

Three's Company



It's hard to imagine three vessels, in a single class, as different in layout, purpose and execution than the trio of multihulls that comprised the year's Best Full-Size Multihull class. Two of the three were catamarans, and the third a most unusual craft: a cruising trimaran. Sorting out these

unique boats was a challenge.

The multimillion-dollar Eagle Class 53—built in Rhode Island to exacting standards and a radical design brief (with potential foiling capability and a solid wing mast that also incorporates a “soft” mainsail on its trailing edge)—was not, in any manner, a contemporary cruising boat. Yes, there is a pair of cabins with doubles aft, and the central living space includes a workable galley and one other notable feature. “It’s the only boat we sailed that even had a full bar on deck with slide-out seats sitting on carbon fiber: custom-made

carbon-fiber pods,” panelist Ed Sherman said. “I mean, it’s just an amazing piece of workmanship. I don’t know what else to say. It’s a cool boat.” And while it would be a reach to call the Eagle 53 a cruiser, it was certainly remarkable and couldn’t be ignored, which is why the judges were unanimous in separating it for special recognition (see “Fly, Eagle, Fly,” page 85).

What it thus came down to was which of the two remaining boats—the Bali 5.4 cat and the Neel 47 tri—best addressed or met its stated design briefs. The 55-plus-foot Bali certainly has offshore bona

fides—the boats are delivered across the Atlantic from the boatyard in France where they’re crafted—but the yacht is most definitely laid out for steady work (and parties) in the charter trade. The final deliberations were lively.

The first thing that struck judge Dan Spurr was the unusual sailing experience, with the steering station situated on a flybridge well above the waterline. “It felt like a floating island and kind of sailed like one, I thought,” he said. “Being so high above the water, even though we were doing well in light air and making 5 or 6 knots, it was almost hard to tell whether we were moving.”

His fellow judge Ralph Naranjo concurred. “The main boom on the Bali is probably



15 or 16 feet high,” he said. “You’re giving away a lot of the foot of the sail, and you’re sticking the masthead up a lot farther in the sky to get the same kind of drive. At anchor in warm climates in areas where

you sail flat and don’t have too much of a seaway, boats like this certainly fit the bill. And the Bali was an extreme version of that. The idea of doing an ocean passage up there aloft seems like a tiring situation.”



“I was actually pleasantly surprised that the boat sailed better than I thought it would, and by a significant margin,” Sherman said. “And let’s not forget the chartering equation that’s a big part of this boat’s aura. The way it’s equipped and laid out down below, it’s built for calm seas and a bunch of friends to have one hell of a good time.”

In some ways, that describes the reasoning behind what happened next. Viewing it as the better layout and configuration for serious cruising, the judges conferred the title of **Best Full-Size Multihull** on the Neel 47. For the BOTY 2020 awards, three hulls proved better than two.

“The Neel 47 is a very interesting boat—the only trimaran in our collection, which has quite a bit of significance just from a design perspective because it enables them to get all of their heavy gear and machinery in that center hull,” Sherman said. “In terms of balance, it’s a great way to go. Under sail, the motion of the boat through the water was very comfortable. It’s a unique concept with

In the large multihull class, at least for 2020, the Neel 47 (left) proved that three hulls are better than two. The Eagle Class 53 (top left) was easily the most unique boat in the long history of Boat of the Year. The flybridge steering station on the Bali 5.4 (top right) was a big topic of discussion.

the interior layout in that the owner’s stateroom is at deck level with these giant picture windows overlooking the horizon, and the guest cabins are aft and in the amas. So even though we have a 47-footer here, it’s really a couple’s boat, though there is room for occasional guests.”

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“The trend of late in cruising multihulls has certainly been toward cats, so I appreciated their efforts to make a cruising trimaran,” Spurr said. “There’s a real trade-off—the fundamental one being I believe you’re going to get better performance with a trimaran, but you’re going to sacrifice accommodations. So I feel that for most of the buying public, they’re going to have to be leaning toward the performance end of the spectrum. The main owner’s cabin on the saloon level is kind of fun and interesting, but it’s adjacent to the galley and entertaining areas. So, I agree with Ed that this is a boat aimed at an experienced couple.”

Those couples who go with a Neel will be going with a winner.

