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Vision 450: Setting High Standards

This 45-foot South African-built catamaran maintains a lofty reputation.

by Herb McCormick



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One could make the case that Peter and Fiona Wehrley, the South African couple whose Cape Town-based company, [Matrix Yachts](#), debuted their new Vision 450 cruising catamaran at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, last fall, are “accidental” boatbuilders. For many years they operated charter boats in the Caribbean, but when they concluded that they needed a larger, more luxurious cat for the demands of their clientele—and they couldn’t find what they were searching for—they decided to return home to design and build precisely what they wanted themselves. The result was the Silhouette 760, an award-winning yacht launched in 2006.

The story might’ve ended there if the Wehrleys had returned to the islands and resumed business as usual, as they’d originally planned. Before they could get there, however, they sold the first 76-footer and took orders for two more. Sailing, they decided, could wait a while. Matrix Yachts had become a going concern.

The Wehrleys, it turned out, were exceptionally well suited to operate a high-end boatyard. A former structural engineer as well as a highly experienced offshore sailor, Peter had the technical knowledge and skills to design and create complex composite yachts. And after many years of cruising, living aboard, and catering to guests in the demanding Caribbean charter trade, Fiona had an innate knowledge of what works and what doesn’t in terms of interior layouts and accommodation plans.

When Matrix decided to build a 45-footer that would serve both private owners and bareboat charter fleets, there was just one problem, as Peter explained just before our test sail aboard the 450 last October on sunny Chesapeake Bay.

“We had to be pretty conscious of our main calling, the 760, which is obviously a megayacht with superb finishes and really quality workmanship,” he said. “We have to, perhaps unfortunately, stick to the same standards. Otherwise, that would impact the reputation of the big boat. So, within reason, the 450 needs to

meet those standards with regard to the construction and joinery and the overall quality of what we put together. We in fact have to do things that are better than what our competition might be doing because of our involvement with the 76-footer. We're not prepared to drop our standards. We need to stay at that level."

Though I've never had the opportunity to inspect or board a 760, it's pretty clear from a tour of the 450 that the craftsmen at Matrix achieved their ambitious goal. The standard P.V.C. vacuum-bagged sandwich construction employs a variety of cores in different applications: for instance, balsa in the lockers; foam in the bridgedeck and on the coachroof; and, to save weight, a honeycomb laminate in doors and related items. The joinery work and furniture, in cherry, was indeed impressive. Our test boat was fitted with a cork floor, a renewable resource that isn't slippery underfoot. But regarding floors and finish work, Peter said, "We can offer alternatives. We're not stuck on any one thing."

The profile of the yacht is dominated by the long, sloping coachroof, a feature that's enhanced visually by the slanting, accentuating windows that also taper forward. A unique addition is the unusually large forward deck—complete with several big lockers and a pair of hatches (the trampolines on the 450 are quite small for a boat this size)—a section of which is recessed beneath the overhanging coachroof.

There's a hard dodger over the cockpit, the layout for which is centered upon the large dining table and wraparound settee to port. The raised steering station—with all instruments and engine controls readily at hand, as well as the mainsheet, traveler controls, clutches, and related running rigging—are to starboard. The fractional rig includes a fully battened main with generous roach and a high-cut genoa as working canvas, with an asymmetric kite for off-the-wind work. Below the waterline, there's a pair of fixed, "sacrificial" keels that draw well over 3 feet.

The 450 is available in the standard four-cabin arrangement, with a quartet of double berths and heads. In this version, the two forward cabins, with their huge, outward-facing beds, are exceptionally spacious for a 45-footer. There's also a three-cabin owner's version, where the forward cabin in the starboard hull has been eliminated in favor of an expansive space with additional seating, lockers, desk, and other amenities.

Throughout the boat, ample storage, some of it in rather ingenious locales, abounds. In both models, an especially well-reasoned highlight is the dedicated compartment stashed behind a clever flush door in the port hull that houses all of the pumps and electrical equipment for quick, easy access.

Thanks to a large forward window in the coachroof, which is equipped with a set of opening ports—a long settee with matching dining table is just aft—there's plenty of natural light and ventilation in the main saloon. The voluminous galley has its own sliding window to the cockpit, plenty of counter space, a large freezer and refrigerator, and even a nice drying rack for washed dishes. As with most modern cats, when all the doors are open, there's no real delineation between the interior and exterior living areas.

Unfortunately, the breeze didn't cooperate for our outing on Chesapeake Bay, though we did go through the motions of tacking and jibing and setting the asymmetric. But in less than 5 knots of wind, it was hard to get any feel for the boat's sailing characteristics. That said, the leads for the traveler and the kite could be rethought; the former could be more efficient, the latter less complicated.

Because our test boat had arrived to the United States after a 7,000-mile voyage from South Africa and the delivery skipper was aboard during our sail, he was able to report that the boat was comfortable and fast, regularly knocking off 220-mile days in winds at or above 18 knots, with a top boat speed of 19.2 knots. More and more cats these days are being manufactured in South Africa, and the Vision 450 is an impressive addition to the ever-expanding fleet.

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