from either solid timber or veneers of marine grade plywood.

The navigation area confirms the ample space available aboard this boat. Measuring 41x30in (1040x750mm) the chart table can take a fully opened chart. There is plenty of space for mounting electronic goodies as well.

CONSTRUCTION

Sometimes it is the hidden details that are the most important and the Freebird is a good example of this. Just as her smaller sister, the Firebird, readdressed the manner in which loads were carried and transmitted throughout a catamaran's structure, so the same philosophy has been applied to the Freebird.

Multihulls are notorious for the loads that can be generated within the boat's structure. You only have to look at the size of the main and genoa sheet winches, the biggest are Lewmar 66STs, to be reminded of that. To cope with these loads, while at the same time keeping the weight low, the Freebird 50 uses a monocoque construction.

Starting with the loads and following their path through the yacht's structure, has allowed the designers to produce an intricate lay-up schedule where there is a good reason for the inclusion of each element. The result is a structure that makes use of carbon fibre, biaxial woven cloth, balsa and foam cores.

As a Northshore boat, the hull laminate also conforms to the Nordseal laminating system, designed to prevent osmosis, and incorporates a copper-impregnated gelcoat.

As far as her appendages are concerned, her 2ft (0.6m) deep, aerofoil section keels are around 8ft (2.4m) long and designed as fuel tanks as well. The undersides of these mouldings are 6ft (1.8m) in length and, when dried out, she sits on these alone.

UNDER POWER AND SAIL

Our trials started in six knots of true wind and even in these light winds she slipped along at an impressive five knots at 100° to the true wind. As the wind speed built to 10-12 knots true outside Chichester Harbour, her speed quickly climbed to just under nine knots on a beam reach. Upwind, at 70° true, she still maintained over seven knots.

Later on in the day the wind built to 15-17 knots and in these conditions her responsive nature was even more pronounced. With the wind just abaft the beam, her top speed reached an impressive 12 knots at times, and was always in the 11 knot region.

But it is the speed with which she accelerates and decelerates that is particularly noticeable. It makes her easier to sail, as sail trim adjustments can immediately be felt on the helm –



There is ample space at the chart table



this is very impressive stuff for a 50ft cruiser.

Under power, her two Yanmar 3GM 38hp Saildrives make it easy to spin her round in her own length, an important feature when your boat is 25ft (7.62m) wide.

With both engines running, we achieved a top speed of nine knots at 3,600 revs/min. With one engine shut down, though, she could still cruise along at 8.4 knots.

CONCLUSIONS

Whichever way you look at it, the benefits on paper of a multihull often make you wonder why you've never considered one before. Sail one like the Freebird 50 and you start thinking just how quickly you could get the family over to Cherbourg for lunch. It's then that you know you're getting hooked.

But the problems of suitable marina space in this country will no doubt continue to dog the cruising multihull industry, leaving only the dedicated to sing their praises.

There is a flip side, though, as Northshore are discovering. The market for large charter boats, based in warm climates where fare paying passengers are whizzed round the bay on a stable platform, is growing rapidly. Our test boat, *Bossonova* was the second of two charter boats designed to meet this need. Both boats have been so successful that two more are now under construction – and both from an all-British background.

Northshore produced *Bossonova* for around £350,000 ex VAT, but with each boat being custom built, along with the acres of space in which expensive goodies can be fitted, who knows what you could get the price to? □

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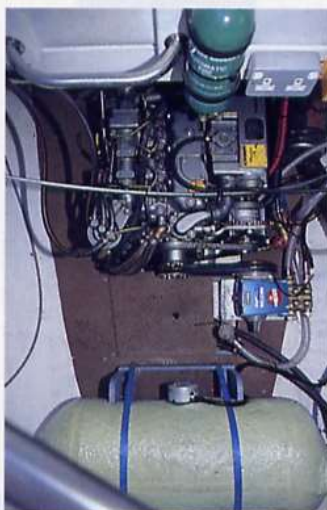
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Marina Developments



Above and below, one of the main attractions over monohulls is acres of space



Above, the Freebird 50 powers along on a reach. Left, one of the twin Yanmar 38hp engines