

Pronavia 38 Review

The Reflex 38 got a full makeover as a cruiser-racer – step forward the Pronavia 38. Rupert Holmes reports.

Many boats claim to be performance cruisers, but few make the grade. However, it's instantly obvious that this design is different — it's a true performance yacht, retaining the well-proven speed and stability characteristics of its predecessor, but with a completely redesigned and fully fitted lightweight interior. The new boat is available in two versions: a standard cruiser racer (as tested), or a high-performance model with a lighter foam laminate interior, plus carbon rig and rudderstock.

The Reflex 38 started life as a brief from Sir Robin Knox-Johnston's Clipper Ventures Company. He wanted a fleet of strong racing yachts, with ocean crossing capability, to train crews for round the- world voyages. The boat has proved to be one of the most successful designs of its size on the racecourse, both round the cans and offshore. For instance, Sailing Logic's 'Puma Logic' was overall class winner in the IRC 1 RORC Series Championship in 2005, and finished third in class in that year's Rolex Fastnet Race. In 2006 the same boat finished the selection trials for the Commodores' Cup in second place, although controversially was not picked for the team.

Part of the original design brief of the Reflex was for high ultimate stability — the design has an AVS of 144 degrees. With the additional displacement of the Pronavia cruising version this is reduced by around five degrees, but is nonetheless still a very respectable figure. The 2.3m draught keel is an iron/lead composite structure, with a large bulb at the base giving a low centre of gravity. Add to that a ballast ratio of near 45 per cent for the raceboat (41 per cent for the cruiser) and you have a very stiff vessel with excellent sail carrying ability. A shoal-draught option of 1.75m is also offered.

The design excels in offshore events — as well successes in the Fastnet, the Reflex 38 has won its division crossing the Atlantic in the ARC and topped the field in the grueling Three Peaks Race four times running.

'The new boat fulfills the potential the design always had,' says designer Christian Stimson, 'It has the benefit of a spacious and comfortable interior, without sacrificing performance.' In part, this has been possible because the Reflex has a heavy low-tech 12mm plywood interior, so the redesigned interior is of similar weight, despite the huge improvement in comfort and sophistication. However, the extra equipment of the more cruising-oriented design, from a windlass to pressurized water systems, inevitably pushes the weight up. The IRC rating of the Pronavia comes out around 1.055, compared to the typical figure for a Reflex of around 1.067-1.069.

Rickard Eskilsson and Anders Ekstrand, who bought the Swedish boatyard six years ago, developed the Pronavia idea. Their search for a more up to date design led them to Christian Stimson's Reflex 38; and they bought the moulds from Cowes-based builder Nigel Harley and commissioned stylist Roel de Groot to design the interior.

One of the key attributes of the Reflex 38 that has not changed is its structural strength. The laminate was engineered by SP Technologies to provide a balance between robust charter boat and performance racer, including a requirement to absorb the very considerable forces of running aground at 10 knots. The engineers' calculations were proved accurate when a Reflex ran aground at speed on the wreck of the 'Varvassi' off The Needles — a hulk that claims race boats almost every year. The impact left a large cauliflower shaped dent in the front of the foil, but incredibly there was no damage to the laminate structure or keel bolts.

Our test boat, 'Seawolf', was owned by Dave Latham of Atlantic Charters. The boat was based in the Solent area during summer 2006, before moving to Gibraltar for the winter season. Dave chose the Pronavia following a year's experience of owning a Reflex 38. He was also drawn by the Swedish yard's flexibility in incorporating his own requests into the build, yet the cost worked out around 20 per cent cheaper for a comparable specification. 'Seawolf' is fitted with almost all the available optional cruising comforts such as boarding ladder, cockpit shower and spray hood.

ON DECK

Externally, the main differences between the Reflex and Pronavia are in the cockpit area, where the seats extend further aft and the coamings are more rounded. Additionally the Reflex's big wheel is eschewed in favour of twin wheels and the entire area is decked in teak. The steering positions from each side are nothing short of excellent, and there's no evidence that the smaller wheels result in high steering loads feeding through to the helm.

