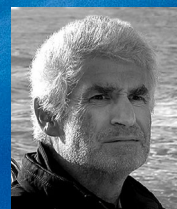


RUPERT HOLMES



Where: La Rochelle, late September

Conditions: 3-13 knots, slight swell

Model: Hull No1, newly commissioned; owner's version with four cabins. Main options: LiFePoO4 batteries, Flexiteek decks, watermaker, aircon, generator, genmaker





Most sail handling operations, except using spinnakers and furling the headsails, can be carried out single-handedly from the helm station



Rupert Holmes

‘The 52 feels bright, welcoming and innovative’

speed, but that’s rarely the key priority for cruising yachts. As a result the shape of the main hulls and amas of this new Lombard design are very different to those of the Joubert-Nivel-designed Neel 51 it replaces (42 built).

In particular the forward sections have a very shallow forefoot compared to the old model, where maximum waterline length was a key priority. The change improves manoeuvrability and is an important factor behind the ease with which our boat tacked in the conditions we experienced for our test. The 52 is also lighter, with improved balance thanks to a mast (and engine room) further aft and a larger jib.

ON THE HELM

Close-hauled in more open water, with the true breeze still predominately between 8-10 knots, we consistently made just over seven knots of boat speed at a true wind angle of 60°-65°. In these conditions there’s very little heel – just enough for the windward ama to skim above the water and markedly reduce wetted surface area.

Steering is via Dyneema cables, which gives a more direct response than many alternatives, though the boat’s heavier on the helm than a well set up monohull, with a less precise feel. Nevertheless it’s still good by the standards of many cruising catamarans.

The standard sail plan includes a square top mainsail, slightly overlapping headsail of around 120% and staysail. Our test boat also had a very flexible 150m² furling gennaker that can be used for reaching in 10 knots of true wind or less and broad-reaching in winds well above 20

knots. Neel also offers a larger asymmetric spinnaker as an option, as well as a marginally taller carbon rig with higher-spec Hydranet sails.

All lines, except spinnaker sheets and furling lines, are led to three electric winches at the helm station. Separate luff and leech pennants for all three mainsail reefs help tame the sail quickly. There is, however, lots of rope in this area and insufficient rope bins to handle it.

Downwind and reaching sails sheet to the back of the amas, while genoa and staysail furling lines are led to the aft end of the starboard ama. This arrangement for the furling lines greatly reduces friction compared to the convoluted route they would have to take to lead to the helm station, but means furling these sails isn’t an easy single-person operation.

With the true wind building to 10-11 knots and puffs to 13 we consistently made speeds of around 9 knots, with occasional bursts just into double figures when reaching at 110°-120° TWA, with the gennaker and staysail set. This was easy sailing at speeds that will quickly gobble up the miles when on passage.

Visibility from the helm station is excellent on port tack, but there’s a big blind spot on starboard – you need to descend four steps to see under the jib or gennaker. A semi flybridge above the hard top, with space for up to eight people, includes generous sunbeds. This is right next to the helm/winch station, so communication between the two is easy and, unlike many multihulls, it doesn’t feel as though the helmsman is isolated from everyone else on board.

You have to be sure guests are sitting before tacks and



The saloon adjoins the cockpit, however you need to stoop to see out of forward windows. Master cabin is to starboard but you need to draw blinds for privacy

gybes, when hoisting and dousing the mainsail, and when reefing on port tack. There's a bimini for sunshade over the helm area, with a clear overhead panel for sail trim, but no provision for sun protection over the flybridge area, though the hardtop over the main aft cockpit gives plenty of shade.

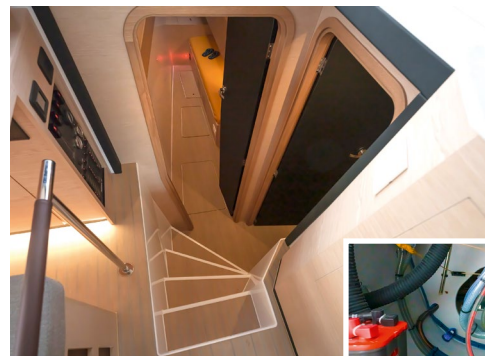
A key selling point for Neel is offering a very refreshing change to the familiar layouts of cruising multihulls of similar length, and the 52's arrangement feels generally bright, welcoming and innovative.



