

Catalina 27

The Catalina 27 offers great sailing at an affordable price and can make a great introduction to small-boat cruising



The Catalina 27 is one of the two most successful Catalinas of all time; the other is its big sister, the Catalina 30. More than 6,500 Catalina 27s were built between 1971 and 1991. Plenty of these boats still gather at regattas on Chesapeake Bay and in other regions and form a lively one-design class.

Three owners independently described these Catalinas to me as "Chevrolets"—an analogy for a conventionally constructed, mass produced, unsophisticated, reliable, and easily modified boat. They're also a great value for money.

Under sail

The Catalina 27 has a reputation as a good performer in light to moderate air, but the day of my test sail dawned with a rip-snorting 25 knots, gusting higher. This will be entertaining, I thought, as we motored out into the Severn River.

We set the full main and a 100 percent blade jib and soon reefed the main. While the boat was controllable even with the rail down, reducing sail area increased both our speed and our comfort. It never felt out of control, and the rudder never ventilated or became unmanageable; it was a fine performance for a boat this size.

The boat tacked through a narrow angle, footed fast, and gave a smooth ride. The calculated comfort value is higher than that of the new Catalina 320, and its capsize screening value is lower. Thus it feels much larger than 27 feet.

Sailing ability is this boat's forte. It's easy to maneuver and steer, with a wide "groove" of performance. It would be a forgiving boat for a new skipper honing his sailing skills. Powering was uneventful, as it should be with the 9-horsepower Evinrude outboard. This pushed the boat at over 5 knots and gave reasonable control in reverse. Owners say a long-shaft model is helpful in rough water, but is not essential. John Potvin, owner of our test boat, had installed a remote throttle and shift in the cockpit, which

The Catalina 27, of which 6,500 were built between 1971 and 1991, is a "best buy" for novice cruisers and racers.

made handling under power much like a boat with an inboard.

On deck

Any 27-footer will be a bit snug for more than three people, but the cockpit and deck layout of this one are quite workable. Potvin, like many other owners, had rerigged his boat, leading halyards back to the cockpit, so we could raise and reef the main easily without going on deck. Most owners have installed roller-furling genoas for convenience when cruising, but this reduces performance slightly on the racecourse. We had the standard rig; the optional tall rig has a short bowsprit.

Three of us were comfortable in the cockpit, and climbing over the cabintop was the easiest way to go forward, although the side decks can be used by those with small feet. I liked the big cockpit lockers, which will swallow fenders, sailbags, and other bulky items.

Three different deck molds were used over the production run. The original 1971 deck was changed in 1980/81 and again in 1983. The variations are subtle: a redesign of the companionway hatch, removal of the cabintop toerail, a redesign of the forward end of the cabin, and improved ventilation. The anti-skid design on later models is also better.

Some owners might think they want a wheel, but I cannot imagine why. The tiller is simple and effective, and it fits the philosophy of the boat.

Down below

There are two variations of the interior. The more common "traditional" layout has settees to port and starboard and a bulkhead-mounted fold-down table, while the "dinette" version has a table permanently mounted to starboard. The traditional version has more space to move around below, while the dinette converts to a sizable single or snug double berth. If you like having a surface for chart work, the dinette version might be preferable.

The Catalina 27 sails well and is forgiving (above); side decks are narrow, so most go forward over the cabin (below).





The "traditional" layout features twin settees and a fold-down bulkhead table (above), plus a small galley aft (left).

Later models have an enclosed head, better ventilation, and slightly improved stowage, as well as higher-grade cabinetry. The earlier boats have headroom throughout more of the forward cabin, the result of a small change in the cabin-sole height.

Advertising hyperbole and reality collide in this cabin. The company brochure lists the headroom as 6'1", but that's only under the hatch; I measured 5'10" in the center of the saloon. It also describes the boat as having "sleeping accommodation for

The "dinette" version features a larger galley (below left). A tiller probably works best on this type of boat (below right).

six," which is a serious overstatement. The V-berth is short and sharply pointed, making it suitable only for children or, at best, one average-size adult. The settees in the main cabin are 6' long, so they are the sleeping place of choice for grownups. There's also a quarterberth, which would be good at sea and could be greatly improved with a small port into the cockpit, but it often becomes stowage space in the real world of cruising.

The galley has a small sink, an inadequately insulated icebox (typical of most production boats of the era), and a two-burner stove; some boats have an oven. This is a prime area for upgrading with a nonpressurized alcohol stove, and the overall working space is quite good. Stowage throughout the cabin is better than on most newer boats of this size.



This is a very nice compact cruiser for a couple, plus perhaps a small child or two. You won't want to live aboard for months, but two weeks can be delightful, and the boat's sailing qualities will let you roam anywhere on the coast.

Hull and engine

Few would describe the Catalina 27 as beautiful, but designers Frank Butler and Bob Finch gave it pleasant, conventional lines with a bit of a bustle aft. The 1988 brochure shows an optional 3'-draft wing keel, which was the fad of the time, but most were delivered with the standard 4' fin. An optional 3'5" fin on early models was popular in very shoal areas like Barnegat Bay. The ballast is bolted on externally, and the bolts on pre-1978 models should be checked carefully for corrosion.

