CATS UK

PART THREE OF OUR USEFUL GUIDE TO BRITISH CRUISING CATS, BY JIM AND JUDY ANDREWS

# SIDE-BY-SIDE

## THIS MONTH: THREE COMPACT CRUISERS

### SIROCCO 26

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|---|---|
| LOA | 25ft 11in |
| LWL | 22ft 6in |
| Beam | 12ft 9in |
| Draft | 2ft 4in |
| Sail area | 301sq ft |
| Price (ex. VAT) | £13,990 |
| Builders | Prout Catamarans, The Point, Canvey Island, Essex. |

Since last they produced a cruising catamaran of about this size (the old Ranger 27, back in the early 1960's), the Prout brothers have ceaselessly indulged in a search for better shapes. The result is improved performance for their boats, coupled with safety. They were the first to employ low-aspect-ratio fixed keels instead of fins or centreboards; they invented an anti-slam nacelle under the low bridgedeck which allows lower topsides and superstructures; they also evolved what Judy and I still refer to as that slightly curious 'minsail' rig — a mast stepped aft and a huge roller headsail.

One of the problems with more conventional Bermudian rigs on catamarans is that the thrust of very upright headsail luffs, and of mainsails set on masts forward of amidships, is angled very heavily over the lee bow, since boats of this kind will not readily spill wind by heeling like a monohull.

With such long, shallow hulls, depression of either end of the boat results in dramatic shifting of the Centre of Lateral Resistance, and seriously affects helm balance, perhaps causing the catamaran to luff sharply, and even capsize.

Prouts' 'mast aft' sail plan keeps mainsail thrust off the bow, and the well-angled genoa luff creates a small amount of lift, thus depressing the bow far less than conventional rigs.

Sirocco is in fact the fourth boat Prout have thus rigged, and is consequently a real delight to anyone 'mad about sailing' when it comes to handling and performance. So while Judy was below inspecting the accommodation, I was having myself a high old time putting the little craft through her paces.

She is fast and weatherly enough to impress even the most confirmed monohull man, and is as positive as a well-bred racing dinghy. For all that, she will remain steadily on course when you want her to, and heaves-to with all the motionless aplomb of one of those old, long-keeled, straight-stemmed fishing smacks of yester-year.

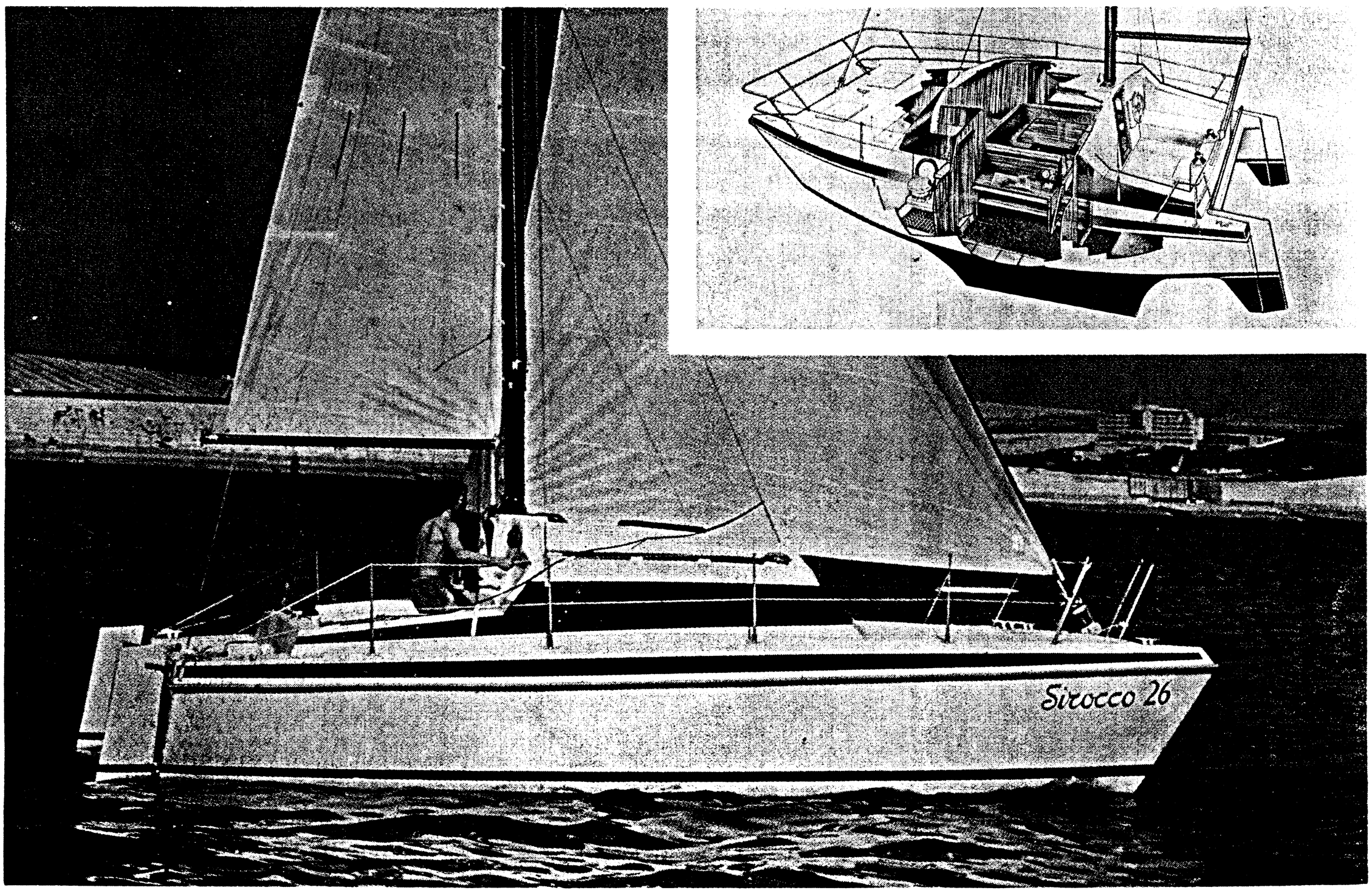
True, I might have preferred a genoa cut slightly higher, for all-round visibility from the wheel when the thing was fully unrolled, but one could always reel in a bit of furling line, rolling the foot of the sail higher up for close manoeuvring. One wouldn't wish to be going full pelt then anyway, and a little less headsail is far easier to sheet quickly if short-tacking.

