

# A CAT IN THE STREAM

The new Leopard 53 Powercat is perfectly suited for the laid-back lifestyle in Bimini

BY CARLY SISSON







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*Clockwise from far left: Conch salad is an island staple; Ebbie's and Pat's Bonefish Club; Coconut Brian serves rum drinks at his beachside bar; North Cat Cay*

A barracuda swims by our catamaran while we rest at anchor. It's a scorching day in Bimini, and the predator was likely looking for relief in the shade between the two hulls. In the distance, a lone sea turtle emerges in intervals between his dives. The water here is so clear that nothing goes unnoticed, especially when there are panoramic views from the flybridge of the Leopard 53 Powercat, the South African builder's latest model.

"This boat so far has exceeded expectations," says Katie Baker, marketing manager for Leopard Catamarans. Just a month before, the 53 had debuted at the Miami International Boat Show, where

the company sold five of these cruising catamarans. After spending a day on board, I can understand the boat's appeal.

We left the dock at The Bimini Big Game Club on North Bimini earlier in the morning for a cruise through the Bahamas' famed turquoise water. Our final destination: Cat Cay, two small private islands in the Bimini chain of the Bahamas. We won't be granted access to shore, but Cat Cay's strict entrance regulations have kept pollution to a minimum and created some of the cleanest water in the Bahamas. There's no wind when we arrive, no rippled water to disrupt the ocean's surreal transparency. There's only visibility for miles and a waterfront dotted with affluent homes to admire.

Located in the westernmost region of the Bahamas, Bimini is only a 50-mile jaunt across the Gulf Stream from Miami,

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though the difference between the two locations is immeasurable. Once a place from which cheap rum was smuggled to Florida during the 1920s, Bimini became a hotspot for big-game fishing after Prohibition was lifted, and it drew many famous anglers. As a result, Bimini became known as the Big Game Fishing Capital of the World. Among the fishermen who trolled lines here were Zane Grey and Ernest Hemingway, who first arrived aboard his boat *Pilar* in 1935 and lived on North Bimini until 1937. According to his grandson, John Patrick Hemingway, for the author "the sheer power and speed of the billfish and the bluefin that were right off the coast of the north island were irresistible." Adding to the thrill were the mako sharks that lurked near the boat, often "apple-coring" the catch before it could be dragged aboard. The sharks served as inspiration for Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Bimini inspired his story *Islands in the Stream*.

Anglers continue to visit Bimini today in search of big-game action, but this outpost also draws those in search of a quiet pace. To travel here is to leave behind the fast pace and busyness of the city and embrace Island Time.

As I'm discovering, there's no better vessel on which to celebrate this relaxed lifestyle than a catamaran. The new Leopard feels much larger than 53 feet and is hardly crowded, even with five people aboard. We don't have our own tropical abode on the shore of Cat Cay, but on the Leopard catamaran we have our own private island

of sorts, with the added benefit of mobility.

The Leopard is just as seaworthy as she is comfortable. That was proven 24 hours ago, when we departed Ft. Lauderdale to cross the Gulf Stream. The winds picked up as soon as we left port, and we were quartering 4- to 5-foot seas for most of the passage. At an average speed of 9 to 10 knots, the boat rolled over the waves smoothly, and the flybridge remained dry until we entered a squall. At that point, our crew moved into the salon, where our captain, Calvyn McEvoy, could navigate comfortably from the optional indoor helm station. The seas were fairly consistent for the trip, which took about five hours, and the boat handled them with ease.

For McEvoy, the choppy seas we saw on the crossing were a vacation. In addition to helping new yacht owners learn to sail and operate their cats, he has worked as a delivery captain for 14 years and has completed 22 ocean crossings on various Leopard sail and power cats, including a trip from South Africa to Antigua on a Leopard 37 Powercat. If anyone can attest to the seaworthiness of these boats, it's McEvoy, who has put these boats through the paces on 45-day offshore deliveries through a variety of weather and sea conditions.

He pushed the cat to a top speed of 25 knots at 3660 rpm where the boat burned just 32.3 gph, powered by twin 370-hp Yanmar diesels. At a cruising speed of 17 knots, the company reports a burn of approximately 19 gph for a





**Above:** The 53 offers spacious entertaining areas, including a wide and bright salon and a well-equipped galley.

range of 463 nautical miles. Maximum range is 1,330 nm when traveling at 7.9 knots. At top speed, the boat ran quietly enough for our crew to converse on the flybridge while under way.

