



ESSENCE OF SAILING

If the Essence 33 were a child, its parents would be a pilot cutter and a Wally yacht! How does that work? Better than you might think...

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There is something dated about the overtly modern. The supremacy of progress that had such a hold over the popular imagination for much of the 20th century produced a harvest of singular craft of startling optimism – hydrofoils, hovercraft, reverse-shear yachts, amphibious cars, three-point hydroplanes guaranteed to kill you, racing sandbaggers and so on. Many of these brave, fragile icons have dated quickly, falling back down from the heavens of our aspirations to splinter into a thousand pieces, leaving a rich sense of nostalgia and loss.

Of course, all things age – but not equally. Standing at the fuel pump on the harbour wall at Saint-Tropez during Les Voiles last October, in 25° (77°F) of windless sunshine, the dozen or so century-old yachts drifting in the harbour, there for their annual centenarians race, looked more current somehow – or at least more in tune with current values – than some of the more outlandish motor yachts riding to anchor, each one dangerously bespoke, the dreams of owners with powerful, but ill-disciplined dreams. They looked like the silt of tomorrow, landfill for the future.

The boat approaching under motor was, to my mind, the most contemporary thing in the harbour that day. Like all spirit-of-tradition yachts, the Essence 33 is a product of post-modernism, a safer school of thought in which things never belong to the era that creates them and fall from fashion softly, if ever. Like the new Beetle or Routemaster, she will look as current in a few decades' time as she does now. The E33 is better described as 'timeless' than 'classic' or 'traditional'. Her Dutch designer Andre Hoek certainly understands these concepts, a fact borne out by his 'Truly Classic' range among others, but the E33 has a racier DNA: she started life as a Wally yacht (the 36ft/11m carbon-hulled Nano),

which explains her razor-sharp lines. The short carbon bowsprit, 3Di sails and carbon mast obliterate any serious attempt at a vintage look, but elements of the Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter have been incorporated in the plumb stem, short, sawn-off counter stern, transom knees and forward-slanting, low-profile doghouse. On paper, a pilot cutter crossed with a Wally sounds like a dog's dinner, but somehow on the water it works to produce an attractive little yacht, and one that sails well too: the bowsprit brings the centre of effort (and therefore ballast) forward, making for a good windward performance and neutral helm, while the plumb bow gives a longer waterline for speed. Hoek envisaged the boat as a more cruise-orientated version of the Wally Nano, but it's still a performance boat at heart.

DOCKSIDE

Owner Sander Nieuwmeijer and boatbuilder Wiebe Dewitte from builder Yagt arrive dockside full of Dutch bonhomie and smiles and I jump on. The Essence 33 is touted as a daysailer, and that's apparent in her large cockpit, exposed decks and lack of any guardrail or offshore gear, accentuating her clean lines. That cockpit really is huge, particularly with the wheel steering option that Sander has opted for (a tiller is also available, but eats up more space). The wheel itself is almost full beam, allowing the helm to sit either side of it or behind and look through it rather than trying to crane around it.

Aft of it is enough space or a separate 'sunpad' area. The helmsman's area is subtly segregated from the forward half of the cockpit by two winch pedestals; here, from out of the coaming, sprout the jibsheet, furler lines and halyards, from where they run through jammers to Harken powered rewind winches, controlled by a bank of six buttons each side that light up in the dark – the



ESSENCE 33

LOA
33ft 2in (10.1m)

LWL
25ft 7in (7.8m)

BEAM
8ft 10in (2.7m)

DRAUGHT
5ft 11in (1.8m)

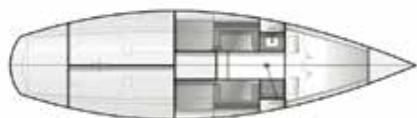
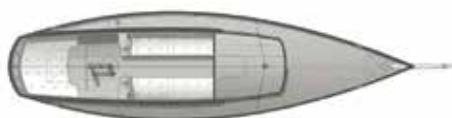
UPWIND SAIL AREA
1,485sqft (138m²)

DISPLACEMENT
2.2 tonnes

ENGINE
Mastervolt 10kW
(13.5bhp)

