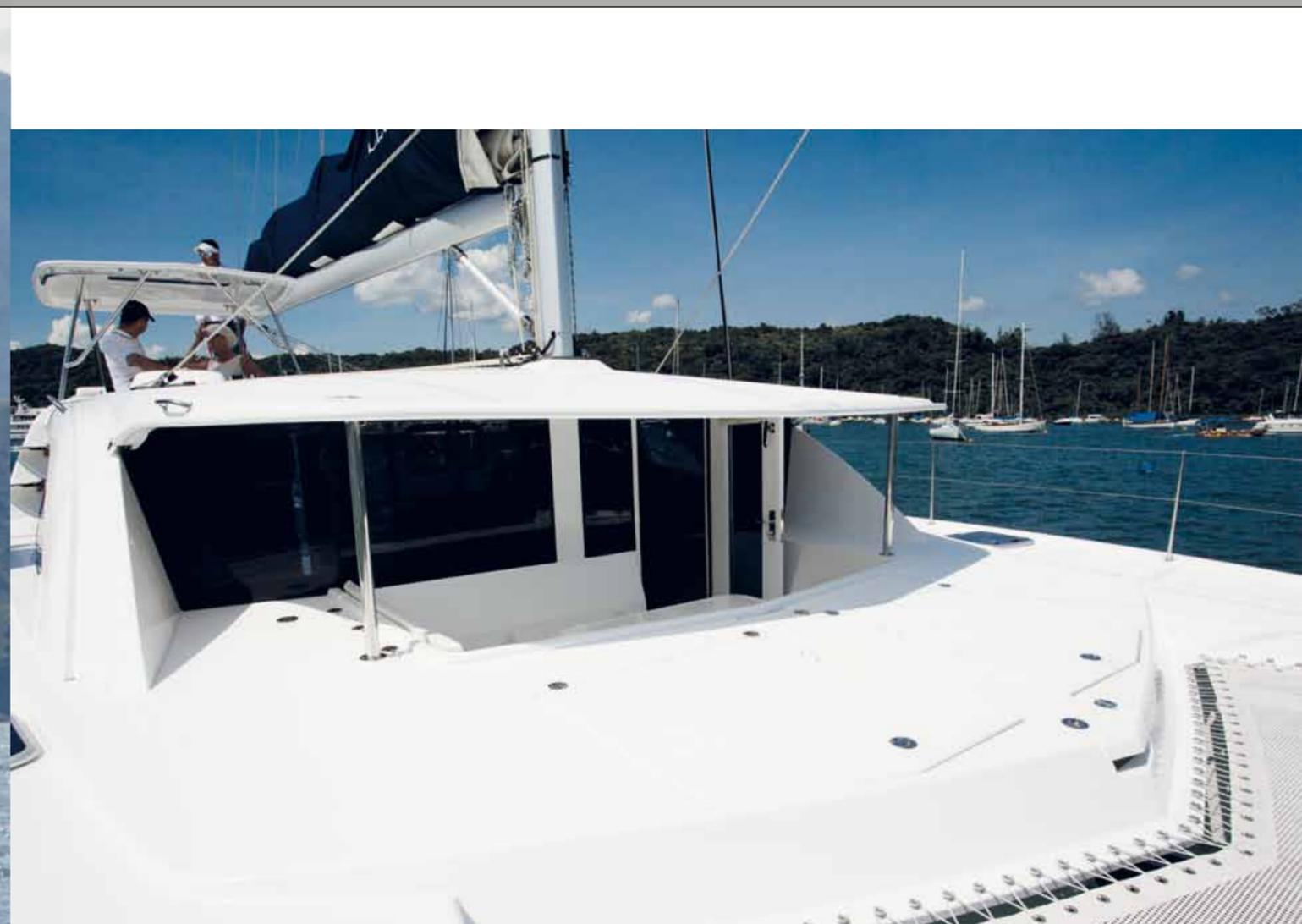


A CAT FOR ALL SEASONS

Somewhere in the mid-40s something magical happens to well-bred cats. Big enough to swallow real world cruising loads without sacrificing sailing performance, a 44-footer is just the right size to still be comfortably helmed by a short-handed owner when well meaning guests turn into hardened fridge pirates.

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For the gold-standard balance of style with comfort, speed with sea-worthiness, and retained value for money the Leopard 44 makes a compelling case.

No wonder then the mid-range cruising cat niche is one of the industry's most contested market segments, with similarly-specified production boats from France, Australia and the US providing wide consumer choice and spirited debate amongst prospective purchasers. There are no real 'lemons' in this category, with major manufacturers continuously incorporating owner feedback in order to improve their offerings, yet there are subtle but important differences between boats.

