

A tectonic shift in design

There aren't that many boats out there built from volcanic basalt fibres but, as **Sam Jefferson** finds out, the Windelo 54 is a yacht that dares to be different





Windelo

OCEAN FUTURE

Boat test - Windelo 54

Many years ago in what seems another life I used to teach sailing in the Caribbean in Hobie Cats.

To be brutally honest, there wasn't a lot to do and, occasionally when the torpor got too much, I would take a Hobie out and play around in the waves; getting the boat up to maximum speed then bearing away in an attempt to deliberately pitchpole. This was both exhilarating and extremely ill advised – particularly as it was me who had to carry out any repairs. It was also incredibly fun. Imagine my surprise therefore when I enjoyed a similar sensation playing about in the waves in a 54' cruising catamaran – obviously I wasn't trying to pitchpole, but the feeling of dancing across the waves at full throttle was life affirmingly similar and not at all what I had expected from a big, blue water catamaran.

This was the Windelo 54 which I test sailed out of its home port of Canet en Roussillon in France in exhilarating conditions. The boat showcased precisely how far big multihull cruising yachts have come in recent years. That sharp divide between fast racing multihulls and somewhat lumbering cruising cats has been blurred. Boats such as this Windelo, Outremer and Marsaudou has changed the



dynamic in a manner that was almost unimaginable a few years back. Yet despite that, perhaps the most interesting feature of the Windelo 54 is not the impressive performance but the incredibly forward thinking approach to design. This is a boat with serious green credentials and they are on show from the daggerboards up.

The concept

The basic concept behind all the Windelo range is to produce fast cruising catamarans capable of taking you around the world in comfort. Nothing particularly radical

ABOVE

A powerful sail plan points to strong performance

BELOW

The design team of Barreau Neumann has penned a purposeful looking yacht

there – it's a path well trodden by Outremer and Catana to name but two. Yet the devil is in the detail and this is where the Windelo most definitely starts to head off the chart because the other great aim was to do all this while constructing an extremely environmentally friendly boat. To this end, the company wanted to produce a boat with 50% less environmental impact than traditional designs. The first and most radical step was to switch from using fibreglass to Basalt, a natural volcanic fibre which offers vibration resistance and durability while still maintaining a high strength to weight ratio. The other great asset it possesses is that it is naturally produced and has no toxic additives.

On top of that, the hull is cored with PET [Polyethylene Terephthalate]. This is created plastic from old bottles which is crushed into very small pieces then melted again in order to create the PET foam. Meanwhile, all woods are sustainably resourced and twin electric motors come as standard. In other words, we are looking at a yacht that does far more than indulge in a spot of 'greenwashing' as it is sometimes known. This is a boatbuilder that is serious about the environment. It's also a serious enterprise. The builders have already won plaudits with its Windelo 50 and enjoys a full order book and is already gaining a loyal following.





First impressions were very good. The boat feels suitably huge at 54' but also looked suitably stylish with lean, purposeful hulls and dreadnought bows topped by a sympathetically designed deckhouse and well dimensioned rig. The 2m high freeboard gave good clearance from waves and the nacelle was set well back to further obviate slamming. The boat was designed by the Barreau Neumann team and their stated aim was to produce a boat that sailed well when loaded down with blue water kit rather than just reeling off impressive figures in lightship mode. The boat has twin daggerboards that are set dead centre in the hulls as opposed to being angled in. This is the most effective position but also a bit of a design challenge when it comes to configuring the interior. The rig is a powerful one featuring twin headsails. The inner headsail is self tacking but due to the mast being placed centrally on the boat, this remains a well proportioned sail. The outer headsail is on a sprit and can be switched for a huge (169m2) gennaker. The big mainsail is set on an aluminium mast as standard although this can be upgraded to carbon. The boom was relatively low and afforded good access for stowing

the main and the coachroof itself was bedecked with solar panels – which brings us to another key feature of the boat; the twin electric motors, which are supplied by Bell Marine and are shaft driven. Under battery power alone, these would give you four hours at 6kn but, of course, the batteries will be constantly replenished via the solar panels, hydroregeneration. Meanwhile, there are twin diesel generators which provide further back up and give you a motoring range of 1,110nm at 6kn.