Deck gear is by Lewmar and Spinlock, with an upgrade to Harken available as an option. A German mainsheet system is led to winches just forward of each wheel, where they can be reached from the helm if short-handed, or by a dedicated mainsheet trimmer. Under-deck halyards help to create a neat and uncluttered layout, boosted by flush-fitting hatches. The coach roof does not unduly hinder deck work and the conventional alloy toe rail is cut flat aft of the shrouds for comfortable hiking — overall it's a better proposition for round the cans racing than that of many popular cruiser-racers. There's a liferaft locker under the sole at the aft end of the cockpit, with space for a few fenders etc, but otherwise locker space is restricted on three-cabin boats. Two cabin models, however, have a large cockpit locker aft of the heads compartment.

The keel-stepped double-spreader 9/10ths fractional rig is alloy on cruiser-racer versions and carbon on the all-out racer. 'Seawolf' is equipped with cruising laminate sails, by Royal Sails of Sweden. Many Reflexes gain a small rating advantage by sailing with a maximum 130 per cent genoa, although Stimson recommends a 140 per cent headsail for the Pronavia: 'It's needed because of the extra weight — about three quarters of a tonne — of the cruising gear compared to a stripped out boat.'

ON THE WATER

Our test took place on the Solent, in 12-15 knots of breeze, with frequent gusts to 20 knots. Upwind the helm has a delightful positive feel and the boat falls easily into a deep groove, even without crew on the rail. There's every indication that the boat will fulfill the polars, which show roughly seven knots of boatspeed and tacking through 70 degrees in these conditions.

Bearing off and hoisting the spinnaker the boat again showed a good turn of speed, and excellent control. When spinnaker reaching the boat remained under complete control with no sign of broaching, even in the gusts. At all times she readily responded to the helm to bear away, with the rudder retaining a good grip on the water throughout.

BELOW DECK

Two basic layouts are offered, with a choice of two or three cabins, and a degree of customization is possible. There's intelligent stowage space throughout the boat — it's plentiful and well planned — and the general feel is

light and airy. Granted, there are more spacious 38-footers, but none will match the performance and handling of this boat. The finish throughout is also worthy of mention — the mahogany joinery is executed to a high standard and a careful effort has been made to avoid any exposed fibreglass.

Right forward in two of the versions is a large owner's cabin, with a 2.14m double berth. The spacious saloon and chart table areas, to port of the main cabin, are identical in all versions, as is the port side aft guest cabin.

A two-cabin layout has a generously-sized heads compartment aft to starboard, with a truly excellent galley stretching along the whole starboard side of the main cabin. This has an abundance of worktop space, as well as huge, but well-organised, stowage capacity. Some linear galleys are a nightmare to work at sea on the 'wrong' tack, but the custom centre-line saloon bench that Dave specified for 'Seawolf' offers something to brace against and makes the galley totally usable at sea.

The standard three-cabin layout has a second, smaller, aft cabin to starboard, and a smaller heads compartment immediately ahead of this. 'Seawolf' has a slightly different arrangement, with the heads compartment forward of the mast at the expense of a smaller forecabin. This has the advantage of allowing a little more space in the starboard aft cabin, as well as maintaining a similarly-sized galley to that of the two-cabin boat.

VERDICT

With 10 boats sold already, the Pronavia concept is proving undeniably popular — with the marriage of the Reflex 38's race-winning heritage and the new interior arrangements, this is a genuine dual-role performance design with the potential to win races both round the cans and offshore. Combining cruising comforts with the ability to plane in wind speeds over 20 knots is certainly appealing.

When sailed short-handed the boat's high stability and sail-carrying ability will prove a real asset — a brisk, but relaxed, pace can be maintained with few sail changes.

Initially the boat has been deliberately undervalued to get attention and represents excellent value for money.

Pricing will increase year on year so residual values are not a worry for buyers.