

REVIEW: NorseBoat

Steeped in tradition, the new 17.5-foot NorseBoat was designed to be the ultimate sailing and rowing adventure boat.

Arguably one of history's most capable small-boat fleets belonged to the hardy 19th century fishermen along the New Jersey shore. Locals from Nauvoo (later Seabright) and nearby villages, routinely battled rough seas from exposed beaches at Sandy Hook and the New York Harbor south in 15-foot open boats.

These round-bilged, lapstrake craft—some with short foredecks—were light, buoyant, and capable of dealing with steep seas. They were also built strong enough to handle the stress of regular beach landings. With a five-foot beam, they could be rowed or sailed under spritsail and jib. Often rudderless, they were sometimes steered by an oar in the transom notch. These "beach skiffs" which shared many characteristics with the Whitehalls of New York—were expanded to 17 feet and even longer, and many developed reputations as excellent wrecking and lifesaving surf boats, plucking shipwrecked mariners from the shallow water over sandbars just offshore.

It makes sense then that when entrepreneur Kevin Jeffrey began to conceive of a modern sailing and rowing cruiser, he returned to the historically proven Jersey beach skiffs for inspiration. "When I was first sketching out the NorseBoat concept, I was introduced to the Seabright Skiff," says Jeffrey. "This traditional rowing and sailing boat used by fishermen along the New Jersey shore was similar in size, shape, and lines to what I wanted, and some of the elements of that craft were used in my conceptual design." Some elements trace back further still, a thousand years or more, to the small but seaworthy rowing and sailing boats of Norway, from where the new NorseBoat Sailing and Rowing Cruiser gets her name,

We asked Jeffrey about his goals for NorseBoat. "My family sailed and lived aboard cruising catamarans since my twin sons were one year old, and as a family we traveled abroad extensively. In 1993 we moved to Atlantic Canada with its abundance of coastline and waterways. At this time in my life I wanted a sailboat that was lightweight and portable, yet seaworthy and suitable for

adventurous micro-cruising. I wanted a boat that could row and sail equally well, was as beautiful as practical, and could be trailered by a small car and fit in a standard garage. After several years of searching for something like this and not finding it, and after quite a lot of market research, I decided that a production boat of this nature could be successful."

To draw a boat in this size range that sails well and is not only rowable, but something one might actually like to row, was no simple crick. Jeffrey asked respected yacht designer Chuck Paine to bring it all to life.

"I had a very clear concept of what I wanted when I first met with Chuck and staff designer Mark Fitzgerald. The two rowing stations, the double berth and dodger/bimini/camping tent setup, cat-boat rig, even the signature shape of the mainsail was in my list of design parameters. But I left the lines of the boat and all decisions about seaworthiness and sailing and rowing performance entirely to Chuck. We had a great time working together. He would allow me to dream up the many innovative features of the boat, then he'd tell me what was possible and/or appropriate for the design. We'd often work together to figure out how best to solve tricky detail or hardware issues."

What Jeffrey and Paine created is a remarkable blend of modern and traditional. The 17' 6" NorseBoat features a fully-battened mainsail attached to wood hoops that slip over a high-tech, two-piece carbon mast weighing 12 pounds. Modern hardware is mounted on a deck embossed with a traditional canvas non-skid pattern, and a roller furler for the screecher sail mounts on an ash bowsprit.

Since the NorseBoat's introduction at the 2004 Strictly Sail show in Miami, Jeffrey has built 15 boats, and the company now has the capacity to build one per week. Interest in NorseBoat has spiked recently with the reports of her sparkling performance in the last two Watertribe Everglades Challenge events—a grueling 300-mile adventure race. A

NorseBoat won its division last year and was first overall this year, setting a new course record.

In order to see for ourselves, we met with NorseBoat distributor Ron Loe in Corvallis, Oregon and went for a test sail. We also surveyed several new NorseBoat owners.

