

With about 10°
of heel the
windward hull
will clear the
water



FIRST TEST

NEEL 43

If you're torn between the performance of a trimaran and the accommodation of a cruising cat, the Neel 43 might offer a solution, says David Harding

Words & pictures **David Harding**



SPECIFICATIONS

MAKE/MODEL

Neel 43

PRICE FROM

£383,103 ex VAT

DESIGNER

Marc Lombard

BUILDER

Neel Trimarans

For anyone who doesn't follow the world of multihulls, it might be easy to imagine that catamarans are for cruising and trimarans are for racing. After all, two hulls offer vast potential for living space, both inside and out. Many cats have expanded in all directions to take full advantage of that, becoming high, wide and, some might think, not particularly elegant. Trimarans, on the other hand, are the light, spindly ones that fly around at high speed while giving you no accommodation. Right?

So you might think. After all, that's how things were once upon a time. My father used to describe the typical cruising cats of the day as 'Dutch barns.' Our

own family cruiser when I was growing up was one of John Westell's 'swing-wing' Ocean Bird 30ft trimarans. When we sold it, the new owner invited me to help him sail it to the Caribbean – so we did. In those days the Ocean Bird was one of relatively few cruising tris, following those from the 1950s and 1960s by multihull pioneers such as Arthur Piver. Then there was Norman Cross who, like Piver, designed many of his tris with solid wings (decks between the floats and the main hull), allowing full-width accommodation out to the floats.

Since those early years of the production cruising trimaran, when three hulls helped to establish the names of Derek Kelsall, John Shuttleworth, Walter Green, Lock Crowther and Dick Newick among others, solid wings have largely disappeared. Racing



Sail controls are led to a pair of winches at the helm



LOGBOOK

TESTED BY

David Harding

LOCATION

Central Solent

WIND

Westerly Force 5

SEA STATE

Slight

DATE

October 2023

trimarans have beams (akas) joining their slim hulls, while some of the later-generation multi-purpose tris designed with marina berthing (or trailing) in mind have had floats that fold in – just as the Ocean Bird did in the late 1960s. A few had solid wings combined with folding floats, such as Tony Smith's Telstar 26 from the 1970s.

TWO HULLS OR THREE?

For all the twists and turns in the evolution of the trimaran, it's the catamaran that has managed more successfully to adapt to the differing needs of cruising and racing sailors. Some cats only have beams and trampolines between the hulls. Others could easily accommodate a sauna, a gym and several four-poster beds. At mainstream boat shows we mostly see the cruising and charter cats – all that deck and living space is a charter-operator's dream – but there are plenty of alternatives, such as the Dazcats, Rapiers, Gunboats, Outremers and Schionnings, for example, that place the emphasis firmly on performance.

This brief dash through multihull history leaves us with one big question: what happened to the solid-wing trimaran? Didn't

Nigel Tetley actually complete his solo circumnavigation in the 1968 Golden Globe race in just such a boat? Yes he did, just as Donald Crowhurst didn't (not the boat's fault), but some things are too readily forgotten.

So why is it that most trimarans designed in the past 30 years have limited their accommodation to the main hull? Unless marina-berthing is a constraint, why not extend it between the hulls as on a catamaran?

Cross and Piver were among the designers who did exactly that, and many of their creations are still sailing. In the Canaries before setting off across the Atlantic on the Ocean Bird we became friendly with an American family on a Cross 46, and very spacious it was too. We also met Geoff Pack, long before he became editor of YM, on his 30ft Wharram cat. We were all heading west.

This background, together with a fair few miles sailed on a whole host of cruising and racing multihulls, meant that I was more than a little



Offset well to starboard, the helm station leaves the enormous cockpit space clear for non-working crew

PERFORMANCE FIGURES (WHITE SAILS ONLY)

POINT OF SAIL	AWA*	AWS**	SPEED
Close hauled	45-55°	22-26	8.5-10
Fetch	60°	18-23	9.8-12.2
Beam reach	90°	15-17	8.8-10.7
Broad reach	120°	12-16	7.5-8.4
Run	180°	11-13	6.9-7.7