These boats are equipped with a range of powerplants, but the two basic versions are outboard (in a lazaret well) and inboard (Atomic 4 gasoline and Universal, Fetter, Volvo and Albin diesels, in that approximate order of popularity). The inboard-engine installation is quite tight, and maintenance may be difficult.

The outboard version would be my choice, as it is simpler and significantly faster under sail. The outboard version also has more stowage space since the long engine compartment under the companionway steps is unused.

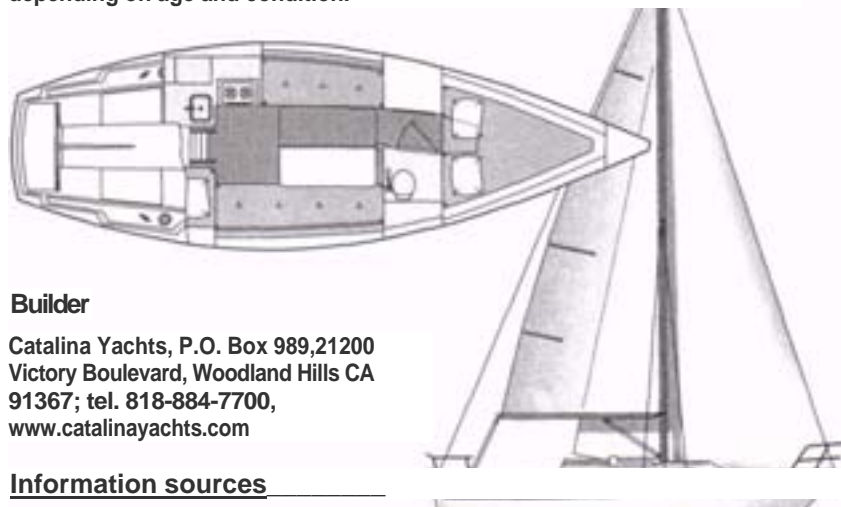
Construction

Catalinas of this vintage have solid-glass hulls and plywood-cored decks. Lay-up quality was average, and concealed areas are not as neatly finished as they are on today's boats, but the hull is certainly strong enough. The interior is finished with a fiberglass liner, which makes access to the inside of the hull difficult but creates a nice appearance and is easy to maintain. Owners report that leaks around the windows are common but are easily fixed with caulking and that the hull/deck joint causes no problems.

Hull blistering is rare in most models, but has occurred on boats built during the early 1980s, when Catalina experimented with a different gelcoat; most owners simply pop and fill the blisters as they appear. The deck cores are subject to water penetration and rot via chainplates and deck fittings if they are not caulked regularly. The marginal early-model shroud and jibstay chainplates

BUILDER'S SPECIFICATIONS

LOA 26'10", LWL 21'9", Beam 8'10", Draft 4', Displacement approximately 6,850 pounds, Ballast 2,700 pounds, Sail Area 340 square feet, Water 18 gallons, Power outboard or gasoline or diesel inboard. Price \$4,000-\$13,000, depending on age and condition.



Builder

Catalina Yachts, P.O. Box 989, 21200
Victory Boulevard, Woodland Hills CA
91367; tel. 818-884-7700,
www.catalinayachts.com

Information sources

International Catalina 27 Association,
14155 Hamlin Street, Van Nuys, CA
91401; www.catalina27.org, and
www.mainsheet.net. Wayne Simpson,
the director, is the recognized guru on these boats. Annual dues of \$20 get you
a subscription to "Mainsheet," a professionally produced magazine for Catalina
owners.

Chesapeake Catalina 27 Fleet 8, 1519 Gordon Cove Circuit, Annapolis, MD
21403; www.geocities.com/Yosemite/4249/index.html. Editor John Potvin
publishes an excellent monthly newsletter called "Teltales."

Calculated data

PHRF rating	204 (standard rig)
Displacement-length ratio	297 (moderately high)
Sail area-displacement ratio	15.1 (moderately low)
Ballast-displacement ratio	0.39 (moderate)
Limiting hull speed	6.2 knots
Capsize screening value	1.86 (US Sailing considers a value below 2 desirable for offshore operation)
Comfort value (Ted Brewer)	25 (high for this size boat)

and backing plates were beefed up in later years, and any buyer should check to see that this critical upgrade has been performed.

Any 20-year-old boat will probably need rewiring, a fairly easy job on this vessel. A new wiring harness is available, and a panel with 10 to 12 breakers to replace the original 6-fuse panel should be about right. The icebox should be removed and reinsulated, and all through-hull fittings should be checked and any gate valves replaced with proper seacocks as needed.

The Catalina factory maintains a stock of many replacement parts, and the network of owners can advise a new owner on virtually any repair or

upgrade. This is one very good reason Catalina sailors show such strong brand loyalty.

Conclusion

Catalina defines the term "production boat," and the strong and weak points of the 27 reflect the era it was born in. The boat is fun to sail and arguably the best small cruiser available for a new sailor who wants to try the sport without making a major commitment.

With fleets around the country, active support from the builder, organized racing and cruising, plentiful boats from which to choose, and an exceptional level of technical knowledge stored among its skippers, ***the Catalina 27 is a Best Buy.***