



Boat Review

By Adam Cort

Hélia 44

In its own way, French catamaran builder Fountaine Pajot's new Hélia 44 is as up-to-the-minute as a carbon fiber racing multihull



Although multihull innovation at the racing end of the spectrum gets the lion's share of the press, no less of a revolution in design has been taking place among cruising multihulls: case in point, French multihull builder Fountaine Pajot's new Hélia 44, a boat that in its own way is as cutting-edge as a carbon fiber racer.

CONSTRUCTION

Structurally, the Berret Racoupeau design is tough and well engineered, which should come as no surprise given Fountaine Pajot's position as one of the world's leading multihull manufacturers. The boat's hulls are balsa-cored and resin-infused in the interest of maximizing stiffness while minimizing the layup's weight. A vinyl ester skin coat helps prevent blisters, and the deck is injection molded—again in the interest of reducing weight by minimizing the amount of material required to create a solid structure. The mast and boom are both aluminum. A fixed sprit projects beyond the forward crossbeam for flying a reaching spinnaker.

ON DECK

Gone are the cramped and lonely multihull helm stations of old. The Hélia boasts an expansive helming bench with plenty of room for a couple of friends to keep you company and a stolid tubular "roof" overhead to keep the sun off. (Hélia apparently means "sunshine" in Greek, but it is possible to get too much of a good thing!)



The Hélia 44's helm also serves as a social center

Images courtesy of Fountaine Pajot

The side decks are wide, uncluttered and enclosed by low bulwarks/toerails. I would have liked to have seen some beefy handrails above the saloon windows, so there'd be something solid to grab onto when going forward in rougher conditions. But the thinking may be that in rough weather there's little reason to go forward.

The cockpit is spacious and comfortable, with a large dining table and benches. As evidence of the fact that Fontaine Pajot wants you to be happy, the company has included an exterior fridge so you won't have to go all the way to the galley for a cold drink.

Aft of the lounging portion of the cockpit is an athwartships passageway running the width of the boat that provides easy access to the port side deck and a means of scampering from one hull to the other without disturbing the people serving out the drinks from the aforementioned fridge. It also provides a clear working area for launching the dinghy from a pair of strong davits.

ACCOMMODATIONS

The saloon and galley are large, practical, suffused with light and configured to provide a seamless transition between the indoor spaces and cockpit. In both the three- and four-cabin layouts, each cabin gets its own shower and head. The three-cabin version gives over the entire starboard hull to the owner's quarters.

What really impressed me was the lighting and ventilation belowdecks. This is another area in which the Hélia 44 is truly pushing the envelope. The combination of hull windows, conventional opening portlights and overhead hatches provide a level of lighting and air circulation that are truly incredible—never mind the immense size of the berths and generous headroom. The aft cabins in particular are well lit, thanks to a pair of nifty rectangular portlights looking out over the aforementioned athwartships passageway.

UNDER SAIL

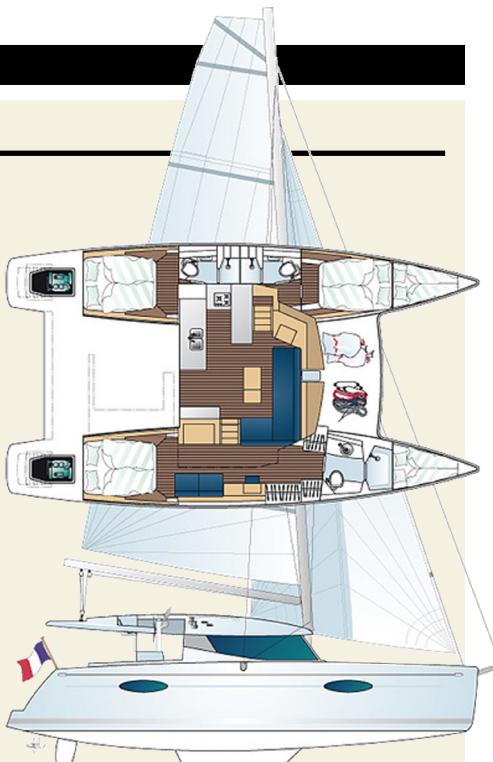
Although there was little in the way of "hélia" for our test sail, thanks to a low, autumnal overcast that was enshrouding Chesapeake Bay, the day was otherwise perfect, with a chill wind blowing in the mid- to high-teens. Reaching back and forth off Eastport, Maryland, we easily managed 9 knots and more as the true wind speed fluctuated between 16 and 19 knots. As is often the case when I'm aboard a well-found multihull, I couldn't stop marveling at how easy it all was. No heaving, no heeling and no spray, even with the moderate chop: just point the bow, trim the sails and watch the wake stretch out arrow-straight astern.

Coming about was equally easy, and the helm was satisfactorily light and responsive, so that it was possible to play the shifts and get into a groove on the tighter reaching angles, much like a monohull. With company president Jean-Francois Fontaine and a couple who'd recently placed an order for a Hélia 44 aboard, we had plenty of crew to tend the lines, and the electric halyard winch made short work of raising the main. It was nice not to have to watch for flying elbows as I drove the boat through a series of tacks while someone else trimmed.

When it came time to reluctantly give up the helm, I spent a few moments afterward watching the wake unfurl behind us, thinking I'd love to cover some serious passage miles on this boat.

UNDER POWER

No surprises here. Like any good cat, playing the engines made it possible to pirouette in place, even in a stiff cross breeze. Setting the twin saildrive-configured diesels at 2,000rpm gave us 7.5 knots of boatspeed, while cranking things up to 2,500rpm yielded just over 8 knots. *AL*



Conclusion

With an array of cutting-edge features, the Hélia 44 is in many ways as revolutionary as the sleekest carbon racing cat. The result is a boat that is not only fun to sail, but more user-friendly than ever for the crew.

Specifications

HEADROOM: 6ft 8in

BERTHS: 6ft 6in x 5ft 2in x 4ft 1in (fwd and aft)

LOA: 43ft 6in

LWL: 42ft 9in

BEAM: 24ft 4in // **DRAFT:** 3ft 10in

DISPLACEMENT: 23,800lb (light ship)

SAIL AREA: 1,230 ft² (genoa and main)

FUEL/WATER (GAL): 124/100

ENGINE: 2x40hp diesel with saildrives

ELECTRICAL: 600AH (house/starboard engine); 100AH port engine

DESIGNER: Berret Racoupeau Yacht Design

BUILDER: Fontaine Pajot, Aigrefeuille, France, fontaine-pajot.com

U.S. DISTRIBUTOR: Fountain Pajot Catamarans, fountainpajotusa.net

PRICE: \$495,000

SAIL-AREA DISPLACEMENT: 24

DISPLACEMENT-LENGTH RATIO: 136

Performance

RACER

CRUISER

Our Take

PROS

- Helm station doubles as a social center
- Well lit and ventilated accommodations
- Plenty of room for tending lines near helm
- Good, solid performance

CONS

- Needs more handrails along side decks