*APPARENT WIND ANGLE **APPARENT WIND SPEED



A hatch in the bow gives access to the anchor locker



Fixed thimbles for the headsail sheets are a neat solution but provide no adjustment



Zip-up gaiters cover the bottlescrews



A barbecue in the cockpit is deemed essential on a modern cruiser of this size



Moulded chocks will accommodate a 3.4m tender

A reef in the main and a couple of rolls in the headsail balanced the boat nicely and led to a light and responsive helm

Rig tension is easier to achieve on a trimaran as the forestay attaches to the central bow





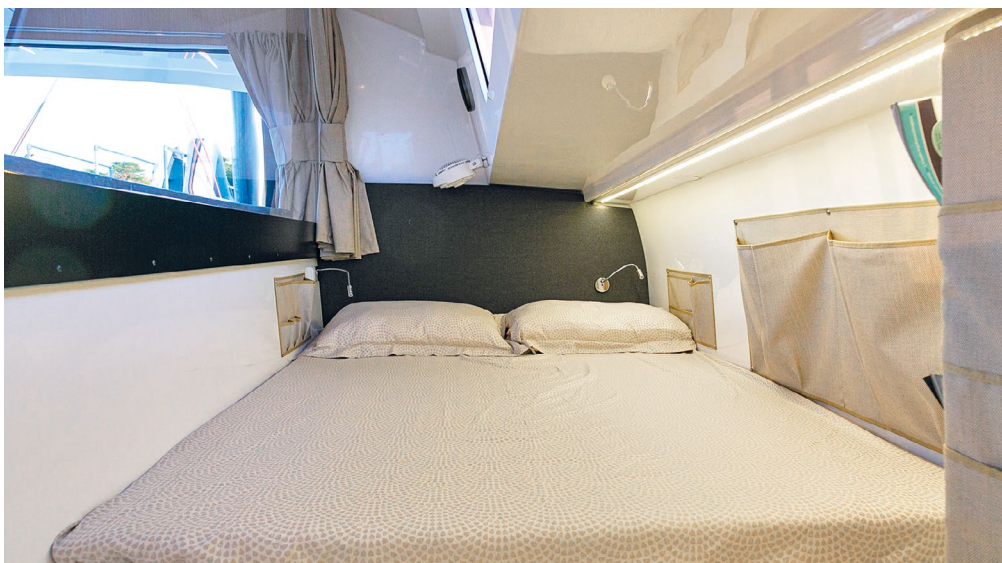
ABOVE: Access to the saloon from the cockpit is via a pair of sliding glass doors



ABOVE: Plain interior mouldings and a good view forward from the nav station



ABOVE: A simple linear galley to starboard adjoins the owner's cabin outboard. Gimbals are not needed for the hob or oven as they would be on a monohull



ABOVE: Double cabins each side in the floats are separated from the saloon by windows with curtains or blinds, although the cabin to port is not fitted with a door



ABOVE: The bow of each float abaft the collision bulkheads can be used for stowage

interested when Neel trimarans started to appear from a factory in La Rochelle about 14 years ago. Here was a modern-day, solid-wing trimaran with full-width accommodation that took on the big cats and, in some ways, beat them at their own game.

Of course, how you see a trimaran in relation to a cat depends on a multitude of factors, but Neel is keen to point out some of the tri's virtues.

One is that a trimaran feels more like a monohull in many respects, most of the weight being carried by the centre hull. The Neel's hull is rockered and, with its single low aspect-ratio (LAR) keel (as opposed to a keel or daggerboard on each hull with a cat), it's easier to tack. The floats are only lightly immersed at rest, so as soon as the boat starts sailing in any breeze the windward hull lifts clear of the water to minimise wetted area.

A single rudder should give a more direct feel to the helm, addressing one of the monohull sailor's common gripes about catamarans in the form of a rather muted feel. Then there's rig tension: it's easier to achieve in a trimaran because the forestay is anchored to the bow of the main hull.

THE RIGHT MOMENT

On the issue of stability, catamaran enthusiasts will sometimes cite research showing that, in extremis, the twin-hulled form is more likely to see you through severe conditions than a monohull or a trimaran. Neel's argument is that a catamaran achieves its maximum righting moment at about 12° of heel, beyond which it reduces rapidly. A trimaran like the Neel, by contrast, heels more progressively and reaches its maximum righting



ABOVE: With one central keel and floats that clear the water, tacking is easier than on many catamarans

moment at closer to 30°, giving you more warning before it becomes over-pressed.

