

Power Catamarans – Setting a new standard in boating lifestyle

Written by Peter Brady

Whilst fuel economy is one of the displaning or high speed displacement power catamarans strongest points (and getting stronger as fuel prices rise) it is not the dominant feature on which the decision to purchase is made. **Lifestyle is the reason most people choose power cats.**

How do we know?

For the past 12 years Lorma and I have designed and built power catamarans and for the 5 years before that, motorsailing catamarans. During this time, we have spoken to or corresponded with thousands of people, both here in Australia and overseas about power cats. In the course of these conversations or correspondence, we have had the opportunity to informally survey people who are considering power cats as to why they would choose them over the more conventional existing types of power boats. In the beginning, our clients were considered on the fringe, or the leading edge, depending on your perspective.

The greatest hurdle in having displaning or high speed displacement power cats accepted was the reputation planing power cats had developed of not performing when overloaded or constructed too heavily. There was also the issue of the power cat's beam and the difficulty of finding marina berths. Gradually, with boats on the water, articles in magazines and the defining of displaning or high speed displacement as being different from planing cats has helped the boating public to better understand their advantages. The adopting of this hull form in its many guises - Wave Piercers, SWATH etc by ferry operators and the military hastened both the development and the acceptance of power cats with many people experiencing their stability and smooth ride. Just as it happened with sailing multihulls, once people were able to see and experience them at boat shows, as charter boats, or spending time with friends on their power cats, they were converted.

What is it about power catamarans that make the boating lifestyle on them different?

We asked both men and women what they wanted in a power boat that would allow them to enjoy their boating lifestyle to the fullest. Because the women were talking to Lorma, they were more open about what they did and didn't like about boating and what their requirements were, than had they been talking to a man. Our survey spread is not representative of all boaties, as we do not design all kinds of boats, but we do believe that it is certainly representative of both experienced boaties looking for something different and people looking to own a power boat for the first time. The survey is particularly representative of families and retired, or soon to be retired couples. We have also talked to a fair number of boaties who have experienced offshore yacht racing in their younger days and are now looking to relax rather than compete. This article discusses the issues these people have raised and what they want in order to enjoy their boating experience to the fullest.

When women were asked what they wanted in a powerboat, their overwhelming response was:

1 - Stability

This is the dominant feature that makes power cats popular with women. When cruising or at anchor, they just want to relax. They don't want to be thrown out of bed when another boat passes their anchorage, nor do they want to have put every item away in secure storage after they have used it. Power cat owners report a much lower incidence of seasickness and therefore a higher rate of enjoyable times on the boat. Women are far less macho than men and do not see throwing up as one of the rights of passage when going boating. As they aged, both sexes commented that power cats were much easier on tired and damaged backs, hips and knees.

2 - Space

The power catamaran is not constrained by rigging considerations, so its beam in combination with the cabin shape provides a unique opportunity for designers to create vastly different layouts from either monohulls or sailing cats. Monohulls are bound, up to a certain length, by a tube or corridor arrangement that tends to create long, narrow lounge seats and tiny galleys with minimal bench space and storage. Galleys are often stuck down amongst the sleeping arrangements almost as an afterthought, with very little visibility or ventilation. On sailing catamarans, the mast, chainplates and sail track positions often dictate the cabin shape and layout, and whilst a narrow cabin allows closer sheeting angles, it does not provide much latitude to create better internal layouts.

From 10 metres up, power catamarans can provide galley facilities equal to, or better than many small apartments. Seating around a table suitable for all those on board can be provided, and on power cats larger than 12 metres, separate dining and lounging arrangements are possible. Even on 10 metre power cats it is possible to use domestic type furniture in the saloon. This allows owners to use their favourite chairs, or to be able to change the furniture arrangement depending on how many are onboard.

The two separate hulls of the power cat provide privacy for sleeping arrangements, both visually and acoustically. Whilst smaller power catamarans are slightly restricted in their sleeping arrangements by the wing deck height and shape, in vessels over 14 -15 metres, island beds provide the power catamaran with accommodation possibilities which again rival most small apartments. The internal volume of a power catamaran allows larger bathrooms, often adjacent to the back deck, providing good light and ventilation. In larger power cats we have even arranged the owner's cabin to have a king size bed, spa bath and lounge in total privacy across the fwd section of the boat. We believe it is this feeling of space along with the stability that makes power catamarans very attractive to women in particular and boaties in general.

