

The cross-channel cruiser you can keep in your garden

Hunter's Medina is excellent value and sails superbly, says John Williamson, which is why he's owned one for nearly 20 years. David Harding reports.

SOMEONE asked me for advice a while ago. *"I'm thinking of buying a small cruiser" he said, "something around 20ft, with a lifting keel, a decent sailing performance and enough room down below so we can go off for the weekend now and again. What would I get for around £5,000?"*

Despite having never sailed one, I immediately suggested the Hunter Medina. I'd seen them racing, read the reports, heard people raving about them, and had no reason to doubt that they were indeed, the finest 20-footer money could buy. The partnership of David Thomas and Hunter boats has yet to produce anything that won't sail (apart from the odd motor boat) - and besides who could possibly go wrong with a baby Sonata?

As it turned out, this chap found a little more money and ended up buying a 26-footer. But, I thought, what about the next one who comes along with a similar list of requirements and the same budget; since I'd probably make the same recommendation, hadn't I better find a Medina to sail? It's always better to speak with the benefit of first hand experience.



At this point, fortune intervened in the form of a letter from an East Coast owner. *"You've tested lots of small sporty boats," he said, and it's about time you looked at one of these!"* No further encouragement was needed: he put me in touch with John Williamson, the class captain, and we agreed to meet one bright and breezy afternoon in Lymington for a sail.

Now you don't find many people who have owned a 20-footer for nearly two decades - boats of this size are often regarded as stepping stones to something larger. John, on the other hand appreciates the advantages of owning a small boat. He bought *Karolu* in 1981 when the original owner decided he wanted something with more accommodation, and has so far resisted any temptation to change. Most of his time afloat is spent cruising around the Solent and racing in the Royal Lymington's Thursday evening series, though he completed a number of channel crossings a few years ago - and not just in fair weather. *"It got a bit rough on one trip to Barfleur," he recalled. "had there been a 30ft boat in the next trough, we wouldn't have seen the top of his mast - it was like climbing mountains!"*

On another trip, a major broach under spinnaker saw the masthead almost in the water and the crew knee deep in a cockpit-full of English Channel when they bobbed back up. *"The amazing thing is that not a drop found its way down below,"* said John, who has never allowed the Medina's small size to cramp his style. *"We've done the Needles to Cherbourg in 11 hours - but you do feel as though you've come quite a long way when you get to France in a 20-footer!"*

Sailing in the shallows

Regular channel-crossing would doubtless call for a bigger boat, with all the associated costs and restrictions. *"After thinking about the channel trips and then doing a few, I found more pleasure in sailing closer to home,"* he told me. *"Much of the fun of having a boat like this is the ability to sail over to Yarmouth on a summer's evening after work and then drift back again in the twilight - or go out through Hurst on the ebb and drop anchor off Mudeford for the afternoon."*

That's one reason why, a little while ago, he considered changing to a dayboat. "My partner and I had a test sail in an open decked 20-footer," he explained, "because it had excellent reviews. We come away thinking the Medina sails better -and keeps you drier - so why change?" John not only kept his boat, but took over role of class captain, organising and taking part in the association's rallies, cruises and racing events - which include the national championships, hosted annually by the Cowes Corinthian Yacht Club. I was surprised to hear that turnouts for the nationals have dwindled to about half a dozen boats, while Medinas no longer have their own start in the Round the Island Race. With such a sporty design, I'd have expected a larger competitive contingent - so what's happened to them? "People who want to race have tended to move up to Sonatas," John explained, "and if I had a deep water mooring, I'd probably do the same. But its all a compromise - most people can keep a Medina in the corner of their garden, but a Sonata would be a bit more difficult."



This upwards migration of the competitively inclined may explain why you see many Medinas heavily disguised beneath cockpit dodgers, spray hoods and zip up sail covers, sailing around with their outboards permanently clamped to the transom. Unusual though it is for a boat with such a pedigree to become "cruisified" in this way, it is testament to her wide appeal and remarkable versatility. John by contrast, has kept *Karolu* close to her original state. One of his few additions has been a 100% blade headsail to supplement the class's original 140% genoa and 70% jib. It proved ideal for the 25 knot easterly breeze at the start of our test sail.