In addition to this, the concentration of weight in the centre hull should contribute to stability as well as reduced pitching, while the greater beam and the closer relative positions of the centre of gravity and centre of buoyancy should make for a smoother motion in a beam sea.

Arguments about the relative pros and cons of trimarans and catamarans will often be batted back and forth. So many people have or have had a foot in both camps. Eric Bruneel, the man behind Neel trimarans, used to work with Fountaine Pajot (catamarans). Multihull designers are often known for both cats and tris. MI Cats, the UK dealers for Neel, are also Fountaine Pajot dealers. Few builders, sailors or designers of multihulls would unequivocally support two hulls while dismissing three, or vice versa.

We accelerated rapidly and would carry on almost in a straight line if I let go of the wheel

BELOW: On the wind the Neel clocked up to 10 knots



As for the 43 itself, it's a big, wide boat, with a beam that's about 2ft (0.6m) greater than that of a typical catamaran of the same length. Nonetheless, at 9 tonnes it's surprisingly light. You can see why by looking below decks: it's fitted out very simply, with just enough in the way of trim and furnishings to stop it feeling too stark.

You feel the power-to-weight ratio when you're sailing. I headed out with MI Cats' demonstrator on a brisk autumn day with the breeze hovering around 20 knots much of the time, and the boat didn't hang about.

I had recently spoken with some friends who had been skippering and managing a new Neel 51 for the owner having taken delivery from the yard. They said it was very sensitive to sail balance, so it was interesting to find that the 43 was pretty tolerant on the whole. We sailed with one slab in the main and a couple of rolls in the jib, and it was fine. Some weather helm became apparent before the jib was sheeted in as we came out of a tack. Then we accelerated rapidly and would carry on almost in a straight line if I let go of the wheel, just a reassuring touch of weather helm remaining.

True to Neel's promise, the helm is indeed direct and responsive, and the boat tacks positively. You really can enjoy sailing this boat for sailing's sake. That, in my experience, is more than can be said for many cruising cats.

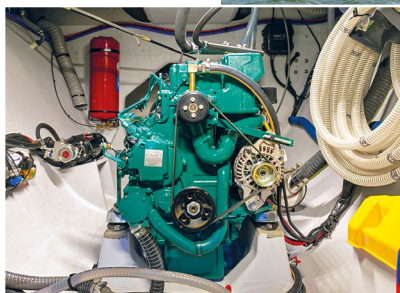
In the relatively flat water of the Solent the log showed us clocking up to 10 knots upwind on starboard tack at about 60° to the true wind and, most of the time, closer to 8.5 knots on port with a true wind angle (TWA) of around 45°. Some calibration of instruments was probably needed. In any event, our tacking angle of around 100-110° by the compass tallied with the TWA readings, even if the angles were offset.

SMOOTH SAILING

Once the tide started to ebb, running against the wind, the water chopped up a little but our motion remained remarkably smooth. The main factors to be mindful of are keeping a lookout under the headsail on starboard tack – the helm station being on the starboard side – and handling the headsail sheets on the single Antal 48 winch (electric on our test boat). That's more of a challenge if you choose to back the headsail during a tack. The chances are you will rarely need to.

Cracking off a few degrees took us up to around 12 knots. Like many multihulls, this one will get you around pretty quickly when it comes to 'straight-line' sailing, even if a performance monohull might have the edge upwind. That said, taking the trouble to sheet the headsail in fairly hard to narrow the sheeting angle made a difference to our VMG.

Performance could be enhanced by some additions, such as headsail tracks. Fixed thimbles give no adjustment for twist and could lead to a slack leech when you have more than a few rolls around the headfoil. Twin mainsheets, taken to strong-points a few feet apart on the stern, give some control over



mainsail twist until the wind comes aft. Strong-points along the gunwales would be useful for sail control and a variety of other purposes. All the basics are fitted; nothing more.