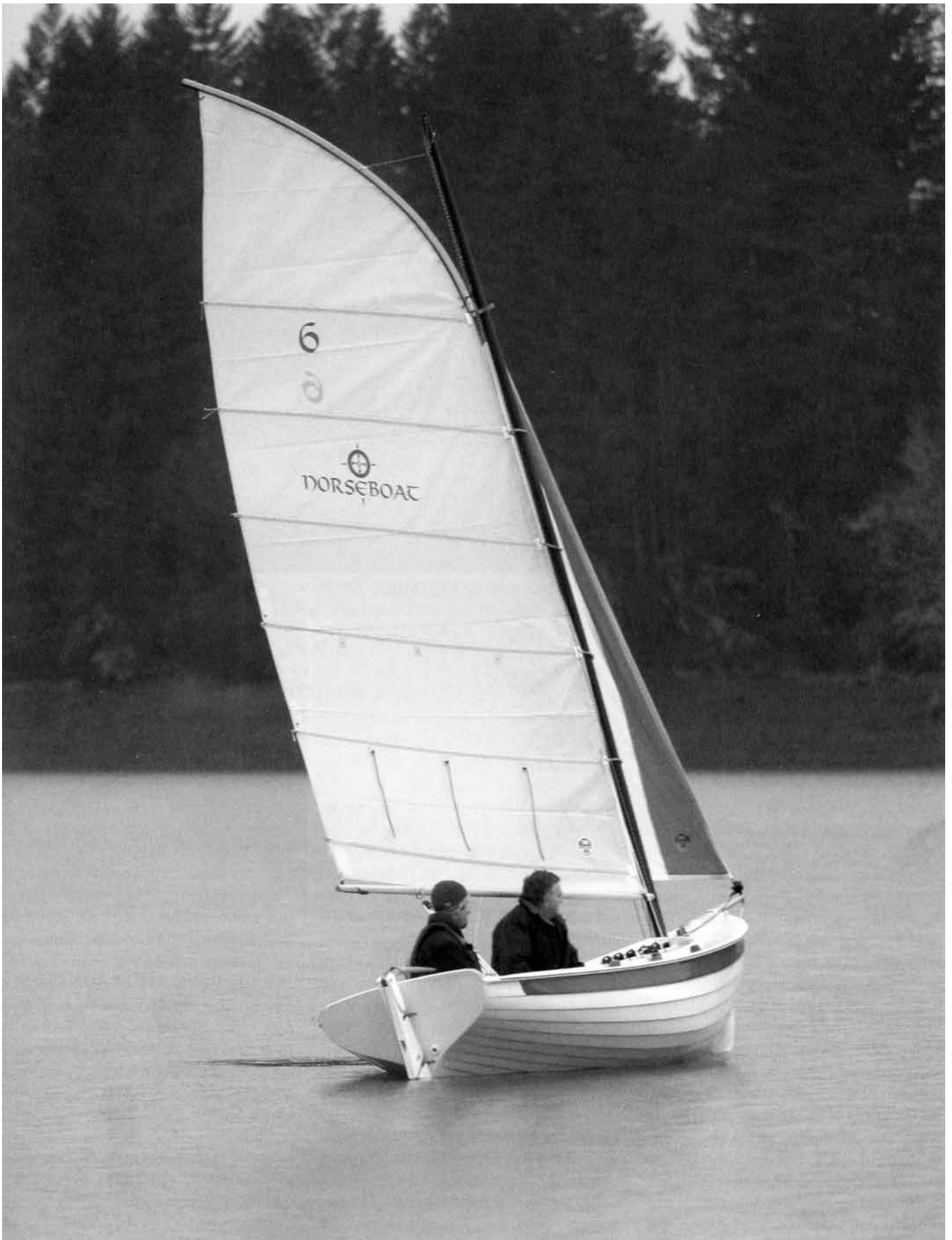
PERFORMANCE:

"Sails and rows very easily. Downwind performance enhanced by the roller furling screecher. Gaff rig keeps COG low with more sail area up. In 15 knots of wind with 2 adults, beam reach at about 6 knots, slightly faster close reaching. You can point 45 degrees, but leeway makes it closer to 55 degrees." Bob Williams, 2004.

"We raised sail outside the harbor mouth, and once we remembered to lower the centerboard made good way upwind. Tacking in light air was smooth and simple. As the wind (and chop) picked up, our speed increased to 5.0 - 5.5 kts as indicated by GPS in a part of the bay with no significant tidal current. It was very gratifying in a smaller boat to be sailing upwind in company of a Tartan 27 and a 40'ketch-cutter with the larger boats making barely half a knot faster than we." David Nabors, NorseBoat Sea Raven

"The wind was quite blustery as we raised the full-battened main. As it filled, the boat took off like a rocket. As we cruised back and forth down the channel, the set of the main looked perfect, full, with no scallops or wrinkles. For the initial launch this was amazing. The pointing with the main alone was quite impressive." horn SCA contributor Darrel Rundsirrom, present at NorseBoat's maiden voyage.