3 - Visibility

Again, this is connected to seasickness. Most boaties find good visibility and the light provided by it far more conducive to a relaxed lifestyle, therefore they are less likely to feel seasick if they can see what is going on around them. One of the main attractions for women to power cats was the bridge deck level galley and saloon. This layout provides a feeling of being on the boat, not down in it.

4 - Ventilation.

Fresh air is also important in combating seasickness and keeping the interior cool. Ventilating the boat when locked up was talked about, as it made the boat far more pleasant to arrive at - starting a cruise in a dank, musty boat is not exactly a bonus in getting the family onboard. Because they do not roll, power cat's decks are normally fairly dry, allowing some windows and portholes to be left open in more extreme conditions than usual, providing much better ventilation. Passive venting of cool air from under the wing deck can also be used to cool or ventilate the interior.

A fresh, cool interior along with low maintenance and easily cleaned surfaces allow all the family to enjoy the holiday or cruising - no one wants to spend their holiday scrubbing and cleaning. Materials and colours don't have to be stark, plastic or cheap - they just need to be carefully considered as to how they will work on a boat. This is not exclusive to power catamarans, however they are less hidebound by tradition and therefore modern low maintenance materials are more accepted and used.

5 - Storage

Most women requested as much storage as possible for clothes, personal effects, appliances, food etc. Rods, crab pots, barbecues, tools, engine spares, bait tanks, iceboxes and beverages - these were men's requirements. Unfortunately, on a power cat, weight is a consideration and therefore storage has to be smart and tailored to the type of gear that is used and carried on the boat. Commonsense must prevail when storing these items so as not to affect trim and therefore seaworthiness. The best way for designers and builders of power cats to ensure this, is to provide the space to store these items where it is best suited. Space is the power catamarans greatest asset; therefore it is in the designers and builders hands how they allocate it.

The displacing catamaran is very forgiving of overloading and whilst it can stress the structure, it seldom has much effect on speed. The extra wetted surface created by heavier loads will have an effect on fuel economy, however it will nowhere as dramatic as it would be on a planing hull.

6 - The ability to enjoy as many of the creature comforts available at home.

Old time boaties will scoff at this request, however times have changed and if families want to go cruising together then concessions have to be made - after all, men want every fishing aid and water toy they can purchase to match the full electronics package on the flybridge. Toasters, bread makers, coffee machines, icemakers, dishwashers and sometimes washing machines are requested - all can be accommodated, but it requires careful planning and the correct sized boat. In most cases, the above deck layout of a power cat can be designed around a series of cubes which fits well with the shape of domestic appliances. The power catamarans stability allows most appliances to be used even when at sea, as they will not get tipped over or internally damaged.

7 - Family friendly, safe and comfortable

Boats that are not family friendly make hard work for women. Trying to keep a close eye on children or inexperienced boaties is hard enough at the best of times, but if the design of the boat by its very nature forces people into small groups that cannot be supervised easily, then it is very difficult to enjoy a relaxed lifestyle. Conversely, a design that does not have room to move and forces people into one area long term is very testing on relationships. A common comment from both women and men was that on monohulls, fly bridges, if fitted, were too small to seat more than 3-4 people in comfort, and the motion on the flybridge was so severe that they never used them. Converted sailing cats often suffer from the same problem of a lack of comfortable seating, as the flybridge is an afterthought, rather than a fundamental design feature. Flybridges that do not provide safe space or seating suitable for at least 6 divide the family or friends into different groups. This makes it harder to keep an eye on children or grandchildren and dramatically reduces the social side of boating. The large comfortable flybridge on the true power catamaran provides a stable drive station with unmatched views for helming and activities such as whale watching. A well designed flybridge also provides a superb waterfront location for alfresco dining or cocktails, with its all-round elevated views catching the cool breeze.

