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A heavyweight with a nimble nature

A long-keeler designed for serious offshore sailing, the Rustler 36 is also more sprightly than you might expect – as David Harding discovered

In almost any conversation about boats for blue-water cruising, the Rustler 36 will be mentioned. She's the archetypal long-keeled heavyweight; a prime example of a boat chosen by those who want to go places and need to survive anything the sea can throw at them.

Her name conjures up images of a proper, hand-built boat, constructed in the time-honoured manner by skilled craftsmen who do things the best way, not the quickest or the cheapest. Sometimes images like this are

created by clever marketing, or by window-dressing on the part of the builder, but not in the case of the Rustler. Her pedigree is impeccable in almost every department: she was designed in the late 1970s by Holman and Pye – it's no coincidence that she looks remarkably like a big version of the Twister – and built by Orion in Falmouth before being taken over by Rustler Yachts who are still building her just down the road. Everything about her makes her purpose clear: the classic profile with the spoon bow and transom-hung rudder, the full-

length keel with the cut-away forefoot, and the simple masthead rig with forward and aft lowers. This is not a boat designed for day-sailing or marina-hopping: she makes you want to step aboard, sail away over the horizon and keep on going – which is exactly what many Rustler 36 owners do.

Boat show impulse

Boats like this are generally bought by experienced sailors who have had several boats before. But there are always exceptions, and Tim Shears was one of them.

Tim had never owned a boat when he went along to the Southampton Boat Show a few years ago with his father-in-law. The plan hadn't initially been to buy one, but Tim figured that the only way to get on board a few genuine intentions – and besides, he admits, there came a stage when he did actually become more serious about the possibility.

'We went around 20 boats. I told the salesman that I had little experience and explained what we were planning to do – mainly coastal and cross-Channel sailing

with my wife and three children, and possibly longer passages if the desire arose. We then asked what in their range was right for us and why.'

'We met everything from the smart deckies-and-blazer-type salesman to the salty old seadog. Then after a few hours we found ourselves standing on the deck of one of the shortlisted boats looking across at the Rustler, and I thought it was the best-looking boat we had seen. So we went and had a look, and the salesman was very knowledgeable, good at asking us what sort of sailing we were interested in. We warmed to

the whole thing, and it was a snap decision.'

Tim then signed a contract, but admits that it was only over the following months when sorting out the final specification that he really started doing his research and realised that he had in fact bought just the right boat.

One of his principal criteria, he explains, was low depreciation – and his advice from every knowledgeable quarter was that Rustlers maintain their value particularly well. Quality of build was important, too, and here again he was happy with what he saw and heard.

Despite being relatively new to sailing, and totally new to boat-

PRICE
second-hand:
£75,000-
£130,000
New: from
£170,000



Moving forward is made easy by wide side decks and chunky handrails. Strips of teak edge the genoa tracks to reduce tripping and stubbed toes



The deep cockpit is comfortably laid out for short-handed sailing

ownership, Tim didn't hang around once *Little Dove* was launched: within months he had set off on an extensive cruise of the Baltic. But many of the miles since then have been logged closer to home, because Tim and his family find that the Rustler makes a first-class day-sailer and coastal cruiser as well. That surprised me because, like many people, I had always regarded the 36 as a boat that you buy only if you want to go a long way in a straight line. I have sailed heavyweights with long keels that make fine offshore cruisers but are not the sort of boats you want to take out for an afternoon's spin around the bay: they lack manoeuvrability, and everything

on board is so big and heavy that working the boat demands a serious effort.

Springing surprises

Armed with these preconceptions, I joined Tim and his family on *Little Dove* in Yarmouth for a sail. Tim admits that he often has to reverse out between the pontoons once clear of his marina berth, but on this occasion he managed to swing the bow around and head out forwards with plenty of room to spare. Although boats with this length of keel will never spin as tightly or reverse as predictably as a typical modern fin-keeler, the Rustler's cut-away forefoot and large rudder make her more manageable than many. The extra

punch of the 34hp Beta diesel (upgraded from the standard 28) also helps.

That was surprise number one. Number two was the way she sailed. You wouldn't expect a light-air flyer, and you don't get one. We had a gusty 8-14 knots of wind, and when making to windward in the lighter patches we only just managed to keep pace with a Trapper 500 – a 28-footer (8.5m) that often has no respect for boats with longer waterlines. With 16 knots over the deck, however, the Rustler moved into another gear and started pulling away, accelerating to 5.8 knots from the 4.5 knots we had been clocking when pointing high in 13-14 knots of apparent wind. After about 10 minutes, with the wind continuing to fluctuate in strength, we had left the Trapper in our wake.

