

POWERPLAY

CATAMARANS



Boat Review for PowerPlay 56

“Merengue”

Story and pictures by Bruce Hodgens

This was an offer too good to refuse. James Dewing, designer and builder of the PowerPlay range of Power Cats in Townsville, Australia, asked us if we would like to join him for a long weekend aboard his latest 56 foot (17 metre) power cat for a shake down cruise. It didn't take me too long to come up with an answer, let me tell you. This latest cat “Merengue” was launched 2 weeks ago for an American client who was planning on basing it in the Caribbean. The contract stated the motors had to have at least 60 hours on the clock and done an extended passage to ensure all the “bugs” were ironed out. James planned a trip to the Palm Group of islands to the north of Townsville on Friday afternoon, then a run out to the reef for a day trip on either Saturday or Sunday, and after a bit more cruising around the Palms, a return home on Monday. The forecast was looking fantastic for most of the weekend, but a strong southeaster was due Monday. We arranged to meet at 3.30pm on Friday at the Breakwater Marina.

Finally Friday arrived. We had stocked the boat Thursday night, and it was all fuelled up ready to go. When we arrived at the marina James was already there with his wife and 3 children. Barb and I loaded our gear and we were throwing the ropes off by 3.45pm. The plan was to get to an anchorage in North East Bay on Great Palm Island. We had only been there once because it is often too exposed, but with a perfect light sea breeze it would be fine. The cat was tied up to the fuel dock, so it was really easy to back it off and spin it around with one motor in reverse and the other in forward, and then off. Once we got into open water James and I started playing with all the toys (GPS, chart plotter, radar, auto pilot and all the other usual instruments). We soon had the course plotted out on the chart plotter. It was a total of 35 nautical miles, and since we were running in new motors we figured a nice easy 2 hour passage. With the twin Yanmar 370 HP ponies down below it would nearly be possible to do that run in an hour when they were run in. The trip down was smooth. The kids were watching a DVD in the saloon, the women were chatting, I was keeping an eye on the autopilot and our course, and James was fussing around the engine rooms, genset and water maker to see if all was well.

An hour and a half later we were passing to the west of Albino Rocks looking at bits of a boat way above the high water mark and wondering how they got there. With the chart plotter zoomed in we could steer around Paluma Rock and Hayman Rock, and then cut in close to Electra Head before entering North East Bay. There are a couple of good sized bommies in close to the beach, but sitting up so high in the flybridge made it easy to spot them and drop anchor in about 8 metres of water on a nice sandy bottom. Anchoring was easy with the anchor winch control in the flybridge, and excellent visibility of the anchor and chain due to the open weave trampoline. We then went down to the foredeck and put the bridle on and let out a bit more chain with the remote deck switch mounted next to the anchor locker. Too easy!

Now for the part that I was particularly keen to try out. When James made the first power cat, a 12.5 metre version, he put a spa on the front deck. He took plenty of “stick” from all quarters about having a spa on a boat, but every client since then has had one included in their layout. James turned the pump on, and it was soon filling up. Time to get a couple of beers and relax!

By the time I got back the women and kids had commandeered the spa complete with an ice bucket, bubbly and glasses (for the adults) and cold cans of Coke for the kids. The spa fitted 5 okay but I couldn't see James and I fitting in as well. All we could hope for is that the kids would get bored with it and leave, but that wasn't looking too promising any time soon. Fortunately the forward decks are huge and there is plenty of room to sit. It was so relaxing we stayed on the front deck until sundowners had well and truly finished. What a great end to the day.

After showers (hot and cold water is plumbed to all quarters) we prepared dinner and watched a DVD on the large flat screen TV mounted in the entertainment corner panel. It had been a hot, humid day but with a fully air-conditioned boat it was very comfortable. James said that they put multiple units in the boats with ducting to all areas. This means you can have different temperatures in each hull and the saloon. The best part is they are very quiet; in fact the split systems at home are noisier. The 12 Kva Fischer Panda genset in the starboard engine room was barely discernible as well. All this really spoils you when you are used to sleeping in the tropics on a boat fighting for every bit of air through open hatches, only to have it rain and make it even more humid.