In fact it was the Medinas performance under jib alone that had impressed him back in 1981. *"After sailing various dinghies, I'd bought a Sailfish 18 when I saw one of these short-tacking through the moorings under just the jib,"* he recalled, *"and I decided I'd like to have something with that degree of speed and manoeuvrability."*

Since we also had to do some short tacking out of the river, dodging moorings, ferries, dinghies and yachts under power, I decided to put *Karolu* to the jib-only test straight away. She passed with flying colours, making to windward at 3.5 knots, carrying a barely detectable degree of lee helm, and tacking without hesitating even when put about slowly. For a small, light boat with a dagger-like keel, it was a remarkable performance. I was beginning to see why she's so popular with the cruising fraternity.

After hoisting the reefed mainsail -an easy job when hard on the wind under jib - we sheeted in to punch against the breeze and the Solent ebb, making between 4.8 and 5.4 knots by our trailing log and tacking through a creditable 80 degrees. Like a Sonata, she sliced her way smoothly through the short chop, never once banging or slamming, and behaving like a boat several feet longer. What's more she was easy to 'keep in the groove' upwind - providing we feathered her into the gusts and dropped the main smartly down the short traveller in the stronger patches.

When provoked by a deliberate slow response from the crew, she heeled over to gunwale-awash and, with the rudder struggling for grip, quickly spun up through the wind. The only way to improve her manners, I thought, would be by adding a little balance to the rudder. John still had the original wooden stock with the vertical lifting blade - and, though weather helm was within acceptable limits, the under-balanced section created quite a pull on the steering arm at times. I could see no way of angling the blade any further forward, but I'm sure that an hour or two in the workshop would produce a solution. My other criticism - levelled at virtually every boat this size - was that the quarter decks are too narrow, so that you can't lean back far enough against the guard-wire. Nor do you have much scope to move in other directions with three people in the cockpit. Racing skippers would no doubt send the crew up on the side deck to sit with their legs over the side, clearing some space and getting their weight further outboard. I tried it, and found the deck just wide enough.



Going surfing

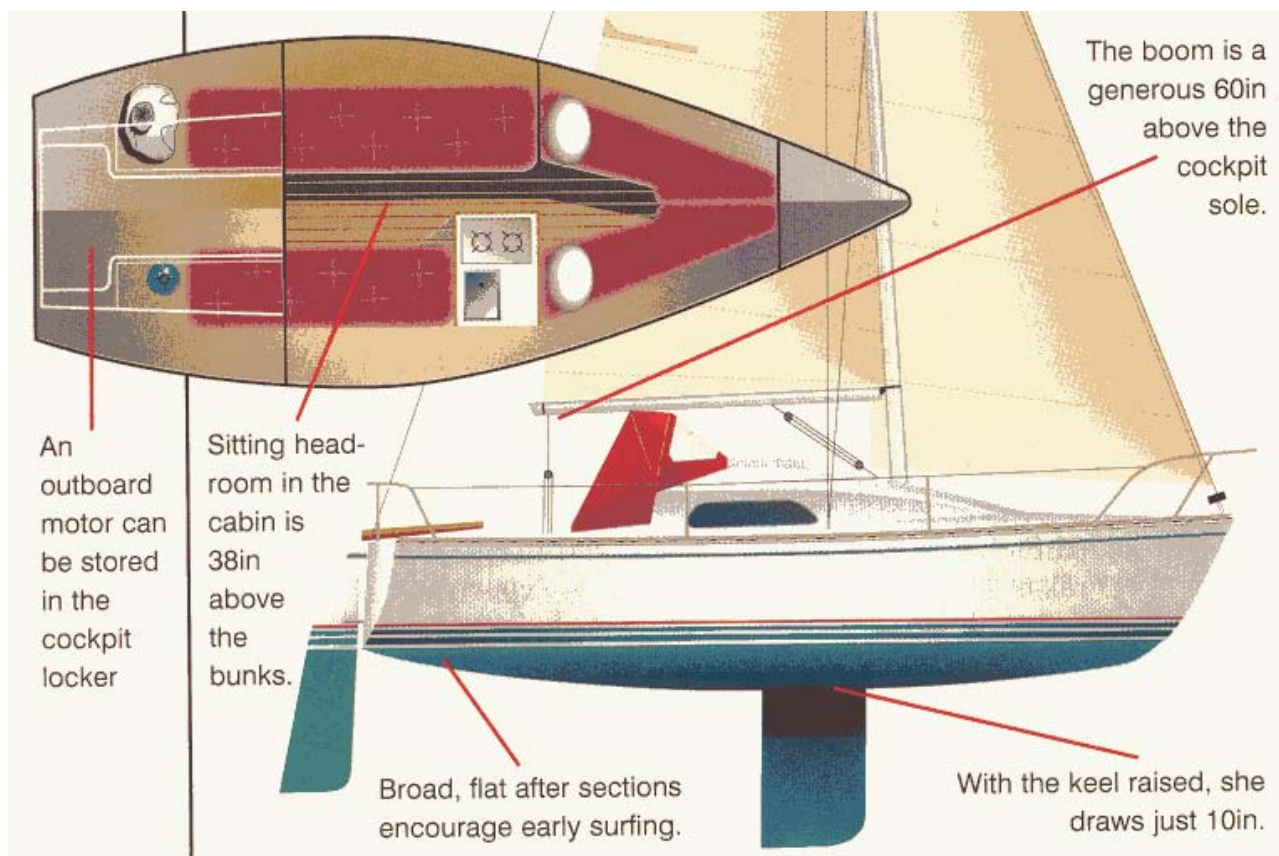
As with any small boat, crew weight has a big effect on the Medina. John was struggling to hold his course when I went forward to take some photos from the bow on a broad reach - but with everyone back in the cockpit and the reef shaken out in the moderating wind, *Karolu* did her best to surf down the small waves. At 8 1/2 knots, apparently, the keel starts to hum. After that, the rudder goes light and things start to get interesting. One owner claims to have recorded 12 knots under plain sail when running before a Force 7.

