

Commonly Asked Questions About Cruising Catamarans

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by Bay Breeze Yacht Charters

In January, the Gemini Legacy 35 was the first fixed hull catamaran to exhibit at the Chicago Strictly Sail show. USCG Captains, veteran catamaran guys and Bay Breeze staffers Dave, Paul and Doug were there to field questions from the 4,000 folks that toured the boat. Below is a sampling of the most frequently asked questions:

Why aren't there more catamarans on the great lakes?

We've been asking ourselves this for years and decided that it's a 3-part answer:

First there is delivery, and typically the wide beam is a problem. The boat would have to travel on its own bottom to get to the Great Lakes. And considering that the largest catamaran manufacturers are in South Africa or France, getting to mainland America is one thing, then going further to the Great Lakes adds more time and a lot more to the cost for delivery. The exception to this is Gemini Catamarans, which are now built in Florida and purposely have a 14' beam making it one of the only cats that can be trucked overland. Our display Gemini at the Chicago show took 2 days via truck and was a fraction of the normal cat delivery cost.

Second is the issue of docking and servicing. The cost can get steep, as cats normally need T-docks or double-slips. And when it comes time for haul out, a very large travel lift is required (because of the beam, not the weight) or a crane is used. Again, the exception to this is the Gemini Catamaran line that, at 14' wide, can fit in a standard slip and can get hauled like a monohull. We actually hauled our Gemini 105Mc at a township park launch ramp.

Third is price. Straight up, it's hard to justify the price of a typical production cat in such a limited sailing season. And again, I revert back to the 35' Gemini Catamaran because it's priced very comparably to a monohull and, here's the kicker - its about \$150,000 less than a catamaran with "standard proportions" like the Mahe 36.

How long have cruising catamarans been around?

The Polynesians are well documented for crossed oceans in catamarans hundreds of years before Columbus started sailing. Ocean-going catamarans have been around a long, long time on the other side of the Pacific, we just never heard those stories growing up because America's maritime history started across the Atlantic. A western multihull pioneer, James Wharram (www.wharram.com) is a life-long hippie, sailor and designer of catamarans. He started building simple plywood and epoxy catamarans in England and sailing them around the world in the 1940's and continues to this day. I've seen Wharram cats everywhere from New Zealand to Traverse City. It's interesting to note that a traditional tall ship will rarely get a stability certification from the USCG without radically modifying its ballast and design but a catamaran usually passes with flying colors. The replica tall ships that travel port to port in the name of historic interest have been modified extensively below the waterline to safely carry on their missions. Early maritime explorers with tall ships may have been bold but they weren't the best naval architects.

How does a Cat handle steep, choppy lake waves?

A cat will feel different from a monohull in most areas; under sail, tacking, docking, etc, and so it goes that it will feel different in a lake chop. Anyone that says a catamaran can't handle steep, choppy waves on the Great Lakes either hasn't actually sailed a cat on the Great Lakes or hasn't sailed a recent production model. Cats have evolved immensely in the last 20 years with the last 5-10 years being the most evident. Modern production cats have addressed the "slap" effect with higher bridge deck clearances and "nacelles" which are long, stringer-like protrusions than run underneath the bridge deck to split waves and cushion the boat along with curved surfaces under the bridge deck that deflect waves. Twenty years ago, few cat manufacturers were building these design features to prevent the "slap". Today, you'll see it in most every cat design.

How fast will they sail?

Our Gemini Legacy 35 hit speeds of almost 60 mph...on the truck enroute to Chicago... The real answer to this is that cats are only faster than monohulls on certain points of sail. If you raced a cruising monohull and a cruising cat on a triangle course, they would both end up at the finish line about the same time. We're comparing cruising boats with displacement hulls here so all you racers settle down. Typically the cat would lose ground going upwind but gain it on the reach and broad-reach.

Why do they struggle upwind?

That's just how it goes when you're trying to sail a "patio" into the wind and I wish there was a nifty technical way to put it. It's a product of beam. But again, the exception to this is the Gemini Legacy with its relatively narrow beam that will sail an "honest to gosh" 40-45 degrees off the wind before giving up speed. A great moment in my life that I like to compare to my wedding day and even the birth of our child was when I was sailing a Gemini 105Mc upwind with two production monohulls nearby. After a while the monohulls, with their flogging sails, couldn't keep the same course and resorted to motoring while I smugly sailed on, close-hauled, sans diesel, maintaining my speed and dignity. That was a first for me in my catamaran career and I'll bore my grandkids to death with that story.

What about flipping over?

Yes, it's possible, and it's also possible that you could get assaulted by Big Foot during your next walk in the woods. In the right (wrong) conditions a catamaran can flip over but these would be the same conditions that would capsize a monohull. All these things are theoretically possible (Big Foot being the most likely scenario) with the right mix of wind and waves but it's of no more a concern in a cat than in a mono. Cats will behave differently in extreme weather, as will different monohull designs, and cats will require sea anchors, drogues, and other tactics to keep things safe, just as monohulls would. Everyone has heard of a story where a catamaran flips over but for every cat that flips, there many more monos that roll and most of those monos don't recover and eventually sink or are disabled to the point of needing rescue. It's just that the cat makes better news. Don't get me wrong; it's a good question if you are seriously considering crossing oceans frequently. But if you want to go coastal cruising with the occasional bluewater passage, capsize shouldn't be any more of a concern than on a monohull.



How much will it heel?

Not much, maybe 5 degrees of heel but that's about it. In 25 knots of wind, both sails reefed, beam reaching in 3-5 foot waves my drink never left its spot on the helm – without a cup holder. Another testimonial is that my 2 year old frequently walks around deck without a stumble while underway. Cats are very good for families and those prone to seasickness.

Why haven't I heard of Gemini Catamarans before?

Gemini has been building multihulls for about 30 years, most of that from a family operated facility just outside of Annapolis. The Gemini 105 is the most successful single-design catamaran ever produced with over 1100 hulls sailing the world. The reason they were somewhat of a sleeper company is that they did very little advertising and have been factory direct until a few years ago when they opened up a dealer network. The Gemini's are now built at the Marlow-Hunter factory in Alachua, FL and Bay Breeze is one of their first dealers introducing the brand to the Great Lakes.



Sailing is believing

Bay Breeze has several Gemini designs for sale and for charter in Traverse City, Michigan and can order Lagoon and Fountaine Pajot catamarans as well. We'll even set you up on a cat charter in the Caribbean on any make and model you choose. And with "Try Before You Buy" we'll reimburse your charter rate if you decide later to buy a catamaran. Call 231-941-0535, email baybreeze@bbyc.com or visit us online at www.bbyc.com.