We went to sleep in the guest cabin in the forward starboard hull. Access to the hulls is via large wide steps with full headroom. There is absolutely no need to watch your head as you go down or up. All the PowerPlay cats have 2 forward cabins, with queen size berths running across the boat. This means that there is room on either side of the bed for carpeted access steps. There is also plenty of room for changing and plenty of storage space. Each forward cabin has a shower through the bulkhead, and a separate head to the rear of the cabin. Both areas are quite large and finished in two-pack paint making it very easy to maintain. The walls and ceiling are lined with foam backed vinyl, and timber trims that contrasts nicely. Plenty of good quality lighting and high headroom makes for a large open, airy cabin. If you don't want the air-conditioning on, there are plenty of ventilation hatches on the deck and hull side. We slept like babies but I think all the bubbly had something to do with that?

In the morning the patter of little feet on the deck woke us, thankfully at a respectable hour – 6.30am. It was only a short swim to the beach so the 2 boys and I dived in and swam to the beach. The sea was calm and the water really clear. This part of Palm Island is only really accessible from the sea. The island is quite mountainous and in places has thick tropical vegetation. Mount Bentley is 546 metres high and there are 2 other peaks over 400 metres. The beach is idyllic, wide and sandy with thick vegetation to the edge of the sand. There are small creeks that flow into the bay from the nearby mountains. We went for a walk along the beach to do some beachcombing and exploring. There is something very relaxing about being on a tropical beach with no other sign of civilisation, but then still having the comforts and convenience of a boat like the PowerPlay to return to. From the beach “Merengue” looked fast just anchored there. The design team at PowerPlay have certainly worked hard to develop the design of the boat to this stage. Nothing looks out of place, and the design will be ageless.

By the time we finished our walk and swam back to the boat the rest of the troops were up and about, with breakfast under way. With 4 adults and 3 children in the saloon, there was no hint of overcrowding. It is huge. There is a large U shaped settee around a table that will comfortably seat 8 people. The upholstery is doeskin suede, with the table and bench tops of acrylic granite (Corian). The galley up is spacious with plenty of bench space, microwave, two-burner stove, hot and cold water and a full size domestic fridge/freezer. With a 240V genset, it was possible to use the microwave and any of the other smaller electric appliances. There is plenty of cupboard space and under seat storage.

While we were having breakfast, a decision was made to go out to the reef for the day and return to the Palms that night. Rib Reef was 18 nautical miles so after cleaning up breakfast we secured the boat and set course for a great day at the reef.

We were soon underway and cruising at 20 knots with Barb driving the boat. Nicole and the kids were lying on the trampolines watching the waves break on the bow when a pod of dolphins started playing off the port bow. The kids were jumping up and down in their excitement, and talked about the dolphins for the rest of the day. When we arrived at the reef, we entered the lagoon and anchored in 10 metres of water. The water was calm and the visibility was fantastic. Everybody donned snorkelling gear and went to explore the bommies nearby. When we returned to the boat, the ladder made access to the rear-boarding platform easy. It would also be very easy to bring a dinghy alongside because the platforms are very large and at just the right height for dinghies. The large rubbing strip would ensure that no damage would be done to the boat.

After snorkelling it was nice to be able to come out the water and sit in the large shaded cockpit without worrying about the tropical sun boring a hole through your head. In the heat of the tropics, having plenty of shade outdoors is essential, but I guess if it were raining in a colder climate the protection of the large roof would be equally important. The comfortably upholstered seats in the cockpit area, with room for a table, are great for entertaining. With the wide folding door to the saloon open it makes it one large living area. Extending out behind the cockpit area is a large rear deck that can accommodate game fishing seat, dinghy storage or just a sun deck.

After three snorkelling expeditions and lunch we up anchored and headed back to Pelorus Island for the night. Sundowners on the foredeck were once again a feature of the afternoon only this time the sunset over the mountains of Hinchinbrook Island was spectacular. Needless to say, the spa was put into action again.