DESIGN/BUILD
Hoek Design/Yagt

COST
From €219,000
(c£173,000).
See yagt.nl



Above: amid all the high-tech trickery is a great low-tech trick – the steel locking nut on the wheel!

main is sheeted to a separate, central pedestal. Two wireless Raymarine instrument displays each side show depth, speed, wind and so on. For the benefit of passengers/crew, these are repeated on the bigger display mounted at the foot of the mast, in the manner of a modern racing yacht. Here, anything from a chartplotter to speed and log to the Six O'Clock News or a DVD can be shown. The effect is a cockpit in three parts, one working and two for passengers, with a wide, 'sit-on' coaming lining each side. Forward of this is the very low coachroof and foredeck, with a flush anchor well, flush, pop-up cleats and short, carbon bowsprit.

The rig is a powerful, carbon, double-spreader, loose-footed bermudan sloop set-up with a hydraulic kicker, outhaul and backstay operated by a three-way rotary switch and small lever – a dial here reads out the pressure applied. Throughout the cockpit and in the large lazarette, stowage is plentiful.

BELOW

The cabin of this E33 – *Dark Ice* – is unapologetically modern, with the feeling of a chic, modern hotel room. It hardly ticks the 'character' box, but this is more a complaint about small-yacht interiors in general – *Dark Ice* is a better example than most. The furniture is in teak-backed foam, and the space-saving mantra goes as far as having a separate sucker pad to open the cupboard



Above, left to right: singlehanding with a reaching sail deployed; sink lifts to reveal heads



doors. This will get lost immediately. Space is limited as you will imagine, although head room is fine for sitting. A settee runs each side, forward to a vee-berth and aft to a pair of quarter berths. An unusual touch is that the galley sink lifts up to reveal a heads. There were some raised eyebrows here at CB about potential proximity and privacy issues, but it's a space-saving compromise that ought to work provided the call of nature is not too loud or urgent. The fridge is big, a definite boon on this sort of boat, but it is important to remember that these are the owner's choices – there is a high level of customisation available on these boats. The Mastervolt 10kW electric motor sits under the forward half of the cockpit sole and is accessible behind the companion. The motor is powered by four lithium-ion 290Ah batteries, which provide enough leftover juice for all other systems – including an electric flush on the heads, as well as the powered winches and autohelm back on deck. The shallow space under the sole and its rather smart leather floor tiles is taken up by rather frightening mess of tubes and wires – “systems” muttered Sander darkly. It's a sobering reminder on how much there is to go wrong on a complicated boat like this.

UNDER WAY

This boat goes exactly as you expect it to. Steering input translates directly to heading, allowing predictable but minute course adjustments under sail or power and, if the latter, in forward or reverse. The electric motor (a diesel option is also available) pushes the boat through the water quietly and with pleasing gobs of torque at its 10kW setting – the 5kW setting is a power saver and

works well too. The maximum wind strength we had was just five knots, so a proper test was impossible. But even in these conditions, we were sailing.

Those 3dI sails and her thoroughly modern deep-fin bulbed keel give her an impressive windward ability, and I eased her ever closer to the wind, watching the figures in disbelief. We sail at 35° apparent, then 30, then 25, then start edging towards 20 before we start losing way.

Tacking and gybing are effortlessly predictable and light and there is plenty of feedback throughout, unlike the “push tiller hard over, see you on the other side” feeling of heavy long-keelers. In more wind, the E33 will reputedly easily plane into double figures.

AUTOMATION

The most notable aspect of sailing this yacht, at least for the unaccustomed, is the automation. I thought I'd hate this, likening it in anticipation to automatic gearboxes or microwave cookery but in fact it's very confidence-inspiring for short-handed or solo sailing. It enables great tricks like tightening the backstay to reef with just a few pumps on the hydraulic (a modern way of scandalising the main), tacking a code-zero, as we were, by furling it, tacking, then unfurling on the other side; and sail-trimming. We all know that perhaps we could be a bit more diligent about this, but when it's the press of a button away, you trim all the time.

It is hard to predict how the Essence 33 would sail in heavier conditions and, to a point, academic. You buy one of these to keep somewhere like Saint-Tropez and take it out on nice days to enjoy a small yacht that sails as well as a dinghy.

Above, left to right: cabin, looking forward; reaching along with cockpit cushions in place