

Cruising a Classy 36-Foot Racer



EXITING THE NIAGARA RIVER WAS A WAKE-UP call for all five of us. As we cleared the point, riding two knots of current under main only, *Seaweed* leaned over in the 16-knot easterly and began charging into the short steep waves. I quickly realized that Sophie, my 11-year-old, probably shouldn't be sitting in the bow pulpit for this part of the trip, and soon had her and the others settled in the cockpit. Driving the powerful Beneteau First 36.7 with its big wheel wasn't hard, nor was easing the traveler, but sailing through the bumps was like riding a powerful horse; you had to hold the reins with authority and keep looking ahead.

We didn't have far to go. We were heading northwest, towards Toronto's CN Tower, standing tall, 25 miles across the west end of Lake Ontario; but the lake was chilly and rough for this, the first leg of our four-day family cruise from Youngstown to Rochester, N.Y., via the Canadian shore.

Why were we heading for Canada on this frisky racer/cruiser anyway? Because

this 2002 Boat of the Year model has sold 180 times in North America, and many are racing in one-design fleets. Why not investigate the cruising side of the boat's personality? I borrowed *Seaweed* from boat dealer Don Finkle and signed on my family crew. The only requirement was that we deliver the boat 80 miles east, in time for the next weekend's race.

Finkle doesn't have time to cruise *Seaweed*—he intends to someday. Instead, he races every weekend and Wednesday night all summer and is the pied piper of the class on the Lakes; the fleet is now up to 25 boats on Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. His counterpart on the Chesapeake, Garth Hichens, has developed a 22-boat fleet. Hichens admits he has commercial reasons to race a 36.7, but believes the boat provides both good value for the money and the dual-purpose capabilities to be viable in the long term. "The class has legs," he says, and "caters to racers, families, and people who need their boats to

HAPPY ON THE HELM, comfortable below, the author and family go Lakes cruising on a First 36.7.



be fiscally justifiable." Just as important to Hichens: "The boat is fast and fun to sail."

I'd already met some 36.7 racers at the Toronto NOOD a month earlier. Dave Shriner's *Legend* crew sent him swimming after winning that series and were primed for the Nationals in Chicago (*Legend* finished second to the three-time champ, Wes Siegner's *Abino*). Shriner, who owns the boat with Dan, his father,

Beneteau First 36.7

LOA	36'
LWL	30'3"
Beam	11'4"
Draft	5'11"/7'3"
Disp.	12,939 lbs.
SA	657 sq. ft.
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described the learning curve as "frustrating at first. I thought the boat should be sailed with the sheets on hard, not a lot of twist, and pointing high." They soon began to learn that making target upwind boatspeeds (up to 7.3 knots) meant putting the bow down and twisting the sails. Shriner told me he hadn't cruised the boat, but had done lots of deliveries. He said it "sails a little tender," but added that he had yet to reef it. Flattening the main and putting the lead aft on the No. 3 kept it depowered in a blow.

Back on *Seaweed*, the waves smoothed out as we reached deep water. I unrolled a third of Finkle's 135-percent cruising genoa to balance the helm and pulled out my handheld GPS. As Shriner had said, if you put the bow down, it's fun to go fast. We were occasionally touching 9 knots over the bottom. As the breeze swung aft and progressively faded, I unrolled the whole headsail, and we broad reached into the Toronto Islands a few hours later. For my family, the highlight of the day was probably watching the Yankees and Blue Jays, but for me, tucking *Seaweed* safely away at the Royal Canadian YC's friendly Centre Island facility gave me as

ONE-DESIGN RACING:

A 36.7 ducks, then tacks for the mark off Annapolis last November.



FIRST 36.7 CLASS ASSOCIATION

Class president, Jim Carkhuff, of Annapolis, reports 101 owners as 36.7 class members. Key elements of the class rules are limits on sails (two new class sails a year) and professionals (at most regattas, only one ISAF Category 3 crewmember is allowed).

Few owners trailer their boats, but they often borrow or charter at away regattas in groups of two or more owners. Several charters are expected for the 2005 NAs at the Lands' End San Diego NOOD in March.

Carkhuff says one of the 36.7's greatest strengths is "its race readiness in a package that can be cruised comfortably and has status as a one-design." He adds that the \$126,700 base price, "makes the boat accessible to many sailors who otherwise would be priced out of a boat this size."

Where The Fleets Are: Annapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Lake Ontario North/South, Northeast, San Diego, Pac. Northwest, San Francisco, and (forming) in the Carolinas and Ohio. www.beneteaufirst367.org

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good a feeling given the weather report.

As predicted, a 25-knot northeasterly blew in the next day, but the 36.7's cabin was a dry, comfortable place to sleep, read, and play cards. The girls shared the aft cabins (two in the queen-sized berth and one in the over-sized single), and with main cabin settees to lounge on, we spent a relaxing day, waiting out the breeze.

We spent much of the next day motor-sailing along the Canadian shore. Our destination was Cobourg, Ontario, 56 miles east, and I was surprised to find we were going 6.5 knots through the water, but only 5.4 over the bottom. With a low pressure system to the west, I guess the water was all heading downhill. Anyway, I had plenty of time to ponder that puzzle, stop when the sun came out for a mid-lake family swim, and then enjoy broad reaching the last 15 miles on a gentle southwester, arriving at Cobourg as the Tuesday-night beer-can fleet got started.

That night I interviewed Olivia, age 13, on her impressions of the boat: Below, she felt there were lots of good seats and good storage for her clothes and accessories (she always has the over-stuffed bags when we travel), and she liked how neatly

her cabin drawers opened and closed. She felt the bunk boards could've seated better, but found sleeping on the bunk comfortable. Noise and vibration from the 29 hp Volvo saildrive unit were minimal—she hadn't woken up until we'd covered at least a dozen miles that day. On deck, at 5'2", she'd have preferred a tiller. Beneteau has modified new boats so the Edson wheel sinks into a shallow well, making it easier for shorter people to see over it.

Recently, I talked with Melanie Tisdale, who owns *First Today* with her husband Gary, and has cruised Lake Ontario's Thousand Islands and the North Channel. Moving up from a C&C 29, Tisdale was unsure about the change until a regatta in Toronto. After racing and topping off the water tanks, she took her first shower aboard. That's when she fell in love with it. "It sounds silly," she says, "but we hadn't had hot water or refrigeration before."

Storage space, is limited, says Tisdale, but she loves the airy interior and the comfort of the dining area, and says Beneteau's white upholstered cushions have held up well. (They come off for races, along with bedding and other cruising gear.)

The Tisdales aren't just cruisers with a

quick boat. After their North Channel cruise they finished third overall in the NAs in Chicago with Gary steering and Melanie doing the pit. They have made some minor adjustments in the cockpit, such as releading backstay controls and adding a foot brace. And for cruising, there's now a cockpit table: "I went to Sam's Club and bought a little plastic table for \$19," she says. It folds up flat and has even been sanctioned by her husband to stay aboard for apres-race usage on Wednesday nights.

Our short cruise wrapped up with a quiet foggy morning at the Cobourg street market, then out on the lake, breaking through into a sunny afternoon sail into Rochester. The breeze gently increased, and while the other crewmembers focused on reading and sunbathing, I enjoyed the quick feel of this Farr design, sailing closehauled with a big fractional rig above me and performance foils beneath. The 7'3" keel may keep you out of some harbors, but it sure felt good that day, allowing us to sail rather than using the iron genoa. My reading-room crew occasionally spelled me at the helm; but I admit I was happy to hog it. ♦

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