

■ USED BOAT EVALUATION ■ BY JOHN KRETSCHMER

Used Boat Notebook

SWAN 38

A famous pedigree at a fraction of the cost

We were hard on the wind, sailing over a long, low Gulf Stream swell, when I remarked to my young friend and crew that I didn't particularly like the rapid motion of the cruising catamaran we were delivering. My comment triggered a spirited conversation about boats and designers. When I mentioned that Olin Stephens was still my favorite designer, my friend responded with a blank look. I was dumbfounded. *Stormy Weather, Dorade, Finisterre* aside, he was also ignorant of Stephens' impressive list of production boats, including the Tartan 37, She 34 and the classic Swan 44. Fresh from college and clearly infected with the sailing disease, my friend was intrigued by the new breed of multihulls for cruising and anything drawn by Bruce Farr for racing. His concept of the sailing world was neatly divided.

Division of age in boats when the user was not so stark, when a catamaran was not thought of as an ultimate compromise but as a dual-purpose boat. The early and mid-'60s S&S-designed Nautor Swans, especially the 38 and 44, seemed to be near-perfect boats to me. The Swan 38 was introduced in 1975 and, with 116 boats built, it was one of Nautor's most successful production boats before being phased out in 1979. For years I admired Swans from a distance, impressed that although most people bought them for racing under the IOR rule and in Swan regattas, they always seemed to turn up at the Atlantic crossroads of Bermuda, Antigua, Florida, Panama, Gibraltar. These were definitely oceangoing boats.

Recently, I have delivered several Swans, including a 1975-built 38, which I sailed 1,000 miles from the Virgin Islands to Ft. Lauderdale. I discovered a few shortcomings, but I also came to admire the weatherly nature of Stephens' Swan 38 design and the quality of Nautor's construction. A top-of-the-line Swan 38

straddles the self-imposed upper limit of \$100,000 for boats reviewed in this column; however, it also reflects a sound value on the used boat market.

First impressions

The Swan 38 is a handsome boat and a vintage Olin Stephens design. Low-slung, the hull sports a bit of tumblehome, a fine entry and a pinched stern. In profile, the wedge deck and trunkhouse that naturally blend into the cockpit coaming immediately give the boat away as a Swan. The rig is relatively high-aspect and, as with all Swans, the mast section is beefy and the deck hardware is first-rate.

South of the waterline, the Swan 38 features a deep fin keel and full skeg-hung rudder. When you see the boat out of the water you realize that there is a lot more boat below the waterline than above. The 38 has a hull shape that is almost incapable of pounding. Coupled with a high ballast-to-displacement ratio, the 38 is extremely seaworthy and can carry sail upwind when other boats can't. Indeed, like many S&S designs of the period, upwind sailing is the Swan 38's strong suit, although the crew should be prepared to get wet if there is a sea running.

Construction

Nautor, a small division of a parent company that is primarily in the paper business, has been building boats since

1966 at its plant near Pietarsaari, Finland, on the Gulf of Bothnia, just 250 miles below the Arctic Circle. Nautor achieved prominence 30 years ago when it was selected by custom builder Palmer Johnson to be its production yard for the new S&S-designed 43. Nautor has since built more than 1,600 boats, ranging from 36 feet to 112 feet. From the beginning, Nautor created well-engineered and well-executed boats that have stood up to the whims of Neptune and the tests of time. Any used 38s are at least 20 years old and many are 25. Yet from a construction standpoint, excluding the teak decks, most are still in excellent condition.

The hull of the 38 is solid fiberglass, reinforced with several full-length longitudinal stringers. A steel beam is laminated into the hull on the centerline. This forms the base of the maststep and also supports the keel bolts. The ballast is lead. The decks were usually balsa-cored, although some were foam. They are almost always covered in teak. Teak decks are the single biggest source of problems on old Swans, including the 38. To keep the weight down, thin teak was used, only 3/8 inch thick in some cases. After many years of sanding and chemical maintenance, there just isn't enough teak left when the fasteners need taking up and when seams are ever-widening. The hull and deck joint is through-bolted, incorporating a nearly full-length aluminum toerail. The joint is also fiberglassed from the inside; it almost never leaks.

