

Used Boat Notebook

By John Kreischer

Contessa 32

This oceangoing dynamo has a special place in the author's history and heart

Indulge me and try to understand—for me, the Contessa 32 is not just another fiberglass production boat. I cut my teeth on a Contessa 32, and the boat occupies a coveted spot in my brain's hard drive. The Contessa 32 tolerated my youthful mistakes, fueled my burgeoning dreams and always returned me safely to port after many long passages. There isn't much more you can ask of a boat. Like all fine boats, the Contessa 32 is forgiving and surprisingly rewarding to sail. Winsome and just 24 feet on the waterline, the 32 is easy to underestimate if you are not aware of its formidable reputation for seaworthiness.

Few boats can post more impressive curricula vitae. The Contessa 32 *Assent* was the quiet hero of the infamous storm-ravaged 1979 Fastnet race. It was a Contessa 32 that escorted 15-year-old solo sailor Seb Clover across the Atlantic just last year. At the other end of the spectrum, *Imagine*, a 1980 model, was sailed by 65-year-old singlehander Bill Williamson across the Atlantic and back a few years ago. Contessa 32s have been everywhere from the Arctic to Zanzibar. And it was a Contessa 32 named *Gigi*, which was one of the last English-built boats, that carried me around Cape Horn, east to west against the wind 20 years ago.

However, the Contessa 32 is not just a bluewater passagemaker. Most

32 owners sail their boats locally, race in one-design or PHRF classes and simply enjoy its soft motion in a seaway and ability to carry canvas when other boats are reefed to the nines. There is no denying that the tiller-steered 32s can produce biceps-building weather helm and ship plenty of water on deck when sailing upwind under full canvas.

Contessa 32 owners, who are not blind to their boat's quirks, are unusually devoted. When you buy a used Contessa you are not just buying a boat, you're buying a classic. You're also joining a cult. I recently attended a meeting of the Contessa 32 Owner's Association, which included a regatta on the south coast of England, and I was reminded what a unique breed Contessa 32 sailors are.

The first two Contessa 32 hulls were molded in builder Jeremy Rogers' small shop on the southern coast of England in late 1970 and launched in 1971. *Contessa Catherine*, owned by designer David Sadler, is still racing competitively today, in fact she competed in the recent regatta and did very well. The other boat, *Red Herring*, was owned by Jeremy Rogers and went on to win her class in that year's Cowes week. The rest, as they say, is history.

The Contessa 32 was the London Boat Show boat of the year in 1972 and more than 700 boats were built before production stopped when Rogers went out of business in 1983.

Also, like the famed Contessa 26, the 32 was built on license in Canada. J.J. Taylor and Sons of Ontario produced 90 or so Contessa 32s before closing its doors in 1990. Although plenty of English Contessas have sailed to our side of the Atlantic, many of the 32s for sale in the North American market are Canadian-built boats. Don't be put off by this fact for there is very little if any quality difference. In

fact, the Canadian boats have a slightly modified interior along with other features that U.S. sailors tend to prefer.

First impressions

The Contessa 32 is a very handsome boat. It has been described with the best of adjectives over the years. The sheerline is deceptive—it almost looks to be reverse until you train your eye on the sweet lines. The bow is fine with a knifelike overhang. The stern is pinched in the style of the IOR boats of the early 1970s, but still attractive. The hull has pronounced tumblehome and the cabin profile and overall freeboard are low. Low as in 28 inches of freeboard, and as I remember, doing the dishes offshore was a matter of simply reaching over the side. Sadler mixed these ingredients just right and came up with a boat that is universally admired. I can't ever recall sailing into a harbor without receiving compliments about the boat.

Below the water the 32 has a powerful fin keel, a skeg-hung rudder and a deep forefoot. I have logged more than 30,000 miles aboard Contessa 32s, most of them upwind, and I have never felt the boat pound in a seaway. It does ship water over the deck and is affectionately known as a "submarine with sails." The ballast of 4,500 pounds is nearly 50 percent of the overall displacement, and although the boat does heel a bit, it is incredibly stable. The IMS stability curve puts the Contessa 32's limit of positive stability near 130 degrees.