The boat is available in three different levels of specification; Adventure, Sport and Yachting – the titles are reasonably self explanatory save for Yachting which is a more high level luxury spec and was the level to which the test boat was fitted out to.

On deck

Stepping aboard, you're straight into the main living area which, in common with 99% of cruising catamrans blends the outdoor/indoor spaces to provide a huge living space. The boat features the big tilt/slide 'garage door' arrangement first pioneered by Bali which means that in fine weather the transition from outdoor to indoor space is completely seamless. Staying outside

ABOVE LEFT

The forward cockpit is unique in this class of blue water multihull

ABOVE RIGHT

A huge and very well lit saloon

BELOW LEFT

Acres of solar panels on the coachroof

BELOW RIGHT

The starboard aft cabin - not the enormous wraparound window

though, there is a big dining area and comfortable lounging area.

Stepping forward and the side decks felt very secure and comfortable while the foredeck was a simply huge space with a big trampoline and storage lockers just ahead of the deckhouse plus a big lazarette in the port hull while to starboard was a nicely proportioned skipper's cabin.

From the foredeck there is a sliding door that allows you to access the cockpit which is, as already mentioned, set ahead of the saloon. This slightly unusual arrangement was first seen in the 50 and has a number of advantages in that you feel very connected to the action up front while also remaining close to the people relaxing, cooking or eating in the saloon. It certainly struck me as a very satisfactory arrangement and a solution to a problem that dogs cruising catamarans; a bridge deck separates the skipper from the rest of the crew, while twin wheels aft can leave the helmsman slightly vulnerable. In this case, the helm is close to the action – particularly when the big front windows open - but is also well protected and secure. You were also afforded a good view of the mainsail thanks to a big skylight overhead. Meanwhile, all the haly-



Boat test - Windelo 54

exited the mast base and were led direct to two banks of jammers and on to a pair of beefy Harken winches. This makes for minimum friction and is also simple to use and means that when conditions are wild you have access to all the important ropes without going out on deck.

The cockpit can be isolated from the main saloon thanks to sliding patio doors but in general, it makes sense to keep things open and sociable. This is one of the great joys of this set up because directly behind the starboard helm is the galley - a nicely thought out U-shaped affair - naturally with an electric hob and oven. Directly aft of this is a dining table, making serving up dinner an absolute delight. To port is a modest sofa area with a very comfortable berth for night passages.

The test boat was somewhat unusual in that it had four cabins in the two hulls plus the skipper's cabin in the starboard hull forward. In standard arrangement however, the entirety of the port hull is devoted to the owner's quarters with the main stateroom set aft, a huge bathroom and potential for a small office space forward. In this boat, the office space had been eschewed in favour of a well dimensioned forward double cabin. This was a light, pleasant space with the bed



set out fore and aft. Headroom throughout is an impressive 2m and the overall feeling of light and space was really very impressive.

Under sail

All that remained was to go sailing. I had noticed that on my drive to the base in Canet en Roussillon that the wind was particularly boisterous around Leucate, just to the north of Canet. I had spotted a number of windsurfers doing Mach 10 or so in the wild Tramontana. I was therefore delighted when we slipped noiselessly out of the marina under electric power (very easy to handle by the way) and headed directly