Prouts favour having the headsail sheet-winches mounted together near the centreline at the back of the cockpit (though one could probably manage with just one winch here if you didn't carry a spinnaker). I'm afraid I created some right little tangles between mainsheet and jibsheet, and got winch handles foul of the mainsheet block when the latter's traveller stops were close-set on their full-width track for beating. The trick is to use the *windward* of the two winches each time, but even at that I found it a bit awkward. Lack of practice.

Wheel steering at the fore end of the broader-than-long cockpit was light and accurate, but being hydraulic, by nature, lacked 'feel', so that steering demanded vigilance.

The cockpit itself was nicely sheltered, and to my mind lacked just one thing — lockers. There was none at all (but could have been several), and none on the aft decking over the hulls either, so that anything like fenders, warps,





sails-ties, or mains'l cover had to be taken forward and deposited, along with spare sails or the anchor and its cable, in one or other of the two big deck-lockers. There wasn't even a cubby-hole for binoculars or camera, not even just inside the cabin door, because that space, along the forward surface of the cabin's after bulkhead, was one side of the passage across the ship, leading down into the hulls.

And talking of warps, it also bothered me a bit to note that mooring lines made fast to the four deck-cleats provided for tying up in harbour were without corresponding fairleads, so that the stern rope, for instance, was quietly chafing itself against the back-stay chainplate, and at the same time like the bow warp and both 'springs', was rubbing away at the gel-coat on the very sharply moulded angle forming the totally unprotected deck-edge. Still, these are all things a prudent owner would put right for himself, but I thought they let down the otherwise highly developed air which this really intriguing sailing craft so clearly possesses.

Going below, one must remember the step down into the nacelle which runs along the middle of the bridgedeck, giving headroom in the cabin, foot-room under the table, and engine room right aft under the back of the cockpit transom, as well, of course, as greatly reducing the slamming effect of seas when beating. (Its section is in fact very similar to the heavily chined hulls of a Catalac.)

The motor normally fitted is a 9hp diesel with a steerable outdrive, which in Sirocco's case is operated from the helm position by a foot lever, quite independently of the wheel and rudder assembly. It takes a bit of practice to do the right things automatically, especially when performing a 'three-point' turn in port, but it does work well.

Below decks, the typical Prout-style layout comprises a long, 'D'-shaped saloon with views forward, which coverts at night to a really excellent double-bunk. Sitting, and to some extent standing, headroom over the bridgedeck nacelle is adequate, and cushions are deep enough to avoid 'bottoming'. The galley in the starboard hull is laid out so that the cook faces inboard at stove or sink, with his/her back to the source of light, but thus avoiding the awkwardness of having to work partly under the sidedeck.

In the starboard forecabin, a 6ft 4in bunk, 3ft wide at the head end, tapers to a mere 1ft 6in, with a long shelf at one side, and a big locker under the pillow end. Standing room is somewhat cramped. Abaft the galley work-top, under the sidedeck, is a little open-fronted hanging locker, just under 2ft wide and almost 4ft high, but only 9in deep at the top and tapering down the nothing.

In the quartercabin, maximum head-room of 4ft 8in is achieved by sticking one's head up into the space formed above the wide cockpit coaming moulding. Again there is a narrow shelf, which Judy thought would have been better with a fiddle to stop things decanting onto the bunk, and a small window facing into the cockpit.

These arrangements are duplicated over in the port hull, which also boasts a truly vast sliding chart-table, surely the biggest of its kind in any 26ft cruising boat anywhere. In the port bow is a large shower-room and toilet. Standing headroom over the loo area is awkwardly restricted by the angle of the cabintop, and I wondered why the positions of the hand-basin and WC had not been reversed, to make things easier.

We both thought everything attractively finished, in wood and plastics of one kind or another, so that the total effect of Sirocco's styling, within and without, is elegant, and very, very modern. She is undoubtedly seaworthy enough for most tastes; the boat we sailed had just punched her way down Channel into an end-of-season gale, and while her skipper reported that it 'wasn't very comfortable', the little boat had gamely battled to windward without cause for alarm or worry. Not bad going for any 26-footer, of whatever kind!

We liked Sirocco. The snag is the basic cost of £13,990, which includes neither engine nor sails, nor many other essential items which other firms fit as part of the deal. Adding VAT takes it up to £16,088, but to this most folk would have to add a further £4000 or so before they were done — unless they opted for one of the several stages of kit available. Either way, you'd end up with a really grand little boat. ●