Construction

The Contessa 32 is not overbuilt. Although, it is solidly constructed and well-engineered, it doesn't sport the massive fixtures of a Westsail or Valiant. Rogers was, and still is, extremely talented when it comes to molding fiberglass. I remember when we wanted to upgrade the size of the standing rigging before our Cape Horn adventure. He tried to point out that the fiberglass deck had only so much tensile strength and

Techline

Contessa 32 Price Data

Prices range from a low of \$43,000 for a 1981 model to a high of \$47,000 for a 1975 model.

General Market Data



that beefing up the rigging was a waste of money.

The hull is solid fiberglass and on the English boats so is the deck. Americans are accustomed to cored decks and it is bit unnerving to feel the deck flex, especially on a legendary oceangoing boat. There is, however, no core to delaminate and flexibility is one of the great advantages of fiberglass. Canadian boats, at least later in the production run, went to balsa-cored decks. We had *Gigi's* deck cored with Airex, another waste of money according to Rogers.

Roger's layup was very well done, and although the hulls are thick by today's standards, every effort was made to keep the weight under control when they were built. These boats were designed for racing success as well as ocean cruising. The overall weight of 9,600 pounds made the Contessa a moderate displacement boat in its day. The Canadian boats were also built to Lloyds' specs and, if anything, are slightly heavier than their English cousins. The ballast is internal lead, and the rudder is solid fiberglass. The stock is stainless steel.



What to look for

Despite its legendary status, the Contessa 32 has a few items to carefully inspect. The Contessa 32 owners' association Web site is a valuable tool for probing into the inner workings of the 32. Also, Rogers, who has been for years refurbishing old 32s (and has recently started building new 32s on a limited basis), is a font of knowledge. He is a wonderful man, modest, very gentlemanly and very accessible.

The first thing to look for is a boat that has been repowered. Although the Contessa 32 has never been a great boat under power, some engines are definitely better than others. A variety of diesels were used including Petter, Farymann, Bukh, Volvo and Yanmar. A 32 with a fairly recent three-cylinder Yanmar is worth paying a premium for.

Another item to look at is the water tank in the bilge. The large inspection plate usually leaks, letting bilge water into the tank. Some owners have done away with the inspection plates, or just given up on this as a fresh water tank. Also, check the hatches for signs of silicone and other sealants, the boat ships a lot of green water and the hatches tend to leak. The electrical system, especially on the older English boats, will need upgrading to accommodate today's digital gizmos. One final note, many 32s had factory colored hulls that will need to be painted, possibly for the second or third time.

On deck

The 32 has a deceptively large and fairly comfortable cockpit. I spent many hours tucked up behind the dodger, which was at times the only dry spot on deck, and many others sprawled against the deep coamings reading while the windvane steered.

Tiller steering is de rigueur, at least on English boats. Canadian boats were occasionally fitted with wheels. There are small coamings and a good-sized locker to port for stowing gear. The mainsheet traveler is mounted on the bridgedeck just aft of the companionway. The helmsman can reach all sail controls without stretching. Two scuppers adequately drain the cockpit when water slops aboard.

There are low teak grabrails on the coachroof and double lifelines and well-supported stanchions are standard. The molded nonskid surface is not aggressive and may be well worn on older boats. A small bulwark that rises forward is an excellent safety feature and looks nice too. The chain locker is external

and can house decent-sized ground tackle, although few boats have a good set-up for anchoring.

The mast on the new boats is from Selden. Older boats will likely have Sparcraft or Kemp spars. The chainplates are U-bolts, secured through the deck and by the hull. While they seem undersized, few if any 32s have lost their rigs due to turnbuckle failure. Winches will likely be Lewmar and most boats will have upgraded to self-tailers along the way. Most of the hardware on *Gigi* was also Lewmar, although we did have one of the early Harken headsail furling systems. A feature I liked was the two-way bulkhead mounted compasses that could also be viewed from down below.

Down below

The Contessa 32 interior is the reason the boat was never more popular in North America. It is small. Really small. It is easy to think you've stumbled onto a 27-foot boat when you drop below. Although Contessa brochures claimed there was 6 feet of headroom it was only the spot just below the companionway. As you stepped forward it was time to duck. British boats were finished nicely with teak interiors, while the Canadians opted for molded liners and components—practical but not as attractive. The Canadian boats do have a slightly wider cabin sole that helps make up for the narrow beam.

These boats were designed for northern sailing and ventilation is an issue. The overhead hatches in the saloon and forepeak are only adequate, and while opening portlights would help, the freeboard is so low that they would be impossible to open under way except in light conditions.

