

Inside the Mason 43

Proven voyaging boats, used Mason 43s are good values for offshore sailors looking for style and comfort in the \$120,000 range

This winter marks the 20th anniversary of the design that became the Mason 43 and 18 years since the first 43 was introduced at the Long Beach California boat show. The design, commissioned by Pacific Asian Enterprises and built by Ta Shing in Taiwan, has roots deep in the American tradition of offshore sailing yachts that reach back to John Alden, Philip Rhodes, and Olin Stevens. In fact, Al Mason worked for all three of the famous yacht designers. Though dated, the design remains one of the most popular offshore boats built in the last 20 years and one of the best values for shorthanded long-range cruising on the used-boat market in the \$120,000 range.



Clover, a Mason 43 owned by George and Rosa Day, during a passage from Fiji to New Zealand.

Design & Construction

The 43 design, which has evolved into the Mason 44, is based upon the earlier Mason 40, which was a wood racer-cruiser with long overhangs, a springy sheer and conventional full keel with an attached rudder and cut away forefoot. Despite fiberglass construction, with all its engineering advancements, the design concept of the 43 is essentially that for a wooden boat of the same size. In other words, design shapes dictated by wood construction and perfected over generations, have been employed. This is true of many fiberglass boat designs from that era, including the line of Cape Dorys, early Pearsons, and Hinckleys. The reason for what may seem retrograde design is simple: It works offshore, offering a lot of hull volume for storage, easy motion in a seaway, high positive stability, and respectable average speeds. Most importantly, because the design is relatively docile, it is well suited to a

couple on their own or a family with small children.

The below-decks layout is expansive for a boat with only a 31', 8" waterline, having good double cabins fore and aft and a reasonable pilot berth in the main saloon. For two couples or a family of four, the layout works well. Five bunks can be left made up while cruising, and with four aboard no one had to sleep in the saloon. With accommodations pushed well aft, the companionway has been shifted off-center to starboard and the depth of the cockpit limited by the need for headroom in the after cabin. The cockpit is the design feature most criticized by owners and was in no small part responsible for the great cockpit in the newer Mason 44s.

It should be noted that the aft cabin of the 43 is one of the best aft cabins ever built. It is completely accessible to the saloon, has a full bulkhead at

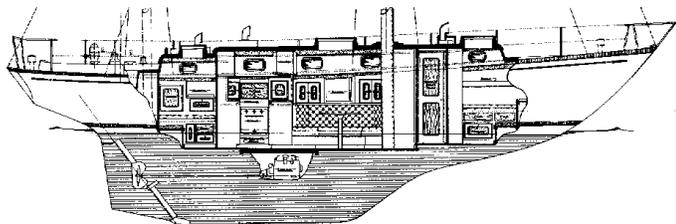
the head of both bunks, has a door that closes completely, its own hanging locker and ample cupboard space. Lastly, the single berth to starboard is an excellent sea berth.

To gain the extra space in the saloon, the engine is mounted below the saloon floor. It may be out of sight, but it is hard to work on it (impossible when its hot) and is well below the waterline so flooding is a threat and back syphoning can be a problem.

Bulletproof is the word to describe the construction of the Mason 43. The solid glass is more than an inch thick at the top of the keel and maintains a half-inch thickness to the gunnel. Laid up in the conventional way, resin-to-glass ratios will be lower than with the new SCRIMP system or vacuum-bag construction. In older Masons, polyester was used while the newer models are built with vinylester. The lead ballast is encapsulated in the keel providing a hugely strong appendage that can withstand a head-on collision with a coral head or submerged rock without risking actual hull damage or leaks.

The hull-deck joint in the older boats, employs a bedded fiberglass flange with full-length stainless steel straps. The teak toe rail and genoa tracks are through-bolted and the bolts also pass through and are tapped into the stainless steel straps. We have seen a Mason 43 after being struck amidships by a steel harbor tug. The damaged looked bad, but the integrity of the hull-deck joint was not compromised.

The decks of older Masons have marine plywood cores. If teak decking was applied over the fiberglass, the screws reach down into the core. This can be a problem over time as mois-



ture enters the laminate and core and gradually rots both. The remedy is to infuse resin into the punky areas and re-screw and seal soft portions of the deck. It is not a cause for alarm or condemnation.