Fountaine Pajot and Lagoon for example, excel in producing comfortable craft especially suited to one or two families holidaying together in temperate coastal conditions. Catana has a stronger focus on blue-water live aboard cruisers. Australia's Seawind, now with a factory in Vietnam, produces increasingly stylish craft that are almost bulletproof.

But some cats are more equal than others, and it's notable that some of the world's biggest charter fleet buyers at Sunsail and The Moorings have come to the same conclusion as an increasing number of experienced private buyers, and turned to a South African builder with a reputation for innovation.

For the gold-standard balance of style with comfort, speed with sea-worthiness, and retained value for money, the Leopard 44 makes a compelling case.

At first glimpse, the hull and superstructure present a unified, almost athletic, look. Contemporary yet purposeful, the boat has

a commanding pontoon presence. Because it seems so natural under an extended hard-top roof, the 44's revolutionary front cockpit looks as if it has always been a standard feature, and like all good ideas, probably will be soon on other boats.

But for the moment, the front cockpit makes an irresistible offer to Leopard guests only who want to feel the wind on their face in a shaded nook away from the hustle of the rear cockpit and saloon. For skipper and crew too, it provides a safe and unobstructed forward observation point, and a quick route to the anchor or mast if required. The sheltering hardtop is set low to follow the saloon roofline, and according to the designer, provides little wind trapping.

The front cockpit has a sizeable drain, and storm canvas if required to limit inundation in extreme conditions. However, with all Leopards delivered on their own bottoms around the world, delivery skippers have reported no issues or need for canvas. At anchor or a swing mooring the front door can be left open to allow previously unobtainable levels of ventilation through the boat.

For serious buyers, this cooling effect needs to be felt to be believed before the generator option is ticked to run air conditioners. For airless summer days at dock with shore power though, Leopard offers double 16BYU Cruiseair units as an option worth taking as the ducting is not easily retrofitted. Like all on-board systems, the air conditioners will benefit from occasional use to ensure seals are tight and gas intact.

Moving forward, the electrically powered anchoring system

also shows family-friendly design. The anchor drops from aft of the trampoline rather than from the leading edge, lending the boat an enviable stability and operator safety when lowering and retrieving the hook. In addition, this leaves a child-friendly one-piece trampoline, uninterrupted by the usual anchoring hardware and central gangway.

Moving around, moulded indentations on steps and ample handholds provide an immediate and intuitive connection between body and boat – a mark of refined ergonomic design. A step to the raised helm falls naturally underfoot, promoting the helmsman to an ideal height for command, yet retaining excellent communication with cockpit and saloon.

It really is possible to operate all the major sailing systems singlehanded from the helm, with some important caveats. While all sheets and halyards return to this position with ample clutches and two powered winches, lifting any 44 foot boat's main by hand or sheeting in a genoa by muscle power alone is not a job for the faint hearted. Electrical assistance for both primary winches, and for the autopilot, is what makes this boat so workable. The caveat is simple. Make sure the batteries are up to spec, and if in doubt, replace rather than fiddle. Electrical systems on a boat this size are necessarily complex, but remarkably reliable if owners follow the manufacturer's advice on maintenance.

With Raymarine instruments on the dash, and optional 39HP Yanmars upgraded from the standard 29s, the skipper has three

powerful methods of controlling the vessel at all times, with lots of back up built in for peace of mind. The engines are run in carefully by the delivery skippers to Yanmar's specifications, preparing the machinery for years of good service for the new owner. Provided they are fed clean fuel, these sturdy engines will relish hard work with enormous dependability. The thoughtful skipper should have no hesitation in using them if it makes the journey more enjoyable for all.

For charter in the four cabin version, fixed props with rope-cutters are a sensible no-fuss solution, but for owners favouring the three cabin version, the folding Gorri propeller options may be well worth a potential speed increase of half a knot or so, and especially useful in the seasonal light wind conditions so often found in the sub-tropics that so many of these boats call home.

The 44 tested pointed well in a gusty 16 knot breeze to an expected 40 degrees, but like all cats, was faster with a little easing-off to a tight reach. In only 12 knots of wind with full genoa and main, the 44 developed an impressive 8 knots of boat speed. Theoretical modelling of performance suggests that in ideal conditions, the hull shape should fetch up to 12 knots on a broad reach in a 20-knot wind before first reefs would be needed. This is fast sailing for fourteen tonnes of boat. Very fast, provided you do not overload the boat with huge amounts of extras.

The Leopard's superior performance is due to both its aero design of rig and sails, and hydro design of hulls and drag-inducing

PREVIOUS PAGE: Leopard 44 goes sightseeing in Port Shelter, Sai Kung

OPPOSITE PAGE: Leopard 44 makes a stable platform for exploring the oceans

ABOVE: The front cockpit is a revolutionary concept that doubles the outdoor entertaining area



The sailing rig is simplicity itself, but remarkably effective in presenting efficient sail surfaces to the wind without racing levels of operator fiddling.