Under spinnaker, I've no doubt she'd get up and fly - as long as you could keep the boat under the rig. "*She'll broach quite readily,*" said John, "*so you need your wits about you in any sort of a breeze.*" Sadly, the combination of an easterly wind and west going tide gave us no opportunity to fly the kite - we'd have been through Hurst in no time, with the prospect of a very long slog back again. Even without the spinnaker, a quick dump of the mainsheet, and jerk of the tiller was needed to stop her rounding up every now and again: for all her good manners when reefed down in cruising mode, the Medina will give a keen racing crew plenty to think about when the wind pipes up.

So, despite finding that she's not *quite* perfect, would I still recommend her? Well, she makes windward in a force 6 faster and more comfortably than many 25-footers, races competitively, provides ample accommodation for a couple on a weeks cruise, floats on wet lawn with the keel raised, can be trailed behind a family car, and won't break the bank to buy. To top it all, she's well built and fun to sail. You couldn't ask for more than that.

In close up

Introduced in 1979, the Medina was Hunter's third design by David Thomas after the Sonata and Impala. Racing fleets were quickly established, and a number of successful helmsmen made their mark in the class before moving on to other boats. With the competition side gradually dwindling, production ended during the mid eighties after about 140 boats. Now despite the prevalence of cruising owners, a number of Medinas still race successfully and, with a typical IRC rating of 0.820, can often give bigger boats a run for their money. The moulds were re-used in the 90's for the twin keeled Horizon 21, which was substantially heavier and had plusher accommodation.



Construction

As with many of their early boats, Hunter kept it simple with the Medina - they used chopped strand mat without rovings, in a layup that ranges from 7oz in the topsides to 24oz around the keel area.

