

Sailing the Multi 23 Trimaran--First impressions

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This weekend I went to California to check out the new Multi 23 trimaran. Mike Leneman of Multimarine, the US importer, picked me up from the airport and we drove straight over to his shop. As we pulled into his parking lot I was confronted with one of the most gorgeous trimarans I have ever seen sitting on stands in his yard, looking as if it was about to take off and fly away. The Multi 23 is an absolutely stunning design by Van Petenghem and Lauriot-Prevost, famous for their famous Orma 60 trimarans and world record-breaking ocean racing trimarans such as Groupama, Banque Populaire, Geronimo, Sport Elec, Idec etc. The Multi 23 is even more beautiful in the flesh than in any pictures I have seen. Apparently even the local monohull sailors have been commenting on how sexy it looks. Equally impressive to the hull design is the state-of-the-art hardware and rigging that comes standard on the boat--enough to make a grown man drool. All synthetic rigging, synthetic shackles, a mix of lightweight Harken and Karver hardware; carbon this and carbon that including a gorgeous carbon rudder foil and carbon rudder cassette and tiller handle that together weigh only 10 lbs. The 35 ft aluminum wing mast has a single pair of carbon spreaders, with two upper and two lower diamond wires on each side. This arrangement has produced a very stable but lightweight spar. With the impressive pedigree of its design, it is not surprising that this boat has been so well thought out from the get-go.

The first thing I learned that changed my expectations somewhat is that it takes a bit more effort to assemble the Multi 23 from its trailering configuration than I had thought. Basically its going to be pretty tough to do it single handed, though not impossible. Attaching the front and rear beams to the main hull will be a lot easier for two people than one. The same goes for attaching the floats to the beams. After seeing the process I would say that this is not something that anyone would want to do every time they go sailing. So the ideal situation for most Multi 23 owners is going to be mast up storage at a Yacht Club or marina , with access to a launch ramp or beach, or a dinghy hoist. or a lift. The trailer parking spot and launch ramp need to be able to accommodate a 15'6" beam. Most launch ramps can do this, but not all of them. At Mike's yacht club he crane-launches his Multi 23 wth a dinghy hoist.

The first day the weather did not cooperate and the marine layer failed to burn off, preventing the generation of any wind. Instead of sailing we spent our time discussing the boat and its rigging. Mike has been working on improving the design of the aluminum road trailer to make assembly and mast raising as easy as possible. There will be adjustable movable supports that will come with the traile which will serve as supports for the floats while you connect them to the beams. There will be a winch mounted on a pedestal on the front of the trailer, which also serves as the front mast support, and a removable rear mast support mounted on the boat's transom. If desired the mast can be raised with the boat on the trailer using the trailer winch and the lightweight boom as a gin pole, or raised by hand using the traditional beach cat method. The mast is very light (its the same section used for Formula 18 catamarans). The trailer has torsion axles, no leaf springs and no brakes, and uses all stainless steel hardware, so corrosion should not be a problem. But for those who want to launch of a beach there will be a special beach cart available with four cat trax type beac wheels mounted on a square frame. Since the boat is only 700 lbs it can be beach launched by

2-3 people easily this way.

The next day I got my wish and the cloud cover started burning off around noon--time to go sailing! Mike already had his Multi 23 in the water at the Santa Monica Yacht Club, and even though we had the luxury of a small outboard engine (Honda 2 h.p.) we simply raised the main, pushed off, unrolled the jib and sailed out of the marina. We met up with a couple of friends of Mike's along the way on an Inter 20 catamaran and tacked back and forth with them out the Marina Del Rey channel and headed north along the California coast towards Malibu. In the light air we had to start with, the Multi 23 was slightly faster than the Inter 20, but as the breeze picked up and the Inter 20 started flying a hull, and slowly pulled away from us (the Inter 20 rates about -88 according to PHRF numbers used by ORCA in Southern California). My first impression was of how comfortable it was to sit in the cockpit and slide out onto the trampoline which is level with the cockpit seat. The best position for skipper and crew given the huge amount of buoyancy forward was up near the front beam. Tacking was a no-brainer with the self-tacking jib--just turn the boat. It helps a little to ease one side of the two-sided jib sheet slightly, or nudge the jib car by hand during the tack, but its not absolutely necessary. We sailed on up the coast until we were off the Topanga Beach pier and then bore away and hoisted the spinnaker.

At this point the breeze was beginning to build slightly, but was still only around 9-10 knots. Nevertheless we were able to maintain a steady 10-11 knots of boat speed, with a jibing angle of about 90 degrees. The spinnaker is trimmed easily without the need for a winch, using one or two ratchet blocks. There are cam cleats available to temporarily hold the sheets if the crew needs a rest.

As we approached Marina Del Rey again we said our goodbyes to the crew on the Inter 20 and, as planned, joined up with an L7 trimaran of Mike's design, a more similar boat to the Multi 23 to get a better handle on our relative performance. By this time the breeze had built nicely, and we headed back upwind under main and jib. At around 10-12 knots of wind, and a light chop, the L7 seemed slightly faster than the Multi 23, and was pointing a little higher. This particular L7 has been routinely beating the local F-31s in point-to-point races, so it is no slouch (rated -30 by ORCA). But as the breeze built to around 15 knots, the Multi 23 really came alive and started closing on the L7 both in boat speed and pointing angle, and the Multi 23 soon pulled in front. Admittedly the L7 was being sailed solo whereas we had a crew of two on the Multi 23, which might account for the L7s apparent slight advantage in the lighter air owing to it carrying less crew weight. Optimizing the size and shape of the Multi 23's jib should further improve windward performance. But a small upwind screacher will probably be the key to being competitive with other boats sailing upwind in light air in a mixed fleet and/or in point to point races. Off the wind, there is no doubt that an asymmetrical spinnaker will be the ticket for windward leeward racing (the storage compartment forward of the cockpit serves as a perfect place to store the spinnaker and launch it from). For pleasure sailing, and single-handed sailing, the main, jib and screacher will be the way to go for most people. For one-design racing the Multi 23 will use only 3 sails: main, jib and spinnaker, or main, jib and screacher, to keep things simple and costs down.