TECH SPECS

LENGTH OVERALL	42ft 7in	12.98m
WATERLINE LENGTH	41ft 8in	12.70m
BEAM	23ft 9in	7.25m
DRAFT	4ft 2in	1.27m
ENGINES	2 x 39HP Yanmar (option)	
FUEL	185USG	700l
SAIL AREA	1270sq ft	118sqm
BASIC BOAT	US\$449,000	
AS TESTED IN HONG KONG	US\$611,000	
COMPARE WITH...	Lagoon 440, Catana 42, Seawind 1260	
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fittings underwater. The 44's thin canoe-like hulls slice through the water, opening up above the waterline with a hard chine or 'angle out', that allows more living space inside from there on up – again, provided the boat is not overloaded, but with a waterline of almost 42 feet, the boat's natural 'hull-speed' is well able to be maintained carrying weights like water, fuel, and multiple guests that would stall a 36-footer by comparison.

The sailing rig is simplicity itself, but remarkably effective in presenting efficient sail surfaces to the wind without racing-levels of operator fiddling. The powerful square-headed main raises easily on low-friction cars on a 3-to-1 purchase halyard, and drops just as simply and neatly into a stack-pack on the boom. Unlike some cats the Leopard 44 employs a simple but strong solid vang between boom and mast base, that holds sail shape effectively. All sheets run on the top of the boat's roof, with no intrusion on cockpit spaces.

The 120% overlapping genoa drives the boat swiftly, but like all big sails up front, can block the helms' view (perhaps one day really clear and durable 'clear' panels can be sewn in), on the starboard tack in this case. This is not a problem when use of auto-helm allows the skipper to move around the cockpit for observations under sail, but otherwise visibility is excellent, and especially under motor when mooring.

The raised helm avoids the space-hogging issues that a double-wheel cockpit solution would entail. The Leopard's own cockpit instead forms an inviting indoor/outdoor space, with easy access to the water for swimming, and comfortable dining for eight people, free of ropes or sharp equipment edges that can turn a holiday into a first-aid course.

Entry to the saloon is via a secure and lockable three-piece sliding safety-glass door.

The galley-up design has advantages for keeping the cook involved – and perhaps even encouraging guests to wash-up! The twin stainless steel fridges to starboard of the saloon entry may be a stretch from the three-burner gas stove and deep double sinks set into Corian counters, but are in an excellent position for crew and guests to pick up their own drinks on the move. This almost removes the need for a separate outside drinks cooler – however, built-in floor mouldings do allow for a large cold chest to be held



securely in the cockpit. Fisherman will value this, along with an optional icemaker.

Inside the surfaces are cherry veneers, with an oak-style cabin sole. Fabrics and upholstery are neutral, comfortable, and will wear well – a vital point for both charter companies and private owners.

Downstairs, the starboard owner's hull in three-cabin layout, is spacious and light. Large windows illuminate the aft double beds. A usefully-sized desk occupies the owner's mid hull cabin with a sizable couch inviting retreat and lazy reading, whilst a forward bathroom provides luxurious private space. Guests in the port hull enjoy a choice of two double berths and a forward single, with their own bathroom. With generous storage under bunks, this boat will stay as ship-shape returning to port as it does leaving.

For visitors arriving by water, just getting aboard some boats can be a trial – especially if heavy bags of supplies and luggage need to be ferried in. The Leopard's innovative electrically winched solid davit frame makes sure that guests' first impressions of the boat are welcoming and seamless.

The lowered solid frame gives arriving dinghy passengers something firm to grasp, with an easy step aboard the 44's landing pods that are accessible from three sides rather than one – ensuring a safe crossing. And there's no need to carry luggage at the same time. With the tender quickly attached to the davit by its bridles, the electric winch painlessly brings the mother Leopard's 'cub' up to stern height, where supplies can be easily and safely transferred aboard.

The davit is capable of carrying up to 500 lbs – more than enough for a healthy sized tender and 10HP outboard – however, the rig has not been designed to carry speedboats with large water-skiing sized outboards or jet-skis, as sometimes risked in the British Virgin Islands. Used as it was meant to, the beauty of Leopard's solution puts the dinghy's load onto the 44's strong transom, minimising sway under way, and making guest transfers a breeze at anchor.

In 2012, the Leopard 44 makes a unique claim for innovation and quality in cruising catamaran design for owners who love to sail and entertain without stress.

Options included on the test boat include generator, solar cells, air-conditioning, water maker, and gennaker with bowsprit.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

The aft deck entertaining area comfortably seats 10-12 guests; the helm station; hide away anchor system; easy access around the yacht

ABOVE:
The Leopard 44 goes cruising around Port Shelter, Hong Kong