As we leave the shores of Cat Cay in our wake and head back to The Big Game Club, I'm surprised by some of the things we encounter. We pass a snorkeler holding onto the guardrail of a small outboard-powered boat as it pulls him through the channel. An overcrowded water taxi rocks somewhat precariously as it shuttles people across the channel, and a derelict sportfishing boat appears to be sinking into the water. Yeah, this definitely isn't Miami.

We tie the boat up at the dock and take a six-person golf cart through the island's narrow roads, which are lined by piles of conch shells and colorful buildings decorated with paintings of marine life. Dodging golf carts full of spring breakers and cars that are just a little too wide for the road, we make our first stop at Ebbie's and Pat's Bonefish Club, a waterfront bar decorated with

dollar bills pinned to the walls, before driving to the beach on the other side of the needle-thin island.

"My name's Brian, but they call me Coconut Brian," says a man wearing bedazzled sunglasses that rival some of Elton John's best looks. "Anything you want, Coconut Brian has." He's earned a reputation on the island for filling coconuts with rum, and he just recently got a "real" bar—a wooden counter dressed with palm leaves and a blender on top, located on the beach. He machetes his coconuts on a tree stump, and I can only wonder how he has yet to lose a finger. Coconuts in hand, we watch the sunset from the shore before carting the short distance back to Big Game.

Historic Bimini Big Game Club—founded in 1936 and at its current location since 1954—helped establish Alice Town as a world base for big-game fishing. Now that the Marine Protected Area off North Bimini ensures a healthy bonefish population, the resort continues to help anglers access world-class fishing, even after the largest schools of marlin have mostly moved on.

**LOA (w/platform): 53'1"**  
**Beam: 25'2"**  
**Draft (half load): 3'2"**  
**Displ.: 41,070 lbs.**  
**Water: 185 gals.**  
**Fuel: 562 gals.**  
**Power: (2) 370-hp Yanmar 8LV370 diesels**  
**Base Price: \$969,000**



Record-setting catches, it seems, are now the exception to the rule, and many professional crews have been replaced by recreational fishermen. There are sportfishing boats and catamarans here from as far as Maryland, Texas and Colorado. Our neighbors are a sail cat, a power cat and an outboard-powered cat, all filled with crews attracted to the relaxed island lifestyle.

We finish the day with cocktails and dinner prepared at the optional grill and wet bar on the flybridge. The wraparound seating and dining table are large enough for the five of us. A chill has moved in now that the sun has set, but the earlier heat has left us tired and ready to retire to the boat's comfortable accommodations. Hull No. 1 is configured with three staterooms and three separate heads—the owner's stateroom occupying the entire starboard hull—but the boat can also be set up with four staterooms in lieu of the owner's suite, which includes quarters for a single crew member in the bow. The rooms are spacious, even if they are confined to the hulls; they fit queen berths easily, and there is plenty of storage built into the bedframes, plus a walk-in closet and double vanity in the owner's cabin.

Everything on this 53 is just spacious.

The salon is wide and bright, and the galley is large enough for multiple people to prepare food at once. Most important for island hopping in the Bahamas are the outdoor areas, and those are plentiful. The aft deck and dining table are shaded, and the hydraulic swim platform provides easy access to the water. There is a sunpad forward with storage beneath—which we filled with two inflatable standup paddleboards—and another sunpad aft on the flybridge.

The window in my stateroom faces out toward the channel, and I wake up to the sunrise over the water, which is already busy with boats passing through to get a jump start on fishing and diving for the day. The problem with being on Island Time—especially when your home base is a boat that's every bit as comfortable as the islands themselves—is that it's hard to return to the real world. Fortunately, the Leopard 53 has combined the space and comfort of a catamaran with the performance of a motoryacht, which means you can jet off to the Bahamas whenever the urge arises. For now, I stretch out on the flybridge's sunpad for the trip back to Florida and watch flying fish dart away from the hull as the islands disappear in our wake. ☺

LOWER RIGHT: GARY BECKETT