Responding to tension

The transformation at this critical wind speed was remarkable, as was the boat's sensitivity to sail trim. I had imagined that fine-tuning would make relatively little difference, but while she's steady, directionally stable and reassuringly solid, the Rustler is also highly responsive to mainsail leech tension. With the traveller set so the boom was just below the centreline, *Little Dove* carried a small amount of lee helm. Then, once the boom was centred, the lee helm gave way to the slightest weather helm and a far more positive feel. Other tweaks produced effects that were less pronounced yet still noticeable, serving as a reminder that the Rustler was derived from a boat (the Twister) that, in her day, was a force to be reckoned with in



There's no aft cabin on the Rustler so the owner's accommodation is in the bow, forward of the heads



A well-appointed chart table with its own seat at the head of the quarter berth. This area is often customised around instruments and pilot books

Rustler work on the basis that owners are going to spend a long time aboard and want nothing but the best: joinery of this quality is hard to find

competitive circles.

Tim says he normally starts reefing the mainsail in about 18 knots of apparent wind. The boat can handle more, but goes just as well with one slab.

As you would imagine, heaving to presented no challenges. Neither did gybing round to carry on sailing with the sheets pinned in, or tacking and spinning straight into a gybe to complete the circle, again without touching the sheets. Coming out of the spin carrying little way, she accelerated gently without stalling and was soon back up to cruising speed.

Steering a course

Tim chose wheel steering for *Little Dove* on the basis that he was new to

sailing and a wheel would be easier to get the hang of for both him and his children. As he used to fly his own plane, he was also accustomed to having a navigation screen directly in front of him. Plenty of Rustler 36s have tillers instead – which, with the transom-hung rudder (ideal for wind-vane self-steering gears) make for a simple, robust steering system.

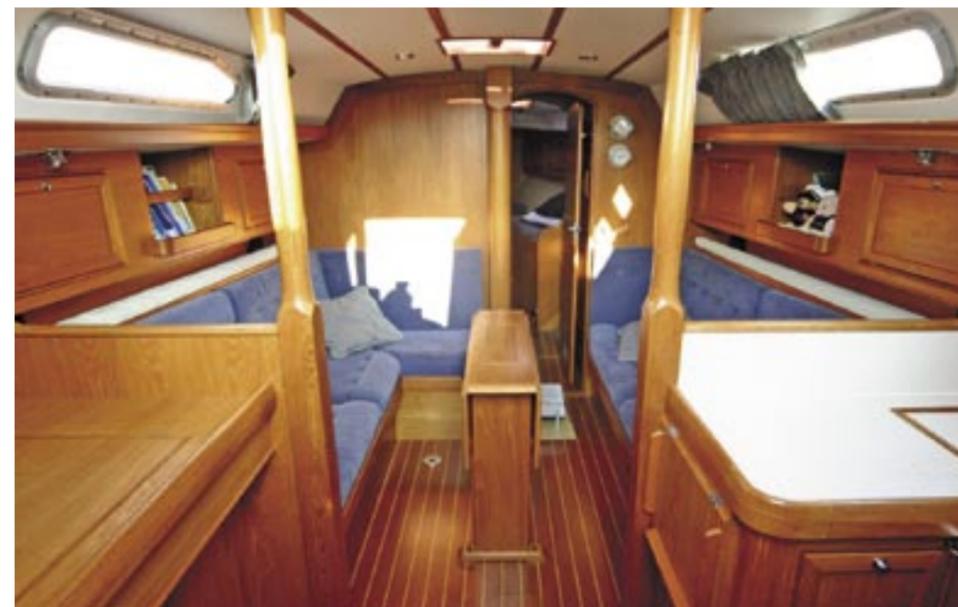
Whichever you choose, the mainsheet on its traveller across the cockpit is easy to reach from the helm. I would want more than the 4:1 purchase to ensure adequate leech tension in a breeze. To tend the Andersen 46 self-tailing headsail winches you have to

move forward from behind the wheel because they're just out of reach, though the boat's directional stability means this usually presents no problems.

As befits a proper offshore cruiser, the Rustler has a cockpit that's deep, comfortable and not so wide that there's nowhere to brace your legs when sitting on the windward seat. The high coamings are nicely angled and Tim had extra seats added in each corner of the stern rail. A full-depth locker runs the length of the starboard seat, with hatches either side of the traveller.

As you move forward, you see plenty of things that separate the Rustler from other boats, including the angled teak strips either side of the genoa tracks to help prevent tripping and stubbed toes, and two pairs of vents. Not everything comes as standard – Tim specified a raft of extras from the teak decks and the boarding gates to the stainless frames over the cowl vents forward of the mast – but the point is that, within reason, Rustler can fit whatever anyone asks for. While there is a standard specification and layout, you would have to look hard to find two Rustler 36s the same among the 120-odd afloat.

My only real reservation on deck is the aluminium toerail, which is bolted through the hull-to-deck joint. It's a widely-used and well-established method, but not one I would choose because of the potential cost and complexity of repair. I also favour through-deck scuppers to help avoid dirty



Designed to be practical at sea as well as comfortable in harbour, the layout includes two pillar hand-holds – rarely seen but a real asset in rough conditions. The joinery is beautifully finished in teak. Pipe-cots pull out above the saloon berths to create extra passage-berths close to the centre of the boat

streaks down the topsides.