SPECIFICATION

Secondhand price guide	£4,000 – £6,000
LOA	19ft 8in (5.99m)
LWL	17ft 9in (5.41m) check
Beam	7ft 3in (2.21m)
Draft – keel up	0ft 10in (0.25m)
– keel down	3ft 6in (1.17m)
Displacement	1,890lb (857kg)*
Ballast (keel plus internal)	600lb (272kg)
Sail area	
(main & 100% foretriangle)	168sq ft (15.6sq m)
Portsmouth Yardstick rating	1109
Typical IRC rating	0.820
Headroom	4ft 5in (1.35m)
Engine	3 – 5hp outboard
Designer	David Thomas
Builder	Hunter

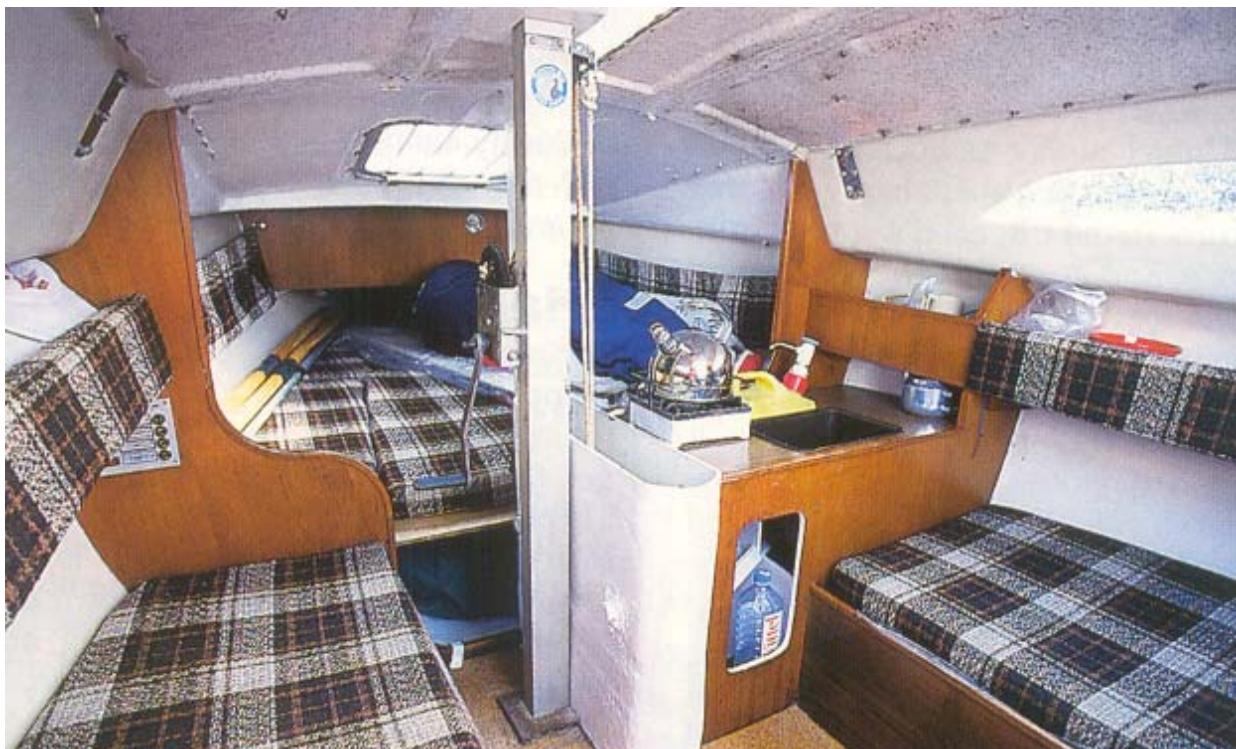
* The weight of most glassfibre boats this age will almost certainly have increased over the years. Accurate checks should be made before towing.

Down below

When I sailed *Karolu*, John was in the throes of replacing the headliner after a spot of leak-busting: The beat home from the previous year's nationals into a 30 knot breeze had resulted in a few puddles down below. He'd initially suspected the deck fittings before homing in on the hull/deck joint - so he removed the old vinyl and ran around the inside with mastic.

In other respects, things are virtually as they were - he's even left the keel's lifting post on the port side of the case. Many owners, apparently, have moved it over to starboard to give easier access forward. Sacrificing the luxury of a chemical loo, though he's opted instead for a bucket, using the space beneath the middle of the fore-berth for stowing an 8ft Avon.

With no interior mouldings below, stowage is generous beneath the saloon quarter berths, too, while the companionway step creates an additional handy locker.



With thanks to Practical Boat Owner magazine.