At the helm station you're well away from the cockpit, so non-working crew can spread out under the hard-top around the large table. You have big lockers aft in each hull, but little in the way of small stowage and nothing under the seats in the cockpit or the saloon. That seems a waste of space.

More large stowage areas are forward in each float, reached by hatches in the deck. They're big enough to be used as cabins, separate from the main accommodation. Each of the three bows has a collision bulkhead and this, combined with the foam-cored (and resin-infused) construction should give the Neel a good chance of staying afloat if you

ABOVE: Visibility from the helm can be obscured by the headsail on starboard tack

INSET: Access to the engine is better than on most boats of this size



hit anything. The literature says these features 'guarantee that the craft is unsinkable.'

A few details on deck are worthy of note, such as the Dyneema guardwires – far more practical than the plastic-covered stainless wire that used to be the norm. Otherwise it's all about simple sailing and loads of space.

INSIDE AND OUT

Neel use the word 'cockloot' to describe a cockpit and saloon that merge into each other. They're separated by sliding doors which, when fully open, create an almost seamless inside/outside living space.

In the saloon, as elsewhere, you're greeted by a lot of shiny moulded surfaces that simplify production and save the weight of more elaborate trim. Additional joinery units are on the extras list.

You have a table to port and a nav area forward of it with a view through about 300°, obscured to starboard only by the heads and the door to the owner's cabin that extends into the starboard float.

A second double cabin is in the port float, this time with no door. Both wing cabins have windows to the saloon, making it light and giving that nearly-all-round view. Curtains or blinds can be used for privacy when the cabins are occupied.

Cabin No.3 is in the bow, down a level from the saloon and with a slightly narrower bunk.

One space that's particularly useful on the Neel is below the sole of the saloon. Drop down through the hatch and you find the utility area running most of the length of the main hull. Aft is the engine – a 50hp Volvo that gives nearly nine knots at full tilt and a comfortable 7-plus knots at cruising speeds. All-round access is pretty well unrestricted. Down here you also find the tankage and electrics, all neatly laid out and easy to reach.



NEEL 43

It seems strange that the solid-wing (solid-deck) trimaran has taken so long to reappear in the mainstream. The success of the Neels, from the 43 up to the truly massive 65, suggests that the world has been ready for something like this for a while.

Like a cruising catamaran, the Neel offers a lot room. Just don't fill it with too much heavy kit or you will lose the fizz-factor under sail.

It would be interesting to see how the 43 performs in a seaway, and good to have a little more scope for sail-tweaking, which the yard might be persuaded to discuss if you started waving a cheque book.

On the basis of what I experienced, this could be an excellent alternative to a high-volume cruising cat or a low-volume performance tri if you want some of the best features of each.

WOULD SHE SUIT YOU AND YOUR CREW?

In some ways the accommodation layout would make the Neel 43 better suited to a family than to individuals or groups wanting privacy, given the proximity of the two main sleeping cabins (especially the port one) to the living areas. In larger models the accommodation in the floats is separated from the main hull, but that's not an option with a 43-footer. You also only have one heads.

If those aren't issues for you, and especially if – as some of us are – you're naturally more inclined towards three hulls than to two, you might find that the Neel is exactly what you want.

In a way she's very French; stylish in some respects, rather basic in others and presented with a Gallic shrug: take it or leave it. By all accounts a good many people are taking it.

PROS

Positive and responsive under sail

Spacious deck, cockpit and accommodation

Fast and steady downwind

CONS

Port cabin lacks privacy

Only one heads

Minimalist fit-out below decks

FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE AS TESTED
£545,596 inc. VAT

LOA
13.11m (43ft 0in)

BEAM
7.50m (24ft 7in)

DRAUGHT
1.50m (4ft 11in)

DISPLACEMENT
9,000kg (19,841lbs)

DISPLACEMENT/LENGTH
111.4

SAIL AREA
(main and jib): 101.8 m² (1,096 sq ft)

SA/D RATIO
23.88

ENGINE
Volvo 50hp diesel

RCD CATEGORY A

DESIGNER
Marc Lombard

BUILDER
Neel Trimarans

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WEBSITE
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You really can enjoy sailing this boat for sailing's sake

