

M52 Back to the future

Blending classic good looks and modern gadgetry, the craftsmanship of this boat impresses *Chris Museler*



ONNE VAN DER WAL

Newport Harbor always boasts some of the world's most fabulous yachts during the summer season, and the day I tested Morris Yachts' M52 was no different. A fleet of AC45s was competing that week in the America's Cup World Series, so despite the M52's meticulously-appointed cockpit and interior, and an eye-catching sheer and sail profile, she was already up against some steep competition for my attention.

The boat was guided all week by company president Cuyler Morris, son of Morris Yachts founder Tom, who was using hull number two as the VIP boat for the Cup team Artemis Racing. You couldn't get much farther apart in the sailing spectrum than an AC45 and the M52, but Cuyler pointed out that the same CEOs and wealthy guests invited to watch the Cup racing are part of his target market: busy, successful people who want the best sailing experience for their precious free time, and are used to getting what they want.

And just as the Cup has tried to reinvent itself while maintaining ties to its history, so Morris Yachts has tried to merge the demands of time-starved sailors with the allure of authentic Maine craftsmanship and design. Has it worked with the M52? Time will tell, though two have already been built with two more under construction, and Cuyler said the list of prospects is growing.

All boats are compromises, and the challenge for a modern classic like the M-Series is to strike the right balance between all the positive handling, feel and

aesthetic qualities of traditional, long-keel boats, and the space, ease of use and speed demanded by today's time-pressed recreational sailors. Morris Yachts has taken no chances in this endeavour and hired the draftsmen at Sparkman & Stephens to pen the M29, M36, M42 and M52.

"Classic is all about the looks," said Cuyler as we motored past the Cup grandstands, where the crowd was dwindling and the spectator fleet was clearing out of the bay. "A modern classic gives you the performance."



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M52

DESIGNER
Sparkman & Stephens

LOA
52ft 11in (16.1m)

LWL
38ft 2in (11.6m)

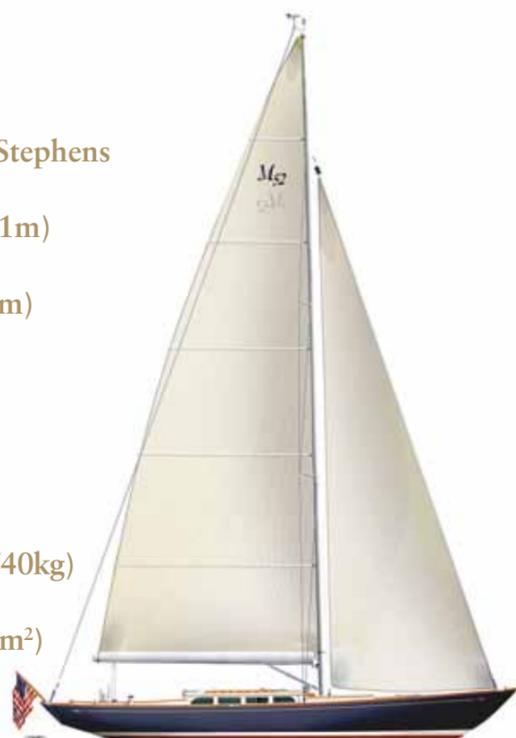
BEAM
14ft (4.3m)

DRAUGHT
6ft 8in/5ft 8in
(2m/1.7m)

DISPLACEMENT
45,725lb (20,740kg)

SAIL AREA
1,414sqft (131m²)

PRICE
\$1,380,000



My goal on this day was to see if that compromise had worked on the M52, and worked well enough to, frankly, fulfil the needs and dreams of a sailor willing to pay \$1.38m (c. £860,000) for their next sailing boat.

GETTING UNDER WAY

The 15 to 20-knot sea breeze that had been filling late each day that week had been holding on, and the tide was just beginning to ebb. The air smelt salty and no matter what, it was going to be hard to have a bad time.

We set the sails effortlessly once we were astride the squat, granite Castle Hill Lighthouse. All the mainsail controls – halyard, kicker, backstay and mainsheet – were led aft to the helm station. The fully battened sail has the in-boom furling system expected these days, and a unique auto-levelling feature for completely smooth furling and unfurling. The push of a button from the cockpit synchronises the furler with the halyard.