Sunday morning arrived with a beautiful blue sky and a dead calm sea yet again (beautiful one day, perfect the next as per usual in North Queensland). We decided to go to Zoe Bay and do the walk up South Zoe Creek to the Zoe Falls. The distance from Pelorus Island to Zoe Bay was 14 nautical miles and we were there in 45 minutes. Zoe Bay is spectacular with Mount Bowen rising to 1120 metres immediately behind Zoe Bay. The beach has magnificent white sand stretching 3 kilometres to North Zoe Creek. We anchored in the southern corner of the bay and headed up the track with plenty of water and snacks. The walk is relatively easy and follows the South Zoe Creek up to a waterfall where there is a waterhole safe for swimming. Jungle Perch seemed tame and almost allowed you to touch them. The cool fresh water was refreshing after the hot humid walk through the rainforest.

There were families from two other powerboats there as well, so while the men talked boats, the woman and the kids played in the swimming hole. Late afternoon after taking plenty of photos of the view from the top of the waterfall to the bay below we returned to the boat and the families from the other two boats came over to join us for sundowners. We had a total of 15 people onboard spread between the spa on the foredeck and the cockpit and there was easily room for another 15. The other two boats were flybridge cruisers and their owners had never contemplated getting a power catamaran. After seeing the amount of room on a 58ft by 25ft catamaran and comparing fuel consumption and cruising speeds they were won over, especially with diesel prices well over a dollar per litre. The added benefits of stability at anchor and steaming were a bonus. When one of the other cruiser owners enquired about the price of the PowerPlay 58 he was mumbling into his drink, "I paid more for my 48 foot flybridge than that".

Monday morning we headed back to Little Pioneer Bay on Orpheus Island for one more snorkel before heading home. We picked up a Marine Park mooring and had a fantastic couple of hour's snorkelling. After lunch it was time to head for home. The strong southeast wind that was forecast for the late afternoon turned up a little bit early. While the islands protected us, it was no problem, but James and I knew it was going to be very rough across the "paddock" to Magnetic Island. However we had no choice because the strong wind warning would last for days.

As we entered the open water at 18 knots we fully expected to have to pull the throttles back. We were punching into a really short 2 - 2.5m swell. James went below to make sure everything was stowed properly and that everyone was comfortable for the one hour that it would take us to clear the rough water. He came back to the flybridge and said that the music was on and they were all sitting around the table playing cards, and asking, "what was all the fuss about?" We were angling at about 20 degrees to the waves to give us a direct course to Townsville and at that speed the boat was handling it very well. Every now and again we would get a really steep back off a wave and we would pull the throttles back to slow it down, but after awhile we gave up on doing that. It is amazing how another 20 foot of boat length improves sea handling. The power cat was longer and heavier than our sailing cat and just punched through the seas effortlessly. Halfway across the paddock we were amazed to see Barb up on the flybridge asking if we wanted a coffee. Once we got into the lee of Magnetic Island the waves dropped down to a short chop and we could get up to 24 knots for a comfortable trip home.

Well it was certainly a great weekend. The PowerPlay 58 performed well. This boat looks great, performs brilliantly, is very fuel-efficient compared to monohulls, doesn't roll around, and has huge amounts of room. What more could you ask for? The next 2 boats are under construction; one has just come out of the moulds a few weeks ago (52 footer) and the next one is just being started. Orders from overseas have remained strong despite the strength of the Aussie dollar, and PowerPlay Catamarans have several boats on order for local and Australian buyers as well. They offer 3 models; a 45, 52 and 56 footer, with a variety of layouts to suit both charter and owner use. More details can be found on their excellent website at <http://www.powerplaycatamarans.com.au>.

LWL	58 ft (17 m)
BWL	25 feet (7.5 m)
Draft	3ft 3" (1 metre)
Displacement	35,840 lbs (16,000 kgs)
Motors	2 x 370 HP Yanmars
Fuel	3,000 litres/1000Nm range
Water	800 litres
Speed 2100 RPM	18 knots
Max speed 3200 RPM	28.5 knots