The more the wind blew the more impressive the Multi 23 was. At about 12-15 knots plus of wind we were still pushing as hard as we could, not bothering to feather it up at

all in the puffs, doing about 9–10 knots to windward, and having a ball. In solid whitecaps and mounting chop, fully powered up now, there was no need to move crew weight aft. At this point I was driving, sitting comfortable just aft of the front beam and Mike was just behind me. From my forward vantage point there was clear visibility of any traffic to leeward around the front of the forestay, a great safety feature. The forward 3 ft of the main hull was constantly out of the water, and even in the biggest puffs our leeward float bow was not showing any tendency to bury, whereas our friend on the L7 was starting to have a few problems--occasionally stuffing the L7's bows amidst a geyser of spray and having to dump his main traveler to stay in control. Sitting fairly high up on the windward float of the Multi 23 we encountered virtually no spray whatsoever. This is one huge advantage of the Multi 23's design--the dihedral is in fact so great that at the dock with no sails up, one of the floats is 1–2 ft out of the water. It can be a little annoying when moving from side to side of the boat at the dock and before the sails go up, but you quickly get used to it and once sailing the boat takes a set to one side, and then you are glad of the extra height above the water. Plus of course the high, arched beams stay well out of the water. The beams also have a streamlined, low-drag profile to reduce wind resistance.

The major controls on the Multi 23 are all very well thought out, with very low loads on everything--mainsheet, main sheet traveller, jib sheet. The jib tacks itself on a nicely curved track mounted on the front of the forward beam, and even fully powered up sheeting in the jib takes only an easy tug on either of the two jib sheets. Easy enough for a small child.

Once we reached Malibu Beach we turned around for the reach back to Marina Del Rey. Now the fun factor kicked into hyperdrive. Even on a screaming close reach, fully powered up and flying through the chop at about about 15 knots of boat speed, the Multi 23 exhibited absolutely no tendency whatsoever to bury its bows even in the bigger puffs and building waves. Incredibly, both of us were still sitting up near the shroud, Mike in front of it and me slightly behind, with the traveller still centered and the main sheeted in hard. I don't know what you'd have to do to pitchpole this boat, but it would have to be something akin to gross negligence as there seems to be almost no limit to how hard you can push it. Reaching like this all the way back to Marina Del Rey we never once felt that we needed to ease the main traveler, move our weight aft, bear off or ease the main sheet. I watched carefully and even in the biggest puffs the stern barely lifted at all and the most I ever saw of the rudder was the top few inches. The rudder by the way is a very nice high aspect ratio foil and the steering feel is perfect--light and responsive, but not twitchy.

By comparison at this point the L7 was struggling to stay in control as it tried to go bow down and stern up. In these conditions on my own Corsair Sprint 750, which I race fairly hard, we would have already moved crew weight back as far as possible on the windward float, and I'd be judiciously easing the traveller in the puffs to prevent the leeward float bow from submarining, and the rudder from coming out of the water with resulting loss of steering control. There was no such tendency on the Multi 23, its huge amounts of forward buoyancy keeping the bows up under all conditions. I have never experienced anything quite like this on a multihull.

The next day I got to sail on another Multi 23 owned by ace local sailor Jay Laplante. It

was the first time he had taken his boat out. It was a simple matter to use the Yacht Club dinghy launch crane to lift it from its trailer and pop it in the water. The key here, as the center of gravity of the boat is very close behind the mast, is to position the bridle lines (two to the front beam and two to the rear beam) so that the boat tips slightly bow down, which keeps the mast away from the crane. Once in the water we raised the mainsail, unrolled the jib, and sailed out of his slip into the channel. After clearing the breakwater we sailed upwind in about 15–16 knots of wind at a heading of about 200 degrees, more or less aiming towards Catalina Island. Our main objective today was to try out a new spinnaker. So after we'd tacked back and forth a few times, and Jay had the feel of the boat, we rounded an outer marker, bore way and hoisted the chute. It went up really easily with no drama, filled, and off we went, surfing down the face of the small waves, with a light helm and totally in control. Again, the total lack of drama while flying along passing every other boat out there was unbelievable. Its a comfortable, stable, dry ride on board this boat, upwind or downwind. I have yet to sail the boat in really heav air, but the upper limits for this boat would appear to be very high. It is going to be very interesting to explore that limit when I get a chance.

Its hard to imagine how anyone who tries a Multi 23 will not fall instantly in love with it. As I said earlier, the only potential drawbacks--and no boat is perfect--is that its not as easy as say a beach cat or a Corsair to go from trailering mode to sailing mode single-handed. Parking it with mast up will require at least a 15'6" wide parking space and a launch ramp that can accomodate it (most can). But for many, returning to the sheer joy of sailing a small, fast, responsive multihull with an impeccable design pedigree, that is easy to sail, safe, dry and comfortable, and relatively inexpensive to boot, will make these minor issues relatively unimportant. The fact that it is drop-dead gorgeous is the icing on the cake.