What to look for

Start by looking for a Swan 38 with a new teak deck. This will, of course, be reflected in the price but

considering that a new teak deck could easily cost \$20,000 and possibly more, avoiding the aggravation of the job might be worth the money. There is nothing older-looking than worn-out teak decks. While subdeck delamination is rare, although by no means unknown, the problem is usually cosmetic. The first sign of deck problems are popped bungs and exposed fastenings, followed by peeled caulking and, finally, lifting teak. If water has permeated into the balsa core, then it can separate from the fiberglass deck skin. The result is delamination and an expensive deck refit project. Before you sign on the dotted line, a competent marine surveyor should carefully examine the decks of a Swan 38. If you choose to tackle redecking an older 38, be sure to specify a type of teak deck that requires a minimum of fastenings. By the way, I have seen a Swan 38 with fiberglass decks and Treadmaster, a synthetic nonskid covering.

Other problems associated with the 38 come more from age than engineering flaws. Of course, the standing rigging should be carefully examined and, if original, should probably be replaced. The aluminum toerail may be pitted or corroded; this will not be easy to replace because the joint below is glassed over. Replacing a small section, however, is possible. There is also a good likelihood that some of the portlights may be old and need rebedding.

Down below, the original, so-called pipe berths forward. Many 38s have retrofitted permanent berths. Check this joinerwork fully; some is certainly better than others. Also, an extra water tank



often been added under the forward berths, so be sure to carefully check this installation.

Checking the sail locker, do not allow a vast sail inventory to impress you. More likely than not, these are tired racing sails.

On deck

The Swan 38 cockpit is functional and deceptively comfortable. The wheel is well aft with a short cable run to the quadrant, which, by the way, is very cumbersome to access from the aft cabin. The helmsperson has a nice perch, level at any angle of heel and isolated from the sail controls. By design the cockpit is divided into steering and working stations. Though many old 38s have been converted to bluewater cruisers, this layout is not as awkward as it may seem at first. My experience is that cruising sailors rarely sit behind the wheel—the autopilot is almost always driving. The 38's cockpit is very efficient for trimming sails.

Double lifelines were standard-issue, although the original stanchions could be taller and the bases better-supported. I like teak decks underfoot, especially in rough conditions. There are teak handrails on the low deckhouse and if it hasn't been done, consider adding mast rails. Unless the 38 you are considering has been altered for cruising, chances are that the halyards terminate at the mast. I am not a great fan of leading every control line to the cockpit, although the 38's near-flush decks lend themselves well to this

purpose. Working the deck is an integral aspect of sailing and keeps you in touch with the rhythm of the boat. Moving all the way forward, the stem fitting is poorly designed for serious anchoring and will need to be retrofitted if you are considering serious cruising.

Down below

A frequent complaint about older Swans is the fire-stationlike main companionways. While steep, the bridgedeck companionway on the 38 is not quite as severe as other Swans. Typical of the times, the accommodations seem cramped by today's standards. The layout features either pipe berths or a converted cabin forward followed by the head to port. The saloon has pilot berths, straight settees and a center-line table with drop leaves. On the 38 I delivered from St. Thomas, one pilot berth had been converted to a cabinet for an entertainment center and it made the saloon seem even smaller. The pint-sized galley is to starboard. The three-burner Flavel stove is sandwiched in place and there is not much counter space. The forward-facing nav station is opposite, with a good-sized chart desk and the electrical panel above. The aft cabin is tucked in under the bridgedeck and cockpit sole and has a single bunk to port and a double to starboard.

Lack of headroom often hurts the 38 on the used boat market. Anyone 6 feet or taller will need to bend his or her neck when moving forward and bend completely over moving aft. Despite the small space, the teak interior woodworking is rich and light, giving the 38 a friendly, homey feel. There are handholds in the logical places, plenty of storage lockers and four excellent sea berths, which reflect the sailing purpose of the Swan 38.