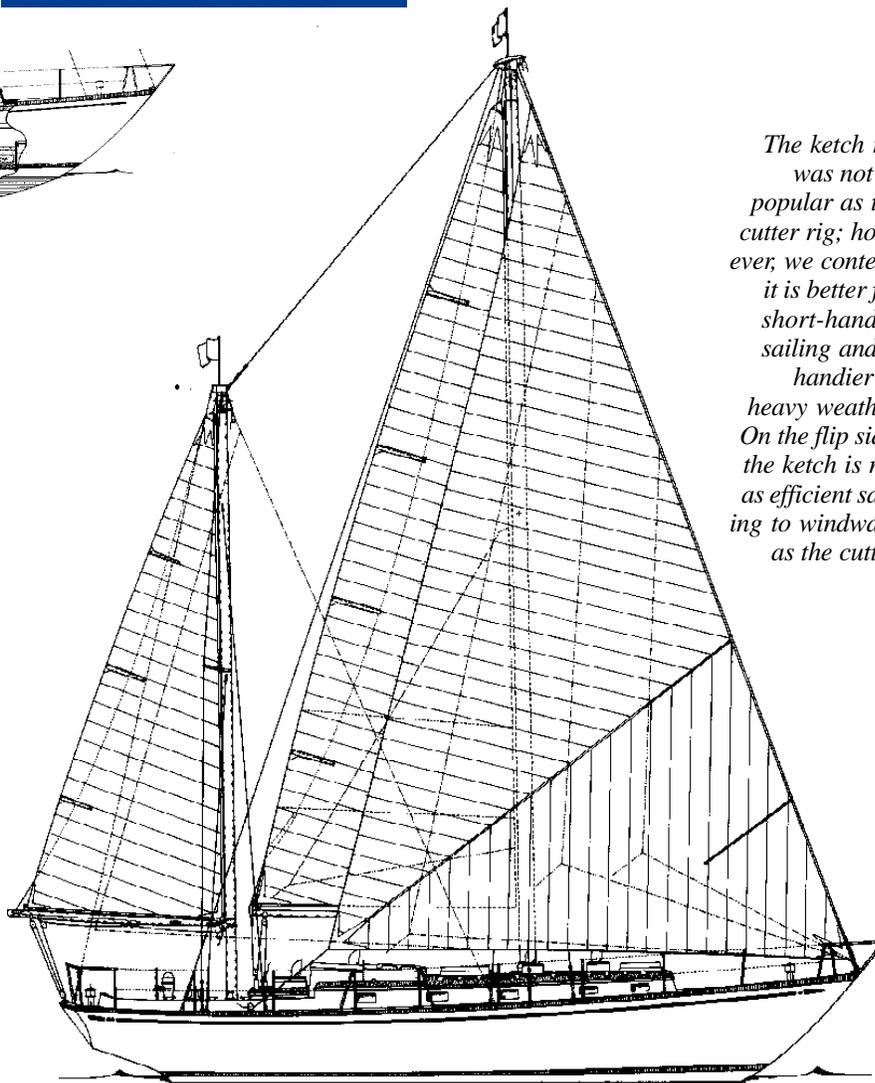
Interior construction and furniture is excellent. Tank mounts, floors, frames, bulkheads and the engine mounts all are heavy to the point of robustness. The furniture itself is woody and dark in early models, although many custom interiors have been done over the years. Also in earlier models, the furniture was built in over plumbing and wiring, making modifications, troubleshooting, and repairs difficult.

From the outset, Pacific Asian maintained ownership of its molds and supervised every construction detail of the new boats, and by doing so transformed Ta Shing (a builder and operator of fishing boats) into the best yard in Taiwan and one of the best in the world. Other boats built by TaShing include the Norseman 447, Mystic 60, Baba 40, and Taswell line.

When inspecting a Mason for construction details, look carefully at the condition of the decks, at the chain plates, stanchion bases and bolts, and at the stem fitting. If older wood hatches are still aboard, don't worry about their condition; they should be thrown out and replaced with aluminum ones anyway.

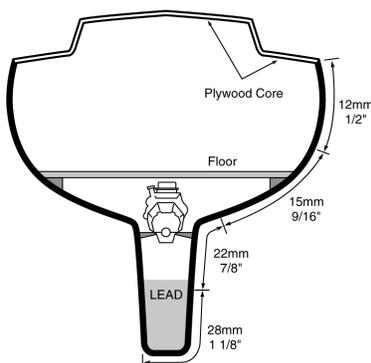
Handling

Designed to float at 23,860 pounds of displacement, older boats will be heavier than that. Moreover, after cruising equipment, anchors, spares and full tanks are added, the boat will displace close to 30,000 pounds.



The ketch rig was not as popular as the cutter rig; however, we contend it is better for short-handed sailing and is handier in heavy weather. On the flip side, the ketch is not as efficient sailing to windward as the cutter.