Both sexes also commented that ergonomics are important in relaxing and enjoying a boating lifestyle. Injuries caused by sharp corners or badly designed or located steps are not conducive to good times. Well designed power cats can provide wide clean decks with multiple, safe entertaining areas, space for sunbathing and chatting on the foredeck, fishing or swimming from the cockpit during the day and entertaining in the cockpit, flybridge or saloon at night. These multiple areas are large enough to accommodate all the guests at one time – they also allow groups of adults, teenagers and children their own space, if required.

When men were asked what they wanted in a powerboat they wanted two types of boat rolled into one.

They wanted all the things that would encourage their wives, children, grand children and friends to cruise with them. Then they wanted the ability to be able to go fishing or diving with their mates. Men raised issues such as:

1 - Space, privacy and variable sleeping arrangements

For family or groups of friends, both mixed and single sex to enjoy themselves on anything longer than a day trip, they must have space and privacy. Power cats are unmatched in this regard, with different deck levels and a wider accommodation layout that allows both visual and acoustic privacy. Accommodation plans can provide both sleeping arrangements for singles or couples and power cats, with their many level floor spaces can easily accommodate additional guests by utilising air beds or camp stretchers. A number of our clients have used sofa beds in the saloon as a backup sleeping arrangement and have flybridge arrangements which provide extra berths.

2 - Power

Whilst high speed was not the highest priority, a good cruise speed was a requirement of most men. This allowed them to get to fishing grounds quicker, to reach quieter and more private anchorages on day trips and to out-run worsening weather. Getting home quickly when kids and grandkids are tiring after a big day out on the water keeps the family happily boating together. The power cats twin engines in separate hulls not only gives a high cruising speed from smaller power plants, but also provides unmatched safety with separate systems in each hull. Most of our clients cruise between 12-16 knots when offshore, but they find it reassuring to have the ability to go quicker should they need it. Because the displacing power cat does not have an “on the plane or off the plane” attitude or trim, owners can chose the correct speed for the conditions.

3 - Range

Range provides options. Range also allows faster passages, constant fuel stops eat up time or require the running of bars in less than ideal conditions. Often the weather has changed by the time refuelling been completed, delaying voyages and ruining plans. Displaning power cats have created a unique ability to be able to combine a high cruising speed with long range. Planing boats of any type cannot carry the weight of fuel required for long range cruising and displacement boats do not have the speed. The ability to make longer passages without refuelling adds a versatility that could only be dreamed of 20 years ago.

4 - Economy

Particularly with fuel prices as they are at present, economy means the family can afford to use the boat more often and go further for their dollar.

So what is the ideal boating lifestyle and why does the power catamaran come closest to providing it?

It is slightly different for different people, however there are some very common threads running through it. Women see a powerboat as an alternative to the beachfront holiday home. Yes, it may not have as much room and sometimes it could get uncomfortable, however this is balanced by the fact that they can have a different view each day, and if they don't like the neighbours they can move. A boat will also provide their family and friends with unique opportunities like whale watching or diving, without having to deal with tourism boat schedules or crowds.

Men see power boats as a family beach front home, a shed at the bottom of the garden to escape the pressures of life, a fishing shack, a dive platform, a challenge against nature, and a electronic-mechanical toy to play with.

Families, couples or friends that regularly enjoy a boating lifestyle together form unique bonds, and retired couples often start a new life together with different challenges such as navigation and meeting new friends. Many retired or semi-retired people just get to relax, read a book, visit places they have never been to and just catch up with friends. Grandparents and parents get to hand down their nautical knowledge and life skills to the next generation. There is nothing like an invitation to stay on a comfortable boat in an exotic location to bring friends or family back together again.

Beautiful surroundings, great company, good food, new experiences and no pressure - that's the ideal boating lifestyle. The displaning power catamarans stability, space, pace and range provides the visibility, privacy and facilities of an apartment. This in turn makes families, and in particular new converts to boating, feel more familiar with their surroundings and therefore relaxed. If everyone onboard is relaxed, has their own space and privacy, then they will enjoy the experience. That's what makes power cats the ideal boating experience.

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