

Gunboat 55

This new high performance cruiser from Gunboat stirs passions and imaginations and might be the ultimate ride for couples who want it all by George Day





Gunboat 55



The new Gunboat 55 *Rainmaker* was moored to a floating dock right below the outdoor bar at Newport, R.I.'s 41 North marina and something unusual was happening. People with drinks in their hands kept stopping by to ask, "What kind of boat is that? It's amazing."

Then one brash guy and his friends tried us with the question, "Permission to come aboard?"

Well, why not. So, he and his two friends took off their shoes and climbed up into the expansive cockpit and plainly gaped in awe. The brash guy just stood there with his arms wide and said, "This is it. When I cash out, this is exactly what I need."

The uninvited visitors were soon on their way back to the bar as we unmoored *Rainmaker* and headed across Newport Harbor in search of wind.

Lauren Battaile, Gunboat's media

and PR Manager, said, "You know, I have been sitting on the boat all day and that just keeps happening. People have this incredible reaction to the boat. It's amazing."

ALL ABOUT SAILING

Rainmaker is the first of the new Gunboat 55 series of high tech, high performance cruising cats that are being built in Gunboat's relatively new factory in Wanchese, North Carolina. Conceived by Gunboat's founder and CEO Peter Johnstone and designed by legendary British multihull designer Nigel Irens, the 55 is something entirely new in the Gunboat line. But, it does have built into its DNA all that Peter and his team have learned in the last 12 years of building more than 20 Gunboats.

At its most basic level, the new 55 is a sailing marvel. We found a bit of breeze off Newport but not much to start with. We hoisted the big, full battened mainsail then rolled out the screecher and tried to get her moving. It was blowing all of five knots but that didn't stop

Rainmaker from sailing at nearly five knots on a beam reach.

Finally the breeze came up and we were able to jibe and head up the bay. At 10 knots of wind the 55 reached along at 8.8 knots. The boat's acceleration in the puffs was immediately noticeable as the speedo started to climb rapidly.

After a few miles of reaching at increasingly higher speeds, we rolled up the screecher, hoisted the self-tacking jib and headed back toward Newport hard on the wind. And, we were not disappointed by her upwind sailing performance, either. In the eight to 10 knots of breeze we were sailing handily at seven or more.

Unlike the previous Gunboats, the new 55 does not have a forward cockpit where all the sheets, halyards and control lines run to stoppers and winches. Instead, on the 55 all lines and controls lead inside the cabin just forward of the helm and just aft of the mast. The cabin has a large sliding door going forward so you can get to the foredeck or the mast right from the helm.

One person can handle all sail hoists and trims right from this inside position. As we were deploying, jibbing and rolling up the screecher, one person—*Rainmaker's* captain Chris Bailet—handled the lines while I steered. One of the two autopilots could have been doing my job, so Chris could have handled the sails by himself.

Like all Gunboats, the 55 has centerboards that greatly improve the boat's sailing characteristics, particularly upwind. But in the 55, instead of having vertical daggerboards that run through the hulls and emerge through the side decks, the 55's centerboards fold neatly into board housings in the hulls beneath the floors. If you didn't know they were there, you would never see them.

The 55 is a hydraulic marvel. The centerboards are lowered and raised by hydraulic rams and these are run by push buttons at the helm. The angles of the boards are visible on the digital screens at the helm so you always know how much draft you have and how much drag. And, the ability to deploy only as much board as you need really helps balance the helm.

The mainsheet is trimmed hydraulically, too. It is incredibly convenient for the helmsman to be able to trim the big sail with one finger while steering. An added safety benefit, particularly on a light cruising cat with a large mainsail, is the ability to dump the mainsheet and thus the power in the sail instantly with the emergency hydraulic release button just forward of the helm.

Visibility from the helm and from the winches just forward is amazing. The front of the saloon has huge safety glass windows and the glass sliding doors in the middle. Overhead there is a huge moon roof that hydraulically slides back in the cabin top when the weather is fair or can be closed while still providing a clear view of the sails. This is the best visibility of sails you will find on any boat with an inside steering station.



For the few hours we had *Rainmaker* out on the bay, we sailed by every other boat that we found yet aside from the instances of acceleration, the boat's motion was almost imperceptible. Only when you looked aft at the wakes flowing off the sterns did you realize that you were indeed sailing at nine knots in 11 knots of breeze.

The 55 is intended to be a live aboard boat for a couple who want to cruise extensively or even make a circumnavigation. The goal is to have a boat that will regularly log 300-mile days and in the right conditions knock off even more. Irens designed hulls that are extremely efficient so the boat continues to accelerate as the wind increases and does not have speed thresholds that become barriers to performance until you get up in the 20 knot range.

