



Jeanneau 54

A luxury cruiser that fires on all cylinders

By Adam Cort

To the untrained eye a sailboat is a sailboat; they all look pretty much the same. Even to an experienced sailor, it can be difficult if not impossible to truly judge how a particular design will perform just examining it at the dock. Nonetheless, when it comes to boats—sailboats in particular—as soon as you cast off lines, it becomes immediately apparent that no two are the same, even if they appear superficially similar. Some, for whatever reason, don't feel quite right. Others, through some strange alchemy, just work. The Jeanneau 54 is an excellent example of the latter.

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION

The success story that is the Jeanneau 54 starts with solid construction, and a tried and true canoe body that doesn't necessarily break new ground, but works well in a wide range of sailing conditions. The hull is vacuum infused in polyester with a discontinuous, end-grain balsa core. A barrier coat helps stave off osmosis, and a solid laminate is used in the keel area.

Bulkheads are bonded to both the hull and deck with high-performance polyurethane adhesives to ensure rigidity, while a molded structural grid, which is both glued and laminated to the hull, makes the boat stiffer still. The cored deck is built in a two-part mold using Jeanneau's proprietary "Prism Process." This not only ensures the correct resin-to-glass ratio, but provides a smooth finish on both sides.

The boat's deck-stepped double-spreader rig includes a Z-spar aluminum mast and is slightly fractional, with discontinuous wire rigging and mid-boom sheeting. Our test boat came with in-mast furling and a 109 percent jib on a Facnor electric furler. The boat has a single, high-aspect semi-balanced rudder, and our test boat came with the shoal keel, which draws 5ft 9in. A deeper 7ft 4in keel is also available. Both are made of cast iron and encapsulated in epoxy.

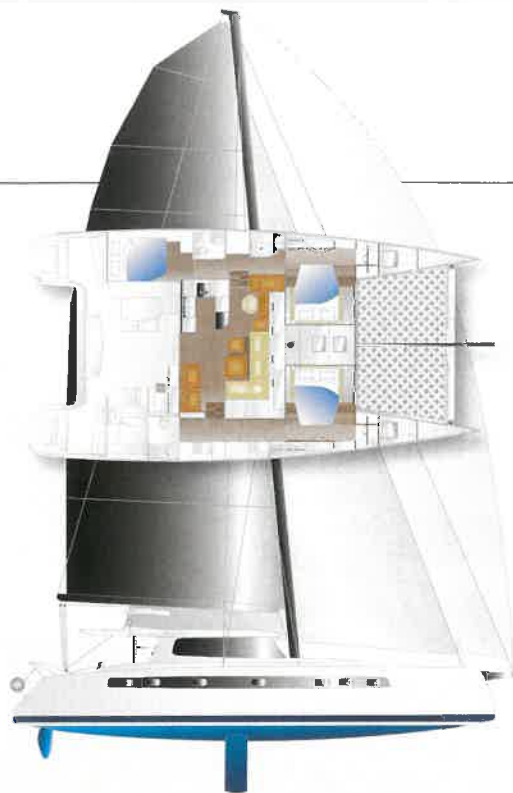
Tracks, blocks and winches—including our test boat's electric primaries—were all Harken, with Spinlock stoppers. There are a pair of folding padeyes that can be used to attach snatch blocks for sheeting in an A-sail tacked to the double anchor roller in the bow. Electronics on our test boat were Raymarine.

Like many of today's cruising boats, the topsides are quite high in the interest of providing the requisite standing headroom. However, with 53ft of LOA the boat doesn't look in any way top-heavy, an aesthetic that is reinforced by the boat's beautifully sculpted cabintrunk. The cabintrunk's long, lean windows also segue seamlessly into the cockpit coaming creating a continuous line of curves that are well set off by the plumb bow, the gently angled reverse transom and what methinks is just the barest hint of sheer. I can't say why exactly the end result looks so good, but it does.

ON DECK

Jeanneau has built a lot of decks over the years, and the deck layout on the J54 is one of the best I've seen. Central to its success is a pair of cut-outs in the aft cabintrunk bulkhead, which allow the cockpit benches to extend a foot or so forward of the companionway. Tucked in under the dodger, they quickly became *the* place to hang out for those not actively involved in sailing during the three-day South Florida cruise that I was lucky enough to take part in for my test sail.