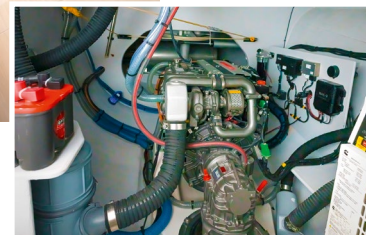
BRIDGEDECK CABIN

The older 51 benefitted from Neel's trademark bridgedeck level cabin, which gives a fantastic view out almost all round the boat when you wake up. This comes at the expense of some privacy, though, which is largely solved by closing the window blinds in the bulkhead that separates the cabin from the saloon. But this space was small compared to typical catamarans owners' cabins.

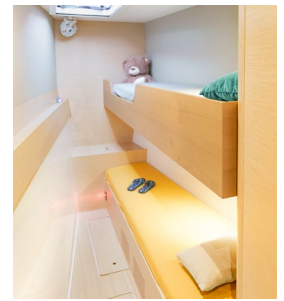
Owners with guests will still need to close the blinds on the main bridgedeck cabin on the 52, but this now links to the whole of the starboard ama. This is a private area with a desk/dressing table and a generous amount of stowage in hanging and shelved lockers. Ventilation is provided by several overhead hatches and there's a long hull window above the desk which provides plenty of natural light. ▶



Above: large and well appointed galley. Left: steps down to the forepeak cabin and central hull mid cabin



Right: technical area is smaller and pushed further aft than earlier Neels, but is still useful



**Above: Pullman cabin in main hull forepeak.
Left: bridgedeck level owner's cabin.
Below: owner's hull space in starboard ama**



‘Volume with Manhattan-style loft living’

The mid part of the owner's ama has a heads with a separate shower stall, while further forward is an additional space that was left fairly open in our test boat, with the exception of a washer/dryer. This area has obvious potential for much more stowage, or even a workbench.

The aft cockpit under the hardtop is relatively small, but this doesn't feel important since this space fully opens up onto an expansive saloon, with the interior and exterior tables together forming a dining table that can be extended almost seamlessly to just over 3m in length.

Ahead of the saloon area is a large navstation with a double seat and a good view forward, to port and aft. However, the bridgedeck owner's cabin creates a large blind spot on the starboard quarter and there is no hatch above to view the mainsail.

All layout options have a large and well equipped galley forward on the starboard side of the saloon. There's acres of worktop space, a four-burner gas hob plus oven, large refrigeration and freezer capacity, plus a slimline dishwasher. Stowage is in 17 lockers both under the counter and at eye level. The saloon has two opening panels in the front windscreen for natural ventilation, plus a small opening hatch over the cooker.

In four-cabin boats steps lead down to a double cabin in the port ama, with a large double berth aft, above which is a long hull window that gives a great view out. Stowage here is primarily in a small hanging locker, plus empty space under the berth that can be used for easy access to kit bags. Forward of this are heads and shower compartments mirroring those of the starboard ama, and further forward a space similar to that with the washing machine on

the starboard side.

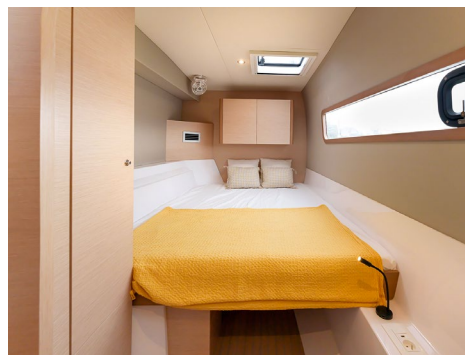
Alternatively the port ama can be fitted out as two doubles that share a central head/shower

compartment. This option is also available in the starboard ama for six-cabin charter specification boats. These also gain additional saloon and dining space on the bridgedeck as there's no owner's cabin at that level.

Seven steps at the front of the saloon descend into a further double cabin in the centre of the main hull, under the solid bridge deck. There's plenty of space, but natural light and ventilation are restricted, with the former coming solely from the two escape hatches. There's stowage plus a heads compartment (without shower) shared with a forward cabin at the front of the main hull. On the test boat this is fitted out as a Pullman-style cabin with bunkbeds. Crew cabins, each with a single berth and head/shower, can also be specified at the aft end of each ama.

On the downside, some elements of the interior have hard edges in places that may not wear as well as rounded corners. And traditionalists won't be impressed by the inside of lockers which have a similar feel to mass market home furniture.

Neel's trademark full height technical area with engine and systems is restricted to the back of this model. Nevertheless, it remains a well laid out and useful space that will make maintenance and repair easier than on many yachts. Unlike cruising catamarans, Neels have only a single engine in the main hull, so a bow thruster is fitted as standard. A stern thruster is offered as an option that can make Mediterranean-style mooring a lot easier.



