

NorseBoat 17.5 Explorer

Designed for sail-camping, this Paine design is also a lively sailer

We call it a backpacker's or kayaker's boat with a pedigree," said NorseBoat dealer Bob Williams as we sailed slowly out of a narrow mangrove-lined channel leading into Marathon's Boot Key Harbor in the Florida Keys. And while the multipurpose NorseBoat is, in many ways, a logical step up from a voyaging sea kayak, don't underestimate its lively sailing performance. It's a real boat, at home in protected thin-water bays and deep water beyond.

Designed by Chuck Paine, the NorseBoat is a blend of proven concepts. The lapstrake centerboard hull shape is loosely based on the Norse voyaging boats of old and the doughty shoal-draft New Jersey fishing skiffs of the 1800s. The low freeboard, sweet sheerline and long sweeps give it a Scandinavian profile while the gaff-rigged catboat sailplan is more akin to a working smack. Together they create a simple, alluring boat, and whether you're rowing or sailing, it's an ideal tonic for the hectic 21st century.

Built by Avalon House, on Canada's Prince Edward Island, the construction process and materials are thoroughly modern. The hull and deck are epoxy fiberglass composite construction. The kick-up rudder and centerboard are also composite, the

result is a light, strong boat that weighs in at just over 300 pounds. NorseBoats are designed to participate in adventure-type races like the WaterTribe Challenge. These rigorous events called raids originated in Europe where they feature expedition kayaks and small sailboats participating in a variety of offshore races.

One criterion for WaterTribe boats is that they must be carried from the beach to the water, so the overall weight has to be manageable. Of course this also makes the NorseBoat easy to tow and launch from conventional ramps. The construction quality is superb, although the boat is light it feels very solid in the water. The NorseBoat also features positive foam flotation, wood thwarts and a stainless steel rubrail.

The standard boat, the Express, is designed exclusively for rowing. The Explorer model includes the optional sailing kit. This consists of a two-piece carbon fiber mast, a spruce gaff yard and a wishbone boom that fits into a bag stowed within the boat. The North mainsail is five-ounce cream cloth and fully battened. A furling screecher sets from a small sprit. Harken Carbo blocks and New England Ropes running rigging are standard.

My daughter Narianna skipped school and endured the long drive

south from Ft. Lauderdale for the opportunity to sail the NorseBoat. I was surprised that with three of us aboard there was still plenty of room in the open cockpit; we were not sitting on top of each other. I was also impressed with the boat's initial stability as we jumped down from the dock—it wasn't the least bit tippy.

The molded seats and coamings are comfortable, even with the boat heeled, and the transom-hung wooden tiller doesn't take up a lot of valuable cockpit space. A clever sliding seat shifts fore and aft, and can be set up to make a good-sized berth when cruising. The halyards and screecher furling lines are led to cam cleats at the forward end of the cockpit and the mainsheet is easily controlled by the helmsman, although a better tack arrangement could be devised.

Williams, who recently sailed the NorseBoat in a Water Tribe race from St. Petersburg to Key Largo, rigged a wide full-batten along the foot of the mainsail for use in light and moderate airs instead of the boom. "You really don't need the boom, other than for reefing," he said. "And with three of us it can be in the way." As a backup, he had one of the oars fitted to take the place of the boom. There are storage compartments up forward under the deck, amidships and aft below the tiller.

The wind was fresh from the west and we sped past the many moored cruising boats in the expansive harbor. The NorseBoat accelerated in every puff, and after initially heeling, stiffened up nicely. The helm was light, and shifting our weight slightly flattened the boat instantly.

The easy-access centerboard line proved useful as more than once we raised it quickly to skip over a mooring line and then dropped it back down. The trunk, however, needs a gasket of some sort to keep water from splashing into the boat. The screecher is efficient from a close reach aft, but for windward

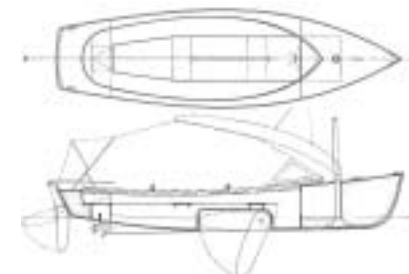


NORSEBOAT 17.5 EXPLORER

LOA 17'6"; Beam 5'2";
Draft board up 3'1" board down "8";
Weight 300 lbs.; Sail Area 110 sq. ft.

Base boat price \$12,500 (with sail kit)

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work it's better to sail the boat with just the mainsail. Like any catboat, you have to free the sheet and tack with a bit of vigor. After reaching down to the bottom of the harbor, we beat back. Nari, who is 11, felt right at home steering and even conned the boat through a narrow bridge span as winds went fluky.

It was dead upwind back to the boatyard so we took the opportunity to row. Rowing is one of life's secret pleasures and the NorseBoat rows quite well indeed, we made quick work of the canal without breaking a sweat. An optional bimini, dodger and camping tent convert the NorseBoat into a micro-cruiser. Crossing over one causeway after another on the drive back home, and gazing out at all the small cays and islets set like jewels in a turquoise crown but inaccessible to our big boat, Nari and I began scheming a Keys sailing-camping cruise in a NorseBoat. Stay tuned.



The author's daughter Narianna helps put the NorseBoat through its paces in Marathon's Boot Key Harbor.