The finish on *Little Dove's* hull, moulded in dark-blue gel coat, has lasted well. Tim has waxed it every year and recently went over it with a buffer to restore the original sheen before putting the boat on the market. He has just sold her to make way for a new boat later in 2008: the first of the Rustler 44s.

Accommodation

Some people argue that if you're only going to spend a few weekends a year on your boat you can tolerate second-rate joinery. Rustler work on the basis that owners are going to spend a long time aboard and want nothing but the best.

The quality of the teak finish is

indeed hard to fault: rough corners, unsealed end-grain and joints filled with sealant – normal fare on production boats – are impossible to find.

This is a boat designed for sea-going, and it shows. Pillars run to the deckhead from the galley and chart table, providing bracing points that let you loop your arm around them so your hands are still free. Features like this have no place in the 'keep it open so it looks spacious' philosophy that seems to determine the layout of many modern yachts.

Equally unfashionable, perhaps, is the quarter berth. Its inboard side at the forward end can be hinged up to reveal welly boot stowage and draining space for wet waterproofs, while still leaving

plenty of sleeping space the other side of a lee-cloth.

Forward of this is a half-Admiralty chart table with a hinge-down switch panel revealing neat, well-spaced circuitry.

With the batteries and all the tankage being beneath the cabin sole, in the deep sump formed by the encapsulated keel, under-bunk space is free for stowage. Extra sleeping space in the saloon is provided by pull-out pipe-cots, above which is built-in stowage

that butts neatly up to the deck-head – something else not found in mass-produced boats.

Neat details include the siting of the seacocks for the heads on the centreline next to the transducers for easy access and good drainage into the deep bilge, a hinge-up extension to the worktop in the galley, and the rubber anti-rattle pads on the well-fitting sole boards.

Poking into corners reveals almost uniformly neat finishing, chunky frames and stringers bonded to the hull, and bulkheads that are also fully bonded to both hull and deckhead.

PBO's verdict

The Rustler 36 is a boat that really does live up to her reputation. To spend time aboard is to appreciate how a boat can – some might say should – be built if the purchase price is a secondary consideration. She looks and feels right, sails beautifully (if not as fast in most conditions as a modern alternative), has an unusually comfortable motion, and holds her value. Don't look at her if you want maximum internal volume, double-figure speeds surfing downwind, or a boat that spins on a sixpence under power.

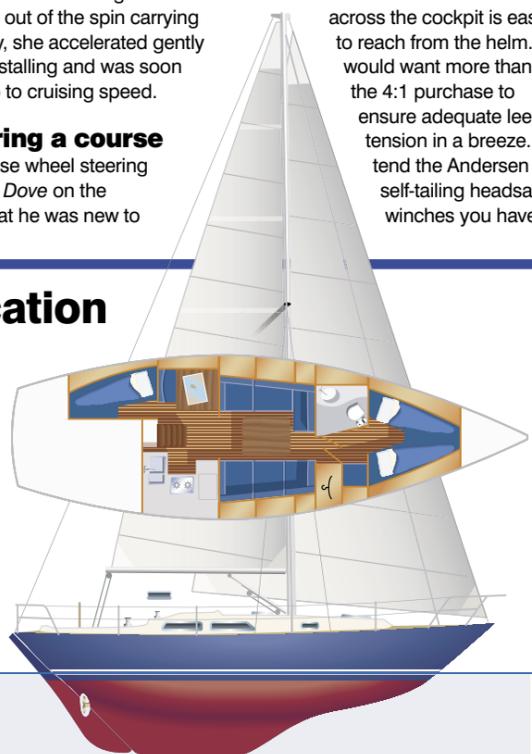
A boat like this will only ever appeal to a relatively small market, but Rustler still have plenty of new 36s on order for people who believe that quality never goes out of fashion.

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Technical specification

LOA 10.77m (35ft 4in)
LWL 8.08m (26ft 11in)
Beam 3.35m (11ft 11in)
Draught 1.67m (5ft 6in)
Displacement 7,623kg (16,806lb)
Ballast 3,456kg (7,619lb)
Sail area (mainsail & No.1 genoa) 64.4sq m (693sq ft)
Headroom 1.93m (6ft 4in)
Engine various, mainly Yanmar, Beta or Nanni
Designer Holman & Pye
Builder Orion Yachts/Rustler Yachts
Contacts: Rustler Yachts, tel: 01326 310120 www.rustleryachts.co.uk
Rustler Owners Association: www.rustlerowners.net



Other boats to look at



Tradewind 35

PRICE: £65,000 UPWARDS

A super-serious offshore cruiser with a full-length keel, a flush deck and just a small coachroof. Now built by Tradewind Yachts in Holland (www.tradewindyachts.eu).



Rival 36

PRICE: £60,000-£85,000

Peter Brett's last Rival design, launched in 1980, has a long fin keel with a separate rudder on a full-length skeg. A centreboard was also offered. Engine was a 20hp Bukh.



Biscay 36

PRICE: £35,000-£55,000

Designed by Alan Hill and built most recently by Cygnus in Falmouth, she's another long-keeled heavyweight suitable for serious offshore work. Sloop or ketch rigged.