Features include:
- *Daggerboards for upwind performance*
- *Option for Integrel power generation*
- *VersaHelm serving upper and protected lower helm*

Balance 442

The newest kid in the Balance Catamarans family is fun, fast, and flippin' smart.

BY ZUZANA PROCHAZKA

When you do multiple boat tests in a short period of time the experiences can blur, so when a design sticks out, you know it's notable. And the robust little sister to last year's Balance 482—the newly launched 442—stands out for a multitude of reasons, not least because sailing her on a breezy autumn Chesapeake Bay day left me fantasizing about taking one to the horizon and back, lacking for nothing, and having a helluva lot of fun.

The smallest sibling in the Balance Catamarans family, this 44-footer is the work of designer Anton du Toit, built in Cape Town, South Africa. The design borrows heavily from her bigger sisters (the 482 and the 526) with features like a sleek cabintop and slightly reversed bows. The hulls, deck, and coachroof are a foam-cored, vacuum-bagged construction with polyester inner and vinylester outer skins. E-Glass and carbon fiber reinforcement are used in high-load and structural areas, and crash boxes are in the bows. The model is available with fixed keels as well as with tapered daggerboards. Most owners spec the boards for better upwind performance.

Savvy Systems, Smart Details

There are a few savvy systems aboard, not technically new but beautifully integrated for ease of living aboard as well as creating a smaller carbon footprint.

First, there is the option of one or two Integrel units, which are a hybrid of an alternator on steroids and a power generation system that eliminates the need for a traditional combustion engine genset. If owners choose this option, the boat steps up to a 48-volt system and Victron lithium batteries, both of which are significantly more efficient. With the large array of solid solar panels on the coachroof, owners can expect three days of living at anchor without needing to run the engines to charge, so long as air conditioning isn't used.

Next is the VersaHelm designed by Balance founder Phil Berman, a concept that has carried over from the larger models. With the same wheel that pivots in a single plane along the bulkhead, you can drive from three different positions: upper helm (wheel fully upright); line handling (wheel is offset inboard, but the driver is still at the upper helm); and lower helm (wheel pivots down to a secondary, fully protected helm that includes another MFD, instruments, and throttle controls). This may sound odd until you try it on a chilly, blustery day such as we had on our sea trial in Annapolis, and you delight in moving so seamlessly from a fully exposed upper helm to an entirely protected lower helm.

Visibility from the lower helm is excellent thanks to windows that were enlarged and also lowered to deck level. These are glass windows rather than Lexan, so they minimize distortion. The view is uninterrupted because Balance eliminated the need for a central support by incorporating a carbon frame into the cabinhouse bulkhead. The view forward is nearly 180 degrees and the view aft is perfect since you're basically in the cockpit and can see both transoms.

The VersaHelm isn't a gimmick or another moving part that will break. Good access to its inner workings, including the Vectran cabling (for higher heat resistance), is via the master bath. For passagemaking, this is a game changer

that can't be underestimated, with owners commenting that 90% of the time, they use the helm in the down position.

Other smart features include traditional raised deck hatches (rather than flush) that won't accumulate debris and water, and the Karver hook that makes raising and lowering the big mainsail easier. The rise from the trampoline to the deck forward is the lowest on the market, a safety factor that helps preclude rolled ankles. Dual Racor filters are standard, and for the sake of simplicity, Balance doesn't offer digital switching.

There are also 2,200 watts of rigid solar panels installed in raised racks on the coachroof to permit ventilation from below. Rigid panels generally produce more power, and cooler panels enjoy better longevity.

Living

Our test boat was the owner's version with a posh suite in the starboard hull. Forward, there's an elevated athwartships bed with a hatch above for ventilation. Aft is a generous head with a massive shower that also serves as a handy wet locker. Extra lockers and drawers can be added at the factory, and there's no shortage of places to put things including into the large bow "closet" in the master with its own door for access from inside. There's 6 feet 8 inches of headroom throughout the interior.

The cockpit divides into a few functional areas. The starboard forward corner is dedicated to the lower helm. Aft of that is a lounge seat just ahead of the summer kitchen with a sink and a plancha grill. A straight seat spans the transom, and the main dinette is to port. The table here is a bit slim by charter cat standards, but four can dine comfortably, and let's face it, it's unlikely a Balance will ever be put into charter.

Moving

The double-spreader Sparcraft rig carries 1,205 square feet of upwind sail area (by Ullman) with a self-tending jib and a square-top main. All lines lead to two Harken winches and nine Spinlock clutches at the upper helm. Specifying a third winch adds flexibility in line handling.

The daggerboards, which are finished with graphite paint for smoother operation, make a real difference in upwind performance and allow apparent wind angles (AWA) up to 40 degrees. In 16 knots of true wind, we made good 11.2 knots speed over ground at 70 degrees AWA. At 40 degrees AWA and pinching, we still held onto 6.5 knots.

The screecher is the perfect balance to the self-tacking jib, and it holds up to about 60 degrees AWA. We had a cold day with perfect breezes on the Chesapeake Bay. The boat settled in on each point of sail and the helm remained light. Sailing with two fingers was delightful, as were clean, easy tacks with the self-tending jib.

Under power, we tested the upgraded 45-hp Yanmar diesels that you'll find if you opt for the Integrel units. At 2,200 rpm we motored at 7.4 knots, and at wide open throttle we added one more knot at 2,800 rpm. Given the spike in fuel consumption, that last knot is an expensive one.

A note on daggerboards under power—you don't want to raise them completely or the cat will slide around when maneuvering since it has no fixed keels. Leave the boards down at rudder protection depth (3 feet 10 inches) for traction but keep them about even. If they're set at different depths, spinning and backing will deliver counterintuitive—and counterproductive—results.

LOA/LWL 44'4"
Beam 25'0"
Draft 3'10" - 7'1"
Bridgedeck clearance 2'9"
Sail Area 1,205 sq ft
Displacement 26,014 lbs
Engine 40-/45-hp Yanmar
Designer Anton du Toit
Builder Balancecatamarans.com
Price $1.2 million sail-away

Truly Impressive

The Balance name isn't an accident. This line of voyaging cats was created to address a niche market for experienced sailors looking for a balance of a performance multihull and a proper liveaboard. Neither slow and voluminous nor high-strung and spartan, Balance cats deliver a happy middle ground.

With the scaled-down 442, Balance fills out the family offering with a price point and dimensions that make their designs more accessible to a broader swath of the cruising market. The result is a performance catamaran that's perfectly positioned to appeal to an experienced sailing couple looking for quality, livability, speed, and savvy systems, all in a true 44-foot package that is a kick to sail. *A*

Clockwise from top left: Fun and powerful, the Balance 442 sails off Cape Town, South Africa; enlarged glass windows permit excellent visbility in the saloon; an athwartships cabin has ample light and ventilation.