There's also a nifty "sun bed" up on the foredeck that even comes with its own bimini, and voluminous drop-down swim platform. The latter is cleverly



Balance 526

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA 52ft 6in LWL 47ft 4in BEAM 27ft 2in
 DRAFT 1ft 9in (boards up); 7ft 3in (boards down)
 DISPLACEMENT (light ship) 20,970lb
 SAIL AREA 1,691ft² (100% FT)
 AIR DRAFT 78ft 9in
 FUEL/WATER (GAL) 264/206
 ENGINES 2 x 47hp Yanmar diesels (saildrive)
 SA/D RATIO 36 D/L RATIO 88

What do these ratios mean? Visit sailmagazine.com/ratios

DESIGNERS Anton du Toit, Jonathan Paarman, Phillip Berman
 BUILDER Balance Catamarans, St Francis Bay, South Africa
 U.S. DISTRIBUTOR The Multihull Company, 215-508-2704,
multihullcompany.com
 PRICE \$1,299,000 (ex factory)

elm, and a massive rope bin easily swallows a considerable length of the 2:1 main hal-yard. Ergonomically, the cockpit and deck are well thought out, with easy and safe transitions between the two. With the daggerboards set below deck level—they are buoyant and must be winched down—and no lines to trip over, the decks are wide and clear. Capacious lockers in the front of the bridgedeck contain tankage and ancillary equipment, with plenty of room for cruising necessities.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Each 526 is finished to its owner's requirements, and *Ondine's* combination of dark wood cabinetry and light ash-veneered furniture was easy on the eye. The saloon layout is logical and open; to port a U-shaped galley has plenty of worktop area and a sliding window that opens to the cockpit seating area. Forward of it is a good-sized navigation desk that has an instrument repeater with autopilot control. It will likely be used more as a workstation, since a plotter mounted in the cockpit will be the navigation mainstay. A flatscreen TV in the saloon can display navigation data if needed. The long, wide settee looks like a comfortable passage berth. The stateroom is generous at 6ft 8in, and light streams in through the near-critical glass windows that are shaded from overhead sun by an overhang. In the owner's hull to starboard, the *piece de resistance* was a magnificent heads-shower in the stern that had room to spare—all it lacked was a bathtub. This arrangement was made possible by the decision to locate the queen-sized berths under the bridgedeck in order to keep the hulls reasonably slender at the stern. There is plenty of room to both get in and out of these beds as well as to sit up for reading. The port hull has a double berth aft, with separate head and shower compartments between it and the other guest cabin. The passages and doors here are on the narrow side as they had to be fitted in between the daggerboard trunks outboard and the large generator inboard. There are plans to widen the passageway on future boats. Because of the high bridgedeck, the descent to the hulls is quite steep, and conventional steps would not have worked. Instead, smaller foot-sized tread steps are employed. These take some getting used to, but work well enough.

Throughout the interior, there is an impressive level of fit and finish, with no evidence anywhere of cost-cutting or shortcuts. The forced-air ventilation systems in the cabins are more evidence of the thought that's gone into this boat.

UNDER SAIL

Ondine was equipped to an exacting owner's specifications with a long list of extras, including a dive compressor and an ice crusher, which together added up to considerable weight, so I was not expecting blistering performance. Imagine then my surprise to find, as we reached in a wind that built to 15-16 knots, that our boat speed reached first double digits, then climbed into the teens and stayed there, peaking briefly at 15 knots. In the flat water there was little sensation of speed, just the feeling of a boat going about its business. There was next to no turbulence in the wakes, an indication of low drag. This performance tallied with what the boat's skipper had told me earlier, of passage speeds close to wind speed. He had seen a burst of 23 knots during the delivery from South Africa, and averages of 12 knots and more in moderate conditions. This is plenty fast enough for a bluewater cruising cat, though some may disagree.

Tacking angles were inconsistent due to a strong current, and the wind instrument was not working, but I had no reason to doubt the boat captain's claim that the boat would point as high as most monohulls.

UNDER POWER

A pair of 45hp Yanmar diesels with saildrives is standard, but *Ondine* was equipped with the optional 57hp Yanmars, which weigh and cost only a little more. The practice on *Ondine* is to cruise under one engine at 2,600rpm, which gives 7-8 knots depending on conditions. Engine room soundproofing is good, with only a reassuring hum reaching the living areas. Tankage is 263gal, split between two tanks.