The wheel had a light feel until the breeze topped 18 knots, then the weather helm became heavy. But this could be remedied with more backstay tension. The small fractionally-rigged headsail and large main arrangement lends itself to this adjusting but also gives the boat a more classic profile. For a more performance-orientated skipper, playing the backstay and mainsheet

Previous spread: From the pen of S&S, the M52 has a pleasing sheer
Opposite: Heavy teak decks combine with minimalistic deck layout
Above right: Morris Yachts' trademark is minutely detailed joinery

will offer rewards in the form of popping an extra knot or so out of the speedometer in the big puffs.

“In a true classic boat you have to really focus on sailing otherwise the boat will come to a dead stop,” Cuyler said, to ring the differences. The boat dropped to 4.5 knots in a tack then picked up to 6.6 knots in 10 seconds. After 30 seconds we were up to 8.5 knots and true wind speed showed 20 knots at the top of the mast.

Driving hard into a broad ocean swell of about 6ft (1.8m), we took little spray over the deck, and certainly none in the cockpit. Off the wind, we passed 9 knots and the boat surged along with great tracking. All manoeuvres, including gybes, were well within the capabilities of an average sailor.

Cuyler said ease of handling was one of the major design criteria of the M52. “People have less time. If we can solve the time thing and make it easier to get going... people are going to get into the nuts and bolts faster. Sailing doesn't have to be hard.”

DOWN BELOW

The boat we sailed was the three-cabin version with a double berth in the bow, another double on the port quarter and a single cabin opposite the companionway. As soon as I climbed aboard, I scurried below to examine the

woodwork the company is known for. My first test was to try to find the seam of the flowing teak countertop in the aft heads. It took more than a minute, but I finally found one so fine that I couldn't capture it in a photograph.

The joinery is of the finest quality above and below deck and truly defines the boat. From the finish on the edge of a lower cabinet to the placement of a chock atop a toerail, it is difficult and very expensive to make everything perfect. But Morris Yachts draws on 40 years of boatbuilding heritage, all the corners have book-matched grain and the accompanying varnish was applied with glassy lustre.

Space below is plentiful on account of the boat's 14ft (4.3m) beam, and nowhere more so than the main saloon. The off-centre folding table to port allows for this openness, and contains a nice design point: a vertical drawer with supports for three wine bottles. Overhead is the newly-engineered butterfly hatch with the same geometry as a traditional skylight. The sleek stainless trim presumably doesn't leak like its forebear.

Moving aft, there is a small chart table and navigation station to starboard that shares a seat with the main saloon. There, all mobile technology can be plugged in for charging or integration into navigation or stereo systems, and there is room enough for a standard American chart.



BILLY BLACK

Above: The large, bright saloon could do with more handholds

“Traditional chart tables are unnecessary today as mobile devices and instruments on the pedestal have taken their place,” explained Cuyler.

Behind a bulkhead to port are the heads, and opposite across a narrow passage, the galley counter. This space is tight, but it does lend security if the boat is heeling. However, the moment we set sail and began beating upwind, walking through the saloon reminded me of crossing a foredeck: doing a quick shuffle of my feet between handholds. It seems to be a trend to forget this in modern boats, but an extra handrail or two near the centreline on the ceiling would be quite helpful.

Some of the most enjoyable and useful features below became apparent only over time. There are several small, elevated shelves throughout the boat with bright, meticulously-carved fiddles that match the curves presented. From the heads to the forward cabin and even spliced into the top of a main saloon partition on the starboard side, these are beautiful little nooks to place a drink, torch, reading glasses and anything looking for a temporary, but visible home.

CLEAR DECKS FOR ACTION

I am a major critic of the contemporary approach of tacking more and more gear onto the deck of a boat. Anchors and windlasses are two of the biggest detractors from the beauty of what should be a boat's most dominant feature: its bow.

The M52 solves this problem in a most pleasing and practical fashion. A flush teak hatch, offset to port, folds open on pistons to reveal the chain locker. The

anchor, supported by a hinged arm, and its chock are also on a large air piston. The mechanism is easily lifted, then pushed down into place and pinned. It takes little more than 5lb (2.3kg) of pressure to begin the process. There's a saltwater power hose within the locker; only the windlass buttons are on the deck. It's no mean engineering feat, but the outcome seems worth the effort.