After slipping the NorseBoat off her trailer at Oregon's Foster Reservoir, we sailed on just a wisp of breeze down a narrow tributary and into the body of the lake. The NorseBoat moved surprisingly well in such light air. Under her full-battened main with signature curved-gaff, and her bowsprit-mounted red and white screecher sail, we ran down the center of the reservoir in slightly stronger wind.



We sat leeward to induce some heel, but by this point in the review the wind was gone and the rain was starting to fall.



Helm balance was remarkably neutral and we found we could leave the tiller untouched for long stretches. One new owner reported some frustration getting his NorseBoat through her tacks smoothly in strong winds and chop, although he expects his handling will improve as he gains experience with the boat. She came through all other tacks for us, but since she's relatively light it might take some time for sailors new to the design to develop efficient tacking techniques in a head sea. We were pleased with her performance under sail.

Cockpit controls aboard NorseBoat were just how we like them—simple. The kickup composite rudder can be lifted with a tug on the line running to the tiller-mounted cam cleat. The mainsheet runs between blocks attached well aft of mid-boom and a flexible cam cleat/block combo shackled to a bail on the center-board trunk. Screecher sheets run back to swivel cam cleats mounted on teak wedges at the rail. The whole arrangement is well thought out; sheeting angles felt natural and the mainsheet was easy to free. A boom vang would likely be desirable on a reach or run, but might be tricky to install if one opts for the dodger.

(Above): The elegant lines of the NorseBoat's transom. (Opposite Top): NorseBoat was lightweight enough to be easily managed even without a launch-ramp dock. (Inset) Shown with tent pitched. (Opposite Bottom Right): NorseBoat manufacturer Kevin Jeffrey reclines at a boatshow. Lids from stowage bins form a double bed Photo by Liza Wendt. (Opposite Left): Ron Loe at the helm. The cockpit accommodates as many as four persons in relative comfort.

The main halyard, peak halyard, down-haul, reef line, jib (screecher) halyard, and furler line all run from near the base of the mast (through blocks on padeyes) aft through holes in the coaming to individual cam cleats at the forward end of the cockpit.

The centerboard is raised easily by a short pendant which runs through a cam cleat affixed to the trunk.

About the time we arrived at the center of the lake, the wind coughed, sputtered and disappeared, leaving a few dark clouds overhead. What began as a sprinkle turned into a full-blown shower—even by Oregonian standards—so we quickly summoned the ash breeze for the long row back to the ramp.

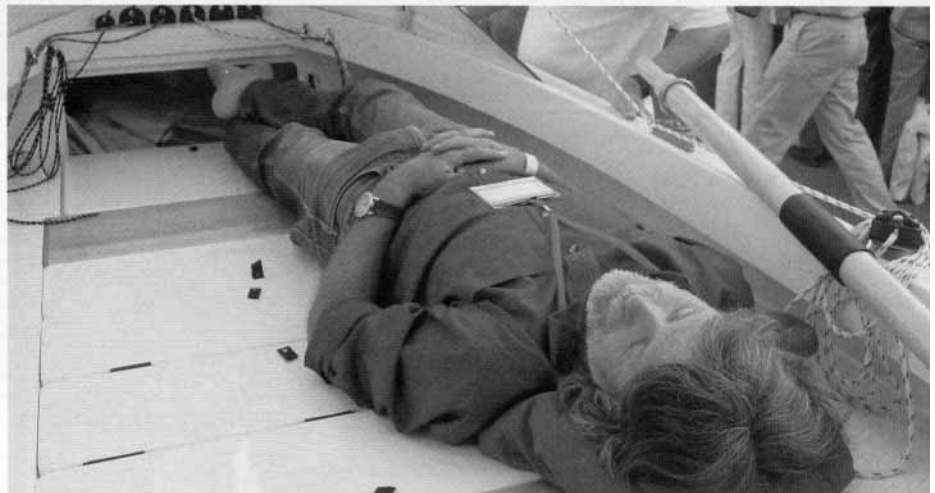