The interior plan is predictable. A double that is best suited for very good friends is forward, followed by the head to port and a locker opposite. The head is compact to say the least. Most older Contessa 32s have excellent Lavac pressure heads. The saloon features a wraparound settee and table to port and settee/sea berth to starboard. There is decent storage beneath the settees. The small galley is to port and usually includes two sinks, a two-burner gas stove and a small icebox. The best aspect of the interior is the nav station located opposite the galley. There is plenty of room for instrument repeaters and the electrical panel is also mounted here. Overall the interior works well for passagemaking and has enough space for a couple to cruise with some degree of comfort.

Engine

As noted earlier, 32s came with a variety of engines. *Gigi* was fitted with a two-cylinder 15-horsepower Yanmar that performed brilliantly for more than 30,000 miles. We rarely motored at more than 5 knots but the engine was stingy with fuel, and we typically stretched our modest 12 gallons into 30 or 40 hours of motoring. Access is from behind the companionway and through a panel in the quarter cabin. *Gigi*, like most 32s, was fitted with a conventional stuffing box, including a grease gland, and a fixed two-bladed prop.

Under way

Contessa 32 voyages have been well documented but voyaging accounts don't dwell on handling characteristics. Simply put, the reason to buy a Contessa 32 is because it sails beautifully. The boat is close-winded, does not make leeway, never pounds in a chop, is fast with respect to a 24-foot waterline and handles extreme sea conditions. The boat is easy to daysail, exciting to race and cruises with a confidence few other boats can match.

Typically, most racers carry full sail until the wind tops 25 knots and deal with puffs by feathering the main. When cruising, shortening up sail results in a very well behaved boat in most conditions. Downwind sailing under spinnaker can be exciting. Most passagemakers report flying either a single or double poled out headsails in trades. Sailing from the Canary Islands to Antigua we poled out our 150 percent genoa and eased along at 6 knots day after day with little stress.

The 32 really shines in heavy going. Read Adlard Coles' classic book, *Heavy Weather Sailing*, for an account of how *Assent* handled the wild conditions that ultimately claimed 15 lives during the 1979 Fastnet Race disaster. We used similar tactics several times during our windward rounding of Cape Horn.

Conclusion

Prices for used Contessa 32s range from around \$30,000 to \$50,000. This is a small price to pay for a boat you can sail to the ends of the earth and back. However, like all boats, the 32 is a compromise. Its legendary sea-keeping traits are offset by a lack of creature comforts. At the end of the day, the Contessa 32 is about sailing and nothing else and that's why it is a classic.

Techline

SAILING Magazine's Value Guide Contessa 32 (5-sailboat rating system)



PRICE: This rating would be higher but the dollar has plunged recently against the English pound making English boats 20 percent higher than just last year. Still, 32s on this side of the Atlantic can usually be had for less than \$40,000, which is a good deal.



DESIGN QUALITY: The only thing keeping this from being a rare five-sailboat rating is the lack of comfort below. Few if any boats of this size handle a variety of conditions as well as the Contessa 32.



CONSTRUCTION QUALITY: Contessa is a well-engineered boat, which is always better than simply being heavily constructed. The 32 has stood the test of time and has proven itself on every ocean.



USER-FRIENDLINESS: The 32 is easy to sail, even for novices, as I proved with my early voyages. The rig is simple, the loads are not extreme and it is very forgiving. It is also rewarding for experienced sailors, a rare combination. Again, only the interior limits this rating.



SAFETY: The 32 is extremely seaworthy, capable of standing up to severe conditions. That is the final measure of safety.



TYPICAL CONDITION: 32s typically have been sailed hard. This is not a boat to baby, so many used boats have tired sails and gear.



REFITTING: Not the easiest boat to work on because access is tight, however, parts are still widely available and there is a lot of documentation and information available.



SUPPORT: The Contessa owners' association is an excellent resource, contact them at www.co32.org. Also, contact Jeremy Rogers at www.jeremyrogers.co.uk.



AVAILABILITY: There is always a good selection of boats for sale in Europe but less so in North America. An Internet search turned up five boats for sale, all in Canada or on the U.S. East Coast. 32s are rare on the West Coast.



INVESTMENT AND RESALE: Although the 32 holds its value fairly well, it is not an easy boat to sell in the U.S. where the small interior really hurts.



OVERALL 'SVG' RATING