ABOVE
The 54 pointed well in the wild conditions

BELOW
The rig is aluminium as standard and features a self tacking headsail and big reacher outside of that

towards Leucate. What started as a brisk sail became increasingly wild. The breeze was dead offshore, providing relatively flat water, but built steadily and topped out at about 25kn or so. That was plentiful given we had the full main up and it would certainly have been deemed prudent to reef had we not turned tail and run off at the exact point that the wind peaked. The boat pointed very well for a big cat thanks to those daggerboards while sail handling was impressively simple. The real joy was, unsurprisingly, the forward cockpit. It was a hot, sunny day, so we rolled up the screens and therefore felt completely involved with the action. The steering was sensitive and the overall feel was good. The boat was also nicely balanced and a pleasure to handle. Hard on the wind we were soon making 10kn plus. Obviously, part of the issue with multihulls is the fact that, because you sit flat in even the wildest of conditions, it's hard to gauge if you're overpowered. However, the helm provided enough feedback and the boat felt sufficiently skittish to tell me we were getting toward the edge. We were also having a lot of fun and, as we eased off onto a beam reach, the speed continued to build, maxing out at a shade under 17kn. As I say, my days as a Hobie sailor have often left me just a touch wistful as I took the helm on a somewhat more prosaic cruising cat. Not the case here! Despite the wild conditions, we barely took a spray onboard, all the while feeling life affirmingly, exhilaratingly involved in the action.





SAM'S VERDICT

The Windelo 54 picks up where its smaller sister the 50 left off. It's part of a band of cruising multihulls that is redefining the genre by providing impressive performance married to good levels of comfort that makes them a blue water cruiser's dream. On top of that, Windelo has also managed to produce a boat that pays much more than just lip service to the environment and the fitting of electric motors as standard on a big

cruising boat remains the exception rather than the norm – and that should be lauded. All in all their willingness to innovate is evident throughout the boat – no more so than in the forward cockpit which, for me, is a real game changer. It made a fun sail exhilarating.

COMFORT: ★★★★★

BLUE WATER ABILITY: ★★★★★

LOOKS: ★★★★★

THE SPEC

Length: 16,46 m (54')

Beam: 7,98m (26'2")

Draft Board Down: 2,35m (7'7")

Draft Boards Up: 1,05m (3'4")

Displacement: 12,800kg (28,219lbs)

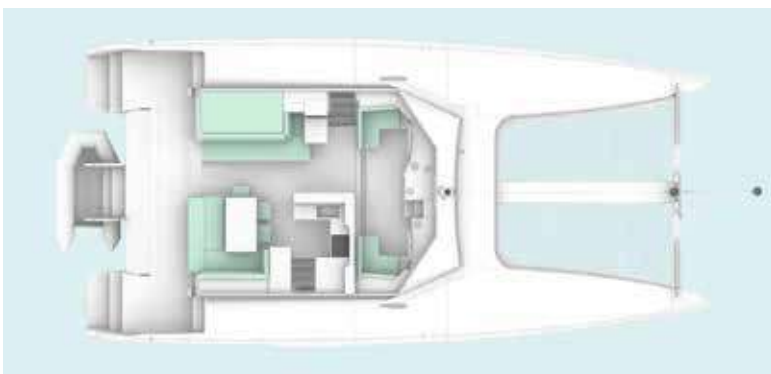
Upwind sail area: 193 m² (2077 sq ft)

Downwind sail area: 267 m² (2874 sq ft)

Electric Power: Bell Marine 2 x 20kW

Price (base): €995,000

Contact: windelo-catamarans.com



ALTERNATIVE BOATS



OUTREMER 55

Outremer has established itself as one of the biggest suppliers of performance cruising catamarans and the Outremer 55 is their newest and largest model. The marque is tried and tested on the blue water trail and the 55 is arguably one of their most polished performers.

catamaran-outremer.com



MARSAUDON ORC57

Marsaudon Composites offer a step up in terms of performance. Their 57 is the latest in the range and this boat is a serious speed merchant. On the other hand it is a step down in terms of creature comforts – touch more spartan and the fit out a little less polished.

Nevertheless, it's an accomplished fast cruiser.

marsaudon-composites.com



CATANA 53

An all new fast cruiser from the company that played a big hand in getting the ball rolling in this sector. The new 53 offers sparkling performance married to good levels of comfort. Twin aft helms give the boat a sporty feel.

catana.com