

St Francis 50

A Stunning Pedigree

by Richard Crockett



It's possibly a co-incidence, but knowing Duncan Lethbridge, it's anything but coincidental that the launch of his 50th boat - a 50-footer - occurred at the same time that beautiful St Francis Bay was celebrating its 50th anniversary!

A few years back we reviewed the St Francis 48 - a stunning Lavranos-designed cat - and were assured that the St Francis 50 was a new boat, not just an upgraded 48 with an extended stern section. The 50 has similar lines to the 48, but has a completely new underwater shape from about amidships aft, and has a cleverly designed transom.

According to its designer, Angelo Lavranos, "the St Francis 50 has a whole new underbody from just aft of the keel right through to the stern, with increases in volume all along an 800mm longer waterline. It is not simply 'an extension' by continuing the lines in a longer overhang.

"There were a whole raft of good (but not essential) reasons for doing it. The St Francis 48 is a very good boat - she handles faultlessly, has done 257 miles in 24 hours and 19 knots in flat water. She is fast and comfortable through the wind range. However it is felt that a boat of such sophistication and expensive equipment hardly increases in cost by extending the hulls (all else remaining similar), while offering important benefits in improved speed, reduced transom immersion and turbulence when pressed hard, better motion characteristics, better looks, and more platform space. Basically it is putting longer hulls with larger (slimmer) beam/length ratios under a given weight 'package'.

"The changes have also made enough space, by moving the rudder back, to have a normal shaft transmission, rather than the (until now) mandatory sail drive units."

The transom has a cleverly designed stainless steel and wooden slatted extension which extends the useful working and bathing area aft, and the bottom step of the transom is cut away on the inside to cre-

This saloon area doubles as a navigation cum office area. It has great all-round visibility with quick and easy access to the helming station. ABOVE LEFT. The great new and very practical stern section cum swimming platform.

ate a platform and step combined into one. The real innovation is the highly functional swimming and boarding ladder which slides out of the hull from under the bottom step on the port side, and folds down into the water. This makes getting aboard from the water just that much easier - and safer, too, as the person in the water has complete access to the stowed ladder.

From a sailing perspective, the 50 sails exceptionally well on all points, and was comfortable upwind in the nasty sea and strong winds we experienced on one of our sailing days. The mainsail is huge with a large roach, so was reefed to the first reefing point in those conditions, without affecting performance in any way.

A cat of this size often becomes an extension of one's home, or actually becomes home, so the interior design and comforts become really important, as do the deck and cockpit areas.

The steering position is to starboard, and gives the helmsman excellent all-round visibility. Full instrumentation is available to the helmsman, including chart plotter and engine controls. In terms of sail controls the mainsheet winch is handily placed for use by the helmsman, plus there is a handy rope bin for the mainsheet tail. All the halyards and reefing points are done from the mast.

The cockpit is large and comfortable, and has plenty of locker and storage space.

There are two options for the cockpit table, with the large dining table top being easily detached and stowed in a locker in the cockpit floor. This leaves a smaller table which is ideal for use when under way.

The cockpit is covered by a sturdy solid bimini which has all the solar panels mounted on the top.

Below deck there are four double ensuite cabins, a large and very comfortable saloon and navigation area, with the galley being 'down' in the port hull. The galley position in cats is regularly debated - is 'up' or 'down' the better option. I personally like the galley 'down' option as it keeps the 'mess' out of sight of the saloon, and gives an option to have a navigation and instrument station up in the saloon area. The argument against it is that with the galley up in the saloon area the cook at least gets to be part of the scene and not holed up down below.

But back to the saloon. The u-shaped seating area is plushly fitted with rich leather. The saloon table can be adjusted in height to be either a low level cocktail table or full-on dining table at the correct height. It's a great feature which makes the area that much more versatile. All-round visibility from the saloon is fine, and there is a good amount of natural light. The windows all have Oceanair blinds for when the sunlight becomes a bit too much, or when one wants to tone things down for a



The sumptuous saloon area has immediate access to the TV, the bar fridge and counter, plus the navigation/office area. The Oceanair window blinds add a classy touch. Below on the port side is the galley.



Part of the galley area with a large work surface. Forward is an en-suite cabin.

romantic occasion.

Adjacent to the main saloon entrance from the cockpit is a working surface under which is a fridge and drinks cabinet for bottles and glasses. Above the working surface is a window which doubles as a serving hatch to the cockpit entertainment area. A big plasma screen TV and DVD with surround sound completes the fittings in this area.

Next to the saloon seating is the navigation area. It's a big area which can easily double as a working/study area for the crew and guests, and comes equipped with a comfortable office-type chair. The electrical system switch panel is situated here, as are all sailing instruments (which are duplicated at the helm), plus tank capacity instruments and charging information.

Forward in the starboard hull is the owner's cabin, which is, in effect, more like a stateroom because it is so spacious and well appointed. Beside a huge double bed set athwartships, are plenty of cupboards plus a vanity-cum-office/work area. A handy and clever 'bedside' table can be folded down into the sleeping area. While the navigation area is good for working, the owner will more than likely want privacy rather than work in full view of the crew and his guests.

Forward of the sleeping area is a large en-suite bathroom which consists of heads, separate shower/sitz bath, and basin. This is well ventilated and light due to a good number of hatches and ports, including the escape hatch which is set into the inside of the hull near the shower/bath.

In the aft section of the starboard hull is a double en-suite cabin. This cabin is mirrored in the port hull, which also has a private en-suite cabin up forward with everything the owner's cabin has, except the office and dressing area, as this space is taken up by the galley.

One expects the galley of a luxury cat to be fully appointed as it is normally quite large and can accommodate all the good-

ies. This galley does not disappoint. There is a large hob, domestic size oven, microwave, hot and cold running water, double sink with domestic mixer, and a handy rubbish bin. Plus, there is plenty of cupboard and storage space. A gourmet chef would be quite at home in this galley as it has good working space, room for an array of appliances, with good and plentiful stowage.

Finishes throughout are of the highest standard.

Just recently I was talking to someone who knows the international and South African boat building industry exceptionally well, and who is considered an 'expert' on the subject of yachts and their builders. His comment was that if there is anything lacking in South African built boats, it's in the finish. "They're 80 - 90% of the way there," he said. Well, the St Francis 50 is easily in the 90 - 100% range, so well finished and good looking is the boat.

St Francis itself as a holiday destination may be a sleepy hollow, but the workers in the yacht building factory are all dedicated people who have been with the company for many, many years, and are proud of the yachts that they build. It is a relaxed environment

in which the boats are launched and tested before moving off into the oceans of the world.

And in conclusion, Duncan Lethbridge of the St Francis Marine factory is one of those rare people who is not only willing to listen to suggestions, but, within reason, make changes in keeping with a client's wishes. So one can in effect get a customised boat without too much trouble. ⚓