The deck hatches up for'ard have the modern, flush look of a Wally, but surrounded by bright toerails, the nod to tradition remains. My bare feet could tell the decks were thick, firm wood – a fact that Cuyler confirmed, saying that the teak was $\frac{1}{32}$ in (13.5mm) thick, and that “most companies use $\frac{1}{4}$ in to $\frac{1}{2}$ in (6-8mm)”.

The retaining bars around the custom stainless cowl vents are an excellent touch, even though the self-tacking jib arrangement leaves little concern for sheets fouling on the vents. Protecting them from the crew, however, is important, and they are bedded strongly for service as useful handholds.

The unique Dorade box at the bottom of the vent completes the look, and adds to the boat's custom feel. The icing on the cake is a sliding vent cover below decks, usually a detail found only on classic yachts with conscientious owners. If you've ever had to run on deck at 2am to turn the vent around when a cold front hits, you can appreciate how valuable that detail really is.

A boat's other dominant feature, the deckhouse, is an area where the M52 has achieved aesthetic success. The shape and windows work seamlessly with the interior, and even the drop in elevation forward to

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receive the jib traveller, though not totally in line with an early 1900s design, is moderately appealing.

The cockpit is large by any standard, but made safer by a fixed centreline table and the welcome addition of a teak foot chock on the cockpit sole. This was quite handy as we heeled past 20°. And the middle of the table pivots to reveal a cooler for on-the-fly drinks. You simply press one end to lift the other, like a seesaw.

The final key area of the boat is the helm station and here, a large wheel gives a feeling of control and stature, even. Powered winches on each side take the jib and mainsheets, and all the furling controls are within reach. Line at your feet is inevitable, but not impossible to manage in this space, and you can easily walk around the wheel to move forward into the cockpit.

THE VERDICT

Pulling the boat back into Newport Shipyard later that evening with 12-M boats sticking out on one side and J-Class racer *Hanuman* and Vendée Globe legend Michel Desjoyeaux's MOD 70 trimaran on the other, I felt it prudent to let Mr Morris take the reins. With bow thrusters and no fear of speed in tight quarters, he spun the boat on her length and calmly backed into the berth.

I realised that my conversation with Cuyler and his staff that afternoon had never been interrupted by the boat. Yes, they are seasoned sailors, but it is unusual to

go through tacks, in the ocean, in 20 knots of breeze, without even pausing in a discussion. This was one of many subtle signs of the ease of use that Cuyler believes is a key to the success of the M-Series.

Sometimes it's the little things that make a boat attractive to a sailor. And there are a lot of little things on this Morris. They are all so well finished that any non-sailor with an eye for art will pick up on the macro and micro areas of quality and artistry.

The boat sails well and, though quick, takes a cue from the motion of full keel forms, riding smoothly over the waves without pounding. That motion, combined with the comfort down below, caught my attention that day, despite the amazing scenery and yachts around me.

The angle and curve of the seat corners were perfect for nestling into a leeward repose to nap or read – one of my favourite positions on a boat above or below decks. This space instantly brought back the laziness of childhood cruising. That, and the comfort of the subtle but meticulous joinery, made the boat work for me.

DESIGNER/BUILDER

Morris Yachts certainly has one of the best reputations for quality in the industry, with plenty of repeat customers. “We wanted to build more boats and realised people were using boats differently,” Cuyler told me. “We had no idea the M-Series would be as big as it has become.”

The company has built its reputation on traditional good looks and lines, combined with a seaworthy sensibility that turns passagemaking into a reality for owners who are adventurous. Before the M-Series, Morris Yachts had been building three to five boats each year, from 26ft (7.9m) sloops to the largest of their ocean series, a 52-footer (15.9m).

Now it has built more than 100 M-Series boats since 2004. “We've been focusing on building the best sailing boats for 40 years. We are a company of sailors. It's a real competitive advantage,” Cuyler said. 

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Above: A blend of convenient modern gadgetry and well considered styling give this boat great appeal