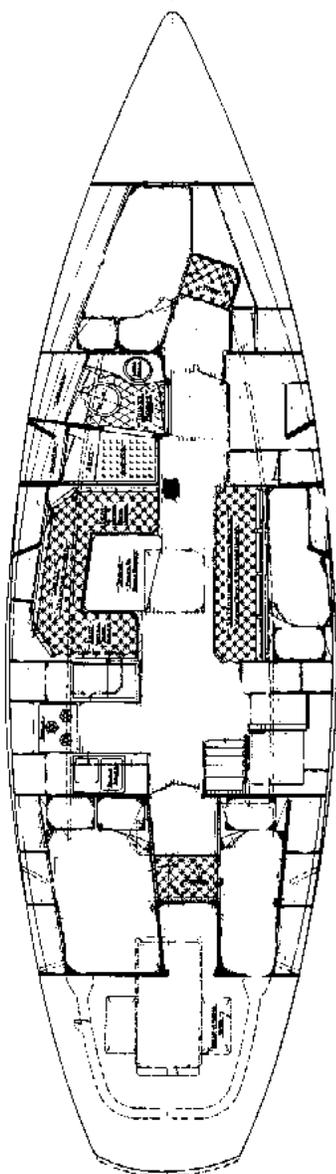
Mason 43 specifications: LOA 43'8"; LWL 31'3"; Beam 12'4"; Draft 6'3"; Sail Area (cutter) 899 sq. ft., (ketch) 916 sq. ft.; Displacement 23, 860; Ballast 9,400 lbs.



The hull layup for the Mason line of boats is massive by modern, light-displacement standards. The topsides are 1/2" of solid fiberglass and the hull then thickens until it reaches 1-1/8" in the keel. Such strength is reassuring when sailing in poorly charted areas and among coral heads.

Under power, with the standard 45-hp Yanmar or Westerbeke, the boat will steam at close to seven knots in flat water, quickly slowing to five or less in a head sea. With the rudder quite far forward by modern standards, the turning radius is large and the docking maneuvers required slow and deliberate. When backing, the stern will follow the turn of the prop instead of the rudder, so stern-to maneuvers are a little tricky; practice improves this from impossible to workable.

Under sail the boat is a surprisingly good performer, despite the displacement and extensive wetted surface. Running before a steady breeze, such as the trade winds, the boat will maintain a 6.5 knot average; in vari-



The accommodation plan shows how the three-cabin layout fits into the deep and narrow hull. The after cabin, with the double to port and single sea berth to starboard, is one of the best aft cabins afloat.

able conditions the average drops to 5.5 knots and going to windward in breezes between 8 and 25 knots the average is 6.1 knots. In blue water terms, the boat will knock off 150-mile days without strain but will never offer up a 200-miler.

Going to windward, the waterline lengthens as the boat heels. Like many designs of the CCA era, the boat is happiest at 15 degrees of heel and should be reefed accordingly. The cutter rig performs better to windward than the ketch, adding a quarter to half a

knot. Both rigs tack through 85 degrees but when the hull's five degrees of leeway is factored in the result is an effective tacking angle of 95 degrees. In heavy weather, the long overhangs tend to create a pitching motion that can turn into dead-stop hobby-horsing in a short steep chop. The solution is to bear off and power up the sails.

Reaching and running, the ketch rig outperforms the cutter, mainly due to the square-footage added by the mizzen staysail—a great cruising sail any member of the crew can handle. In strong breezes the ketch will have to drop the mizzen to prevent weather helm, while the cutter needs to tie in a reef. In a quartering sea, the small rudder, positioned as far forward as it is, has trouble swinging the bow out of as broach. Running downwind, the hull tracks well up to a theoretical hull speed of 7.5 knots and then becomes squirrely. A narrow-shouldered, tri-radial spinnaker will balance the boat well in winds up to 12 knots apparent. With the ketch rig, running wing-and-wing, with the genoa on a pole, the mizzen out against the spreaders and the mizzen staysail drawing, is a fine option for long hauls.

Value

The first Mason 43 to come into the U.S. had a base price of \$154,900. Eighteen years later, that is about the average asking price for a used Mason 43, although it is possible to find one for under \$120,000. The attraction of the Mason 43 for today's offshore sailor is the ability to buy a handsome blue water boat of high-quality construction for less than \$120,000, safe in the knowledge that little further depreciation will occur. Like any boat, the Mason 43 has its vices, but it also has many virtues, which to our minds make it a truly capable offshore boat and fine world cruiser, particularly for a couple or a family. Plus, if you like traditional boats, she's a joy to look at.

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