



Boat Review

By Tom Dove

Neel 45

A cruising trimaran that's as comfortable as it is quick



Eric Bruneel straddled the yellow line as he whipped the little Peugeot we were riding in deftly between a truck and an oncoming car on the road out of La Rochelle. He cut back into the right lane and quipped, "Life is too short to drive slow."

The Neel 45 trimaran is the product of this kind of thinking. Bruneel loves to sail across oceans, but he doesn't want to spend too much time doing it.

CONSTRUCTION

Everything about the Neel 45 is oriented toward crossing big water at high speed in safety and comfort. The hull, amas, deck and coachroof are all vacuum-bagged, foam-cored fiberglass for a strong, light structure. The interior furniture and bulkheads are laminated with honeycomb cores and everything that goes into the vessel must pass three tests: Is it strong? Is it necessary? Is it lightweight?

The plumbing and wiring are neatly installed. Engine access is outstanding, and there's plenty of space to move about in the "basement" (more about that in a moment) to maintain the various boat systems.

The interior is simply the finished laminate. This saves weight and, to my eye, looks just fine. A liner would look fancier and would probably save some building time, as finishing raw fiberglass takes much handwork. But Bruneel builds the boat at the same yard in La Rochelle, France, where he builds his racing boats, so he feels confident in the quality control.

Because the three hulls generate enough lateral resistance by themselves, the boat needs no keel or centerboards. This is a deceptively simple boat.

ON DECK

The running rigging consists of a double mainsheet and a couple of jib sheets, making the boat no more complex than a daysailer. Sailing downwind, you can move one mainsheet to a snatch block on the leeward ama to get better trim. Otherwise, the leeward line acts as a vang, and the windward one as a sheet. There is no traveller.

Bruneel has raced across a lot of oceans, so he has taken care to include good backup systems on the Neel 45. For example, the emergency tiller is not an afterthought, but a functional fitting that lets the skipper sit under cover in

the cockpit and steer manually as if nothing had happened to the main steering.

The cockpit is large, comfortable and simple, with an ample table and good seating. The helm seat is out in the open, and visibility in all directions is excellent.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Walk through the sliding door aft and you enter a straight passageway with staterooms and heads to either side. The galley is straight ahead in the middle of the boat. Forward of that, the space opens to a full-width saloon with a marvelous nav station to port and a big table to starboard. A third stateroom is a couple of steps down in the center hull forward.

The main staterooms are the two on the bridge deck, and both enjoy excellent views through big windows. Each has a double berth. The saloon also extends across the bridge deck with panoramic views in almost all directions. This is functional as well as attractive, since you can snuggle into the contoured nav seat, steer the boat by autopilot and simply enjoy the ride. You can't see the sails, so you'll get your exercise stepping outside occasionally to check the trim.

After the saloon, the best feature of the interior is the basement. A carpeted hatch in the passageway sole opens on to a ladder leading into the depths of the main hull. It is a huge space, suitable for a big workshop, in addition to food stowage, plus a generator, and you'd still have good all-around access to the main engine. You could even put a wine cellar down here.

Our test boat had a gray interior with accents of red-orange, which seems either dramatic or overdone, depending on your taste.

UNDER SAIL

Our test boat had crossed the Atlantic at an average speed of 10 knots. I have found that cruising multihulls rarely match their open-water speed potential when I test them on the Chesapeake, but the Neel 45 proved to be an exception. I quote my audio notes: "This is freakin' amazing. It's blowing 10-12 knots and the boat is doing 10 close-hauled, with no effort." As long as we watched the mainsail



The saloon, with sightlines in all directions, mimics that of a catamaran and is easy to access from the cockpit

trim, we tacked easily through less than 90 degrees.

When the breeze kicked up to 15 and then to 20, our speed touched 13 knots, with no extra work on the part of the crew. At 20 knots, we rolled up the Solent jib and went to the inner jib. Bruneel calls this his "first reef." He only reduces the mainsail when the wind is above 25 knots. The heel angle was a consistent five degrees at all times, with the windward ama flying just clear of the water. The photo boat was having trouble keeping up with us and we were

outrunning every sailing vessel in sight.

A strong sailor can manage everything on this boat manually, but most of us over the age of 50 will want the optional electric winch to control the mainsheet and halyards. There is a learning curve to figuring out linehandling sequences when maneuvering, as they sometimes differ from monohull or catamaran sailing.

Since Bruneel's aim was to make a boat that is comfortable at sea, as well as fast, I went to the inside nav station and steered from there for a while. Bruneel believes trimarans are

Our Take

PROS

- Fast
- Comfortable
- Quality construction
- Excellent ergonomics

CONS

- Learning curve to sailing it properly
- Needs power winches
- Interior is simple/plain

best for voyaging, because the motion is easier with less of the pounding and jerkiness that sometimes plagues catamarans. I found the ride through the three-foot chop we experienced was absolutely smooth and quiet.

UNDER POWER

With a single engine in the main hull, a cruising trimaran does not have the maneuverability of

a catamaran with engines in each hull. Still, I found the Neel to be more responsive than most monohulls, thanks to its narrow hulls. The boat stopped and backed with easy control inputs and the turning circle was just over one boatlength.

With the engine running at a 2,500 rpm cruise setting, I measured 9.5 knots of boat speed with a rather low 74 dBA sound level. The ride is so smooth it is easy to lose track of your speed until buoys and landmarks come up much sooner than expected. *Al*

Specifications

HEADROOM 6ft 8in // **BERTHS** 6ft 3in x 4ft 7in

LOA 44ft 3in // **LWL** 44ft 3in // **BEAM** 27ft 8in

DRAFT 3ft 7in // **DISPLACEMENT** 13,000lb

SAIL AREA 860ft² (100% FT)

FUEL/WATER/WASTE (GAL) 105/140/16

ENGINE 55hp Volvo Saildrive

ELECTRICAL 480AH (house); 70AH (engine)

DESIGNER Eric Bruneel with Joubert/Nivelt/Mercier

BUILDER/AGENT Neel Trimarans, La Rochelle, France, neel-trimarans.com/en

U.S. DISTRIBUTOR East Coast: Aeroyacht Ltd, 631-246-6448; West Coast: Catamaran Access, 510-469-3330

PRICE \$583,700

SAIL AREA-DISPLACEMENT RATIO 25

DISPLACEMENT-LENGTH RATIO 67

Performance

RACER

CRUISER



Conclusion

The Neel 45 is a breakthrough boat. It takes what the French have learned from years of record-setting voyages in multihulls and translates it into a true cruising vessel. To do this required expert engineering and careful construction with close attention to details, and that does not come cheap. This builder has mixed the ingredients properly and the result is a swift, exceptionally comfortable ocean cruiser that is easy to handle with a small crew.