CONCLUSION

This good-looking cat should tick every box in the bluewater cruiser's wish list. Fast, well-thought-out and well built, the Balance 526 is a highly desirable express cruiser—and, as the drone footage from our test sail showed, it's also a good-looking boat, which certainly doesn't hurt. **S**

There is a clear view through the saloon from the lower helm position



articulated, so that when deployed it creates a pair of gentle steps leading from the cockpit to the water. These, in turn, accept a pair of equally clever inged cushions to create twin chez lounges.

Beyond that, Jeanneau simply gets it right in terms of general layout and dimensions. The split ackstay, for example, is attached to either side of the swim platform, but inboard of the helm stations, so you don't have to worry about them digging into your shoulder when on watch. The T-shaped helm seats (which hinge out of the way when not in use) are plenty large for two and include a stainless steel handhold inboard for people moving to and from the swing step—a nice touch. There's a low bulwark/toe rail and the side decks are nice and clear for security when moving forward. The list goes on and on...

ACCOMMODATIONS

Not surprisingly, this smart design is also apparent belowdecks—especially in the saloon, which on our test boat was equipped with a large in-line galley to port that employed the back of a centerline bench facing the very large dining table as a brace point. The beauty of this configuration is that you can feel totally comfortable preparing a meal at sea, while still being able to slide out the way if something hot spills in your direction. It also grants you easy access to the dining area when serving drinks and meals. The fact that it opens aft right to the foot of the companionway steps makes it easy to pass food up to the cockpit as well.

Beyond that the owner's stateroom up in the bow was nothing less than palatial, with an en suite head and shower, and easy access to the berth from both sides. I especially liked the small desk to port and the cozy little lounge beside the hull window to starboard. The side-by-side hatches overhead admitted scads of natural light.

The two quarterberths aft also had their own heads and showers, and there was a good sized aft-facing nav table that shared a seat with the starboard-side settee. The latter would also serve as an excellent sea berth, and can be turned into a double berth by lowering the dining table. The modern light-colored Alpi Teak joinery work was well



Jeanneau 54

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA 53ft LWL 46ft 9in BEAM 16ft 1in
DRAFT 5ft 9in (shoal); 7ft 4in (deep)
DISPLACEMENT 37,840lb
BALLAST 10,979lb (shoal); 10,240lb (deep)
SAIL AREA 1,194ft² (furling main and 109% genoa)
AIR DRAFT 73ft 5in
FUEL/WATER 63/192 (gal)
ENGINE Yanmar 80hp with saildrive
BALLAST Ratio 29
SA/D RATIO 17 D/L RATIO 165

What do these ratios mean? Visit sailmagazine.com/ratios

DESIGNER Philippe Briand Yacht Design
BUILDER Jeanneau, Les Herbiers, France
U.S. DISTRIBUTOR Jeanneau America,
410-280-9400, jeanneauamerica.com
PRICE \$650,000 (sailaway)

executed throughout. Oak joinery work is also available. All interior and nav lights are LED.

UNDER SAIL

Three full days of sailing in the vicinity of Miami's Biscayne Bay provided plenty of opportunity to see how the Jeanneau 54 did in a wide range of conditions with its suit of Technique Voile sails. And I'm happy to say the boat never once let us down—whether it was ghosting along in less than 10 knots of breeze, or powering up when things picked up again. Despite not having an A-sail aboard, we managed 7 to 8 knots with ease on a broad reach in 14 knots apparent. Sailing on a close reach, we hit 6 knots with equal ease.

I was especially impressed as we made the 35-mile run from Pompano to Palm Beach on day three. The wind was blowing from the teens into the low-twenties out of the northwest, but the boat couldn't have been happier blasting along on a close reach at 8-plus knots, occasionally touching 10. The twin helms and Jefa steering felt responsive and well balanced, even in the puffs. The boat's motion through the chop was nice and easy, and after settling in at about a 10-degree heel angle, she charged ahead like she was on rails. Suffice it to say, there was never any need for the autopilot. Steering the boat by hand was just too much fun.

UNDER POWER

No surprises here, even when maneuvering in and out of a super-tight marina and slip at West Palm with the help of the boat's bow thruster. The boat's three-blade fixed prop on a saildrive pushed us into a slight headwind at 8 knots when set at 2,800 rpm. Throttling up to 3,250 rpm to hurry out of the way of an inbound liner yielded 9.1 knots of boatspeed.

CONCLUSION

Looking back over this review, it occurs to me I may be gushing a bit. So be it. The state of boatbuilding is such that there are very few lemons these days, but that doesn't mean all boats are equal. Many boats are good, but only a few are truly great. The Jeanneau 54 is a great boat. **S**