A lot of

Gunboat owners enjoy racing their boats and these high and easily reachable top speeds truly add to the thrill of sailing in competitive situations. Yet, even when passage-making the 55 will show a high average speed while remaining comfortable and unstressed. A 300-mile day is an average speed of 12.5 knots and this is very achievable in the 55 we sailed.





OPEN PLAN LIVING

Hull number one has the signature open plan saloon that has been talked about since the first drawings were published more than a year ago. When you climb aboard up the stern stairs, you enter a living room and sailing platform that merge in one spacious and elegant environment. The goal was to make the 55 a truly indoor-outdoor boat since that is the way most of us like to sail in warm weather.

With no bulkhead and sliding doors separating the aft living space from the saloon and sailing functions, you have a vast and airy space with 360-degree visibility. Plus, there is no rigid enclosure aft or along the aft sides of the saloon. In fine weather, you are protected from the sun by the cabin top. In rainy weather, you are still under the top and can stay dry. And in cool and inclement weather, you can enclose the whole area with semi-rigid panels that slip and zip into place in under 20 minutes to create a pleasant and weatherproof

cocoon.

The 55 we sailed had the galley-down layout. You climb down a short companionway into the port hull and the galley is tucked into the hull aft. An owner could opt to have the galley up in the saloon if cooking and preparing meals are the central family activity. If not, then the galley down layout preserves the elegant and clean appearance of the saloon.

The companionways have lockable nesting doors and nifty sliding screen doors. With only two equally comfortable double cabins, the 55 is not configured to be a charter boat. This is a couple's boat that has excellent accommodations for visiting friends and children. If you end up with a crowd on board for a few nights, the settees in the saloon will make comfortable overflow beds.

The double berths in the cabins are raised and have good access up steps. These bunks are easy to get in and out of and can be made up without difficulty. The cabins

are truly private suites with their own head and shower stall, plenty of drawer and closet space and doors that can be closed.

In the aft section of the starboard hull, the first 55 has a utility room with access to the generator and the washer-dryer. This cabin could also be configured as a home office or as a third sleeping cabin for crew or children.

Elegant, restrained and very finely finished, the look and layout of the new 55 is impressive while still being very much the cutting edge of design, technology and modern living.

THE GUNBOAT DIFFERENCE

From the very first Gunboat 62 that Peter built for himself, he set out to build a boat that was truly forward looking. All carbon, high tech ultra fast cruising boats were a new idea. Only a few had been built on a custom basis.

With the 55, Peter has extended that disruptive innovation with a design that makes most cruising

cats look old fashioned. A big part of the Gunboat mystique lies in the advanced technology that goes into the boats. The hulls are core-cell foam sandwich with infused carbon fiber and epoxy skins. The boat does not have a cross beam between the two bows as in almost all catamarans so the carbon structures have to be incredibly strong.

The carbon fiber rudders are retractable and fitted with an ingenious system of telescoping poles that make raising and lowering them a snap. This feature combined with the retracting centerboards allows you to sail the 55 footer in as little as three feet of water.

The rig is an all carbon spar from Hall Spars fitted with a T-600 V-boom that acts like a cradle for the furled mainsail. The shrouds and forestays are all unidirectional Aramid fiber that reduces weight and eliminates stretch.

The boat is equipped with a high tech hydraulic system that controls the centerboards, moon roof,

mainsheet and windlass. Rows of discreet silver buttons at the helm allow you to operate a lot of the boat with the press of your finger.

The 55 we sailed had a B&G Hercules H3000 performance instrument package with two autopilots that are all linked to the latest B&G Zeus multifunction displays.

The boat's electrical system runs off a lithium-ion battery bank that is in turn kept topped up by the generator and an 800-watt solar panel array on the cabin top. A single smart screen that allows you to select the mode you want for the lights and instruments operates the whole system. If you are going sailing in broad daylight you press "Underway Day", or if you are anchored in a peaceful cove for the night you simply press "At Anchor-Night".

The Gunboat 55 is an elegant, high tech sailing machine that reminds us of a water-born Ferrari. A couple that wants the very best and latest in a boat that will take

them about the world both swiftly and comfortably, will certainly appreciate this new evolution of the Gunboat concept. And like our brash visitor in Newport, you might just find yourself saying, "This is it. It's exactly what I need." ■

Gunboat 55

LOA	56'11"
LWL	56'11"
Beam	25'0"
Draft 9min	2'0"
Draft (max)	9'3"
Displ.	27,558
Sail area	1,775 sq. ft.
Hull width	5'0"
Headroom	6'6"
Mast height	84'3"
Fuel (x2)	79 gals.
Water (x2)	49 gals.
Deck clear	32"

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