Engine

The standard engine was an underpowered Buhk 20-horsepower diesel. An agile sailor, Stephens figured that the diesel would be used for easing in and out of the slip and little else. He seems to have been right, for most 38s still have the original engine and many have low hours. The fuel tank holds only 30 gallons, which gives a realistic range of about 200 miles in flat seas. Access to the engine and stuffing box is good. I spent an entire day powering on the delivery. Running at 1,800 rpms, which sounded right and vibrated the least, we kicked along at about 5 1/2 knots. With a little assist from the 150-percent genoa, we quickly shot up to nearly

7 knots, although the true wind was probably less than 5 knots.

Under sail

We shot out of the Virgin Islands under full sail with a Force 5 easterly just aft of the beam. Although the boat had been in charter service and needed some attention, I was immediately impressed by the way she handled. The steering was tight and true and the boat tracked nicely. The seas built quickly, reaching 6 to 8 feet, but the 38's motion was rock steady. Dropping below, I might have been in a library; needless to say, the off watch slept well. She began to roll a bit when the winds moved further aft and I longed for a spinnaker. Instead, I dropped the main and poled out the headsail and, although our speed dropped to around 6 knots, the autopilot steered the boat effortlessly for the next two days. As a delivery skipper, I have learned that boats with easy motion generally have fewer problems than boats that battle the sea.

After the day of calms, the winds returned from the northwest, a direct head wind, and the Swan 38 was in her element. We rolled in a bit of headsail and sailed close to the wind. At less than 45 degrees, we sliced through the water. We didn't need the autopilot; with the sails trimmed properly, the boat steered herself for long stretches. Our maximum upwind speed was less than 7 knots but the motion was sweet despite a short, choppy sea. Sheets of green water however, routinely doused anybody in the cockpit. A spray dodger, which we didn't have, should be standard equipment. The winds continued to clock and soon we were reaching again, touching 8 knots occasionally. I spied the condo towers lining Port Everglades on the morning of the sixth day; we had averaged almost 160 miles per day without raising a sweat or losing any sleep.

Conclusion

With prices ranging from less than \$70,000 for a boat that needs decks and general upgrading, to around \$115,000 for a boat in excellent condition, a used Swan 38 can be purchased for a fraction of its replacement value. Retrofitting may be costly and aggravating. In the end, however, you will have a high-quality boat with a true pedigree, and one that will be desirable if you ever choose to sell. I don't think you will want to sell; for the Swan 38 is an unusually fine sailing boat, capable of crossing any ocean or offering its crew a few hours of solace out on the bay.

SAILING Magazine's Value Guide The Swan 38 (5-sailboat rating system)

PRICE: Swan 38 prices can be quite attractive. For example, you can buy a 1978 Tartan 37 for around \$60,000 and a 1978 Swan 38 for around \$80,000.

DESIGN QUALITY: This is a classic S&S design. The design pedigree is part of the value in owning a Swan.

CONSTRUCTION QUALITY: The construction of the 38 would warrant a 5 if not for the problems with the teak decks. Overall, hull construction is simple and solid. The boats have held up well over the years. Top-quality gear was used throughout its production run.

USER-FRIENDLINESS: Although originally designed for racing, the overall sweet sailing characteristics make the boat a pleasure to sail. With its IOR rig, it can be a lot of work cranking in headsails.

SAFETY: The overall quality construction makes the Swan 38 a safe boat. The helm is rather prone to green water that frequently sloshes aboard.

TYPICAL CONDITION: This would warrant a higher rating if not for the deck problems. If the decks have been replaced, used 38s are often in excellent condition.

REFITTING: The 38 is not a particularly easy boat to work on. The deck, diesel and rigging are high on the retrofit list.

SUPPORT: Support is through the five Nautor agents located around the country. Because most 38s are so old, there is not much support by agents interested in selling new boats. You can reach Nautor direct at: (Tel) 358 6 760 1111, (fax) 358 6 788 7364, or online at www.nautor-swain.com

AVAILABILITY: The 38 was one of Nautor's largest production runs and many boats were imported into the United States. There seem to be more boats on the East Coast.

INVESTMENT AND RESALE: The Swan 38 is a sound used boat value. When you search for comparable quality in a newer boat, you will be looking at spending much more money.



Swan 38 Price Data

Prices of Swan 38s can range from less than \$70,000 for one that will require a deck job to approximately \$115,000 for one in excellent condition.