Double berth at aft end of port ama

FIRST LOOK



The Neel Trimarans Group formed in 2010 and is now building 25 trimarans a year. Yet as the company expanded rapidly over the last decade it has been faced with a number of quality and customer care complaints (some are well documented online). Under new management this year, Neel is putting a renewed focus on this area.

Handover issues can be relatively common in any boat, particularly from volume production builders. In an upcoming edition we'll be looking at how it can affect buyers and what they can do to prevent ongoing problems.

Deck stowage includes large lockers that can accommodate sails, fenders and watersports toys, while the tender rests on purpose made chocks at the aft end of the main hull. It's lifted using a line from the end of the boom – a simple arrangement that avoids the weight, complication and cost of davits. Access to the water is from the extended bathing platforms on the aft end of each ama and the transom of the main hull.

Our test boat was set up with just under 2kW of solar panels on the coachroof. Neel says this is almost enough for complete autonomy while cruising when combined with the boat's lithium iron phosphate battery bank, though as standard 625Ah of 12V AGM batteries are fitted.

OUR VERDICT

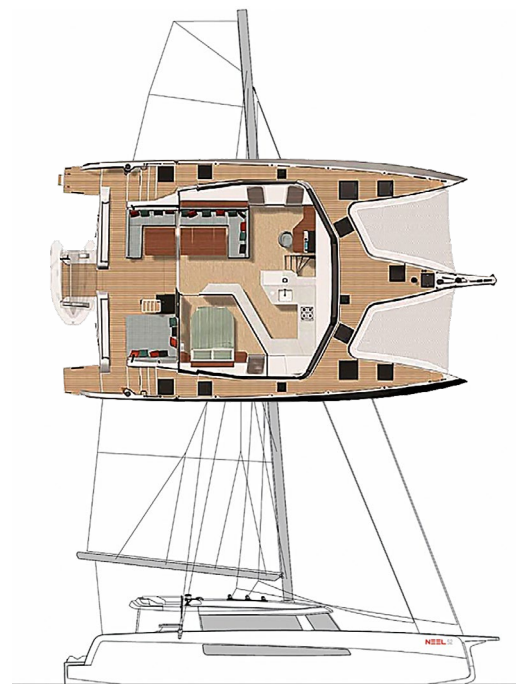
There's much to like about this boat for anyone who needs the accommodation volume offered, or is seduced by the appeal of Manhattan-style loft living. The Neel 52 also offers a big advantage over its predecessor thanks to the reconfigured owner's suite with immensely more space.

Speeds under sail are unlikely to differ noticeably to the 51, which already had potential for very quick passages when reaching, although upwind and downwind VMG for both models is less impressive, other than downwind in a blow. However, the way the new boat behaves under sail gives it a feel closer to that of a cruising monohull.

More importantly for this part of the market, the 52 is easy to handle, with few operations requiring more than one person on deck. These factors, combined with the various layout options, boost this yacht's appeal and by the time the prototype had been in commission for three weeks, delivery schedules were already stretching into early 2026, with 26 boats sold. ■

The flexible gennaker on our test boat can be used for reaching in up to 10 knots of wind and at 140° TWA in well over 20 knots

NEEL 52



SPECIFICATIONS

- LOA 15.90m 52ft 0in • Beam 8.80m 28ft 11in
- Draught 1.90m 6ft 3in • Displacement 13,500kg 29,800lb
- Mainsail (aluminium mast) 95m² 1,022ft²
- Mainsail (carbon mast) 102m² 1,098ft²
- Furling gennoa 71m² 764ft² Staysail 31m² 345ft²
- Freshwater tank 600lt 132gal
- Fuel tank 700lt 154gal • Engine 110hp
- Base price ex VAT €1m; as tested €1.3 million
- Design Marc Lombard

ALSO CONSIDER

CATANA OCEAN CLASS

Lightweight with huge bridge deck accommodation but less of an accent on performance than earlier models. €1.03m. catana.com



Arnaud Rizon

FP AURA 51

Spacious recent model that stops short of a full flybridge with numerous layouts up to 6 cabins. From €951,842. fontaine-pajot.com



Jean-Marie Lot

LAGOON 51

Full flybridge with palatial accommodation, yet sails much better than the appearance suggests. €973,500. cata-lagoon.com



Gilles Martin-Raget