

Bound for Bimini

THE LEOPARD 53 POWERCAT DEMONSTRATES ITS BLUEWATER
CRUISING ABILITY ON A CROSSING TO THE BAHAMAS.
BY LOUISA BECKETT

LOA: 50'6"
 Beam: 25'2"
 Draft: 3'2"
 Displ.: 41,070 lbs.
 Fuel: 581 gal.
 Water: 185 gal.
 Power: 2/370-hp Yanmar
 Price: \$1.3 million

Designed to appeal to monohull and powercat owners alike, the 53 proved its seakeeping abilities in a choppy Gulf Stream crossing.



Bimini is the closest Bahamian island to South Florida—around 50 nautical miles from Ft. Lauderdale—and offers a sampling of everything the island nation has to offer. Friendly people, fun beach bars, conch fritters and pigeon peas, great fishing and snorkeling, and above all, that famously crystal-clear turquoise water. You can experience it all in Bimini during the course of a weekend. So, when I was invited on a short cruise to Bimini aboard Leopard Catamarans' new 53 Powercat, I quickly obliged.

You may be more familiar with Leopard's sailing models, which range from 40 to 58 feet, but they also build power cats for both private owners and The Moorings charter fleet. (Leopard Catamarans and The Moorings are part of the same ownership group.) The new Leopard 53 Powercat made its world debut at the Miami International Boat Show. Built by Robertson & Caine in Cape Town, South Africa, the Leopard 53 PC replaces the 51 PC, touted by the company as "the best-selling powercat of all time in its size range."

Which begs the question: Why tamper with success?

"The 51 Powercat was coming to the end of its production life, so [Leopard] looked to design the 53 PC as a pure motoryacht from the start," said Katie Baker, marketing manager for yacht sales, who joined us on the cruise to Bimini. The goal, she explained, was to produce a model with accommodations and amenities that would appeal to the owners of traditional monohull motoryachts as well as other powercat owners. "We want to compete with the Sea Rays and Azimuts of the world."

One of the biggest changes the Leopard design team made in drafting the new 53 PC was to move its front bulkhead forward, eliminating the 51 PC's foredeck cockpit and whereby creating a huge salon and galley area, as well as enlarging the flybridge. "This boat gained 30 percent more volume over the 51," Baker said.

Crossing to Bimini from Florida in the winter can be challenging due to the frequent cold fronts that pass through the area with accompanying high winds and waves. Our trip was delayed by weather for a couple of days, and when we finally boarded the 53 PC at

Harbour Towne Marina in Dania Beach, seas were still running 4 to 5 feet with lots of chop. While less than ideal, these conditions made our 50-nautical mile crossing an excellent trial of the boat's seakeeping ability. I wasn't particularly worried, since our Captain, Calvyn McElvoy, said he had delivered Leopard Powercats from South Africa across the Atlantic Ocean to the Caribbean on their own bottoms.

Driving from the flybridge helm, McElvoy deftly maneuvered us out of the slip using the optional (single) bowthruster and the Yanmar diesels. (Each has its own engine compartment in one of the yacht's twin hulls.) We left Ft. Lauderdale's Port Everglades Inlet at 11:15 a.m. and immediately hit seas that were large, choppy and sloppy, quartering on our port bow. Using the well-placed handholds, we descended the aft stairs to drive from the boat's protected optional lower helm station, running at about 9.5 knots. Despite the conditions, the ride was quiet—I recorded a conversational 68 d(B) A in the salon. The yacht's catamaran configuration, with its widely spaced hulls, provided much-appreciated stability in the rough seas,



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especially when we hit the Gulf Stream. While it wasn't the most comfortable crossing, it was safe and tolerable, making a strong case for the adage, "Two hulls are better than one."

By 2 p.m., the seas had calmed considerably, and McElvoy brought our speed up to 18 knots. We got to Bimini by 3 p.m. and tied up on the T-dock at the Bimini Big Game Club Resort & Marina in the main harbor. The Big Game Club has been beloved by anglers since it first opened in 1936, at a time when Bimini was considered the "Big Game Capital of the World" and Ernest Hemingway, who frequented the island, brought his catch to its docks.

Bimini actually comprises two islands; the Big Game Club is located in Alice Town on the North Island, which is where most of the "action" can be found. Baker rented a large golf cart, which is one of the main means of transportation (in addition to small cars) on this 7-mile-long island. That evening, we visited two memorable watering holes. The first, Ebbie's and Pat's in Bailey Town, is located on a dock over the harbor—look down, and you can see water between the floorboards. The proprietor, "Bonefish Ebbie" David, is one of Bimini's best-known bonefishing guides, taking anglers out in his skiff to chase the elusive silvery fish that are native to the islands. He told us that the bar and dock had been wiped out by Hurricane Irma in September 2017, along with many other structures on the island, but they soon rebuilt it.

Next we headed to Radio Beach on the other side of the island, where Coconut Brian has his stand. Order his signature drink, and he takes a large machete, lops off the top of a coconut and fills it with his secret rum punch. This west-facing beach is a wonderful place to watch the sun slowly set into the ocean, especially with coconut drink in hand.

That night we had dinner at the Big Game Club's restaurant overlooking the marina. We feasted on local seafood, enjoying the view of the harbor at night from our outdoor table on the upper deck.

Then it was back to the boat to spend the night in the lap of luxury. The 53 PC's twin hulls are narrow at the bow to slice cleanly through the waves but flare out above the waterline to provide additional volume for the staterooms. Our yacht offered three staterooms, including a master suite that occupies the entire starboard hull, featuring an island double berth, vanity, head with dual sinks and a separate shower that easily must be the largest I've ever seen on a yacht this size. My husband and I were lucky enough to have been billeted in the master.

Three steps down from the salon, the master suite has a cleverly designed pocket door for privacy. Boasting 6 feet, 6 inches of headroom, it is lined with large hull windows (the shower even has one), further enhancing the feeling of abundant space. The berth is very comfortable. There is a bench to sit on and slip on your sandals.

The Leopard 53 PC's other two staterooms, located in the port hull with the washer/dryer in the companionway between them, are also good-sized. They each have an island double berth, hanging locker and en suite head with separate shower. The berth in the forward stateroom is positioned athwartships in order to maximize space.

A four-stateroom version is also available, both to private owners and those participating in The Moorings charter yacht program. Based on the portside staterooms in our test yacht, I am sure the 53 PC provides very comfortable accommodations for up to eight people.

The salon is huge, encompassing the lower helm, L-shaped settee with cocktail table (a dining table is optional) and a large aft galley convenient to the aft-deck dining area. Headroom is a whopping 6 feet, 9 inches. The entire main deck is light and airy, encircled by nearly 360 degrees of large windows and glass doors (including one



RPM	GPH	KNOTS	Range	dB(A)
900	0.4	7.8	11,330	63
1500	1.4	7.9	3,279	65
2100	3.8	10.3	1,575	69
2700	7.4	14.2	1,115	72
3300	12	19.7	954	75
3660	16	22	799	76

Seas: 2 ft. | Fuel: 1/2 full | Water: 1/2 full



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leading to the foredeck). Only the full-size refrigerator and the galley cabinetry in the aft corners block the view.

After breakfast on our second day, we left the dock to explore the natural side of the islands. With a draft of just over 3 feet, our powercat was ideally designed for gunkholing in shallow Bahamian waters. We swung by the famous wreck of the concrete ship *Sapona*, which sank off the South Island in 1926 and is now a popular dive site. We were happy to see that much of it had survived Hurricane Irma. Next, we ran down to Bimini's neighbor island, Cat Cay, which holds a private club with its own airstrip. We anchored off its ocean beach, lined with mansions, to swim in the pristine water, look for sea turtles (saw one!) and take a spin on the inflatable SUPs we carried on board. While both of the 53 PC's hulls include aft stairs and swim steps, our yacht was equipped with a large, optional hydraulic swim platform that made launching a SUP easy. The platform also has mounts to

hold the tender, keeping the flybridge clear.

After returning to the dock at the Big Game Club that evening, we cooked out on the flybridge, which had a wet bar with barbecue grill—a "must-have" option, in my opinion. This huge upper deck—with its U-shaped dining area, forward bench seating and aft sunpad—is ideally suited to dining and entertaining in privacy, even while in a marina. The al fresco dinner tasted great after our day in the sun.

The next morning, the seas had calmed to just 1 to 2 feet with light chop and a northeasterly breeze. Driving from the flybridge, the yacht handled beautifully, and made much tighter turns than I had imagined a catamaran could make. This maneuverable vessel is clearly ideal for an owner/operator.

In the calm conditions, we opened up the throttles all the way, pushing her to 3660 rpm, recording an average top speed of 22 knots. (Leopard says they clocked the boat at 25 knots.) The fuel consumption on the

yacht thoroughly impressed me, a real advantage of its powercat configuration and efficient Yanmar propulsion. At a cruise speed of 17.2 knots at 3000 rpm, it sipped just 9.4 gph total, and fuel use only increased to 16 gph at WOT. Leopard estimates the yacht's maximum range as an astounding 2,000 miles with 581 gallons on board.

The company's all-new design for the 53 PC made it a great platform for our quick jaunt to the Bahamas. The yacht more than proved its cruising capability in the process.

"Private sales of the Leopard 53 PC have exceeded expectations," Baker said. She added that half of the production of this model at Robertson & Caine would be the private version, and half would be designated for The Moorings charter fleet. This offers a unique opportunity for prospective owners to "try before they buy" while cruising in paradise.

Either way, the 53 PC makes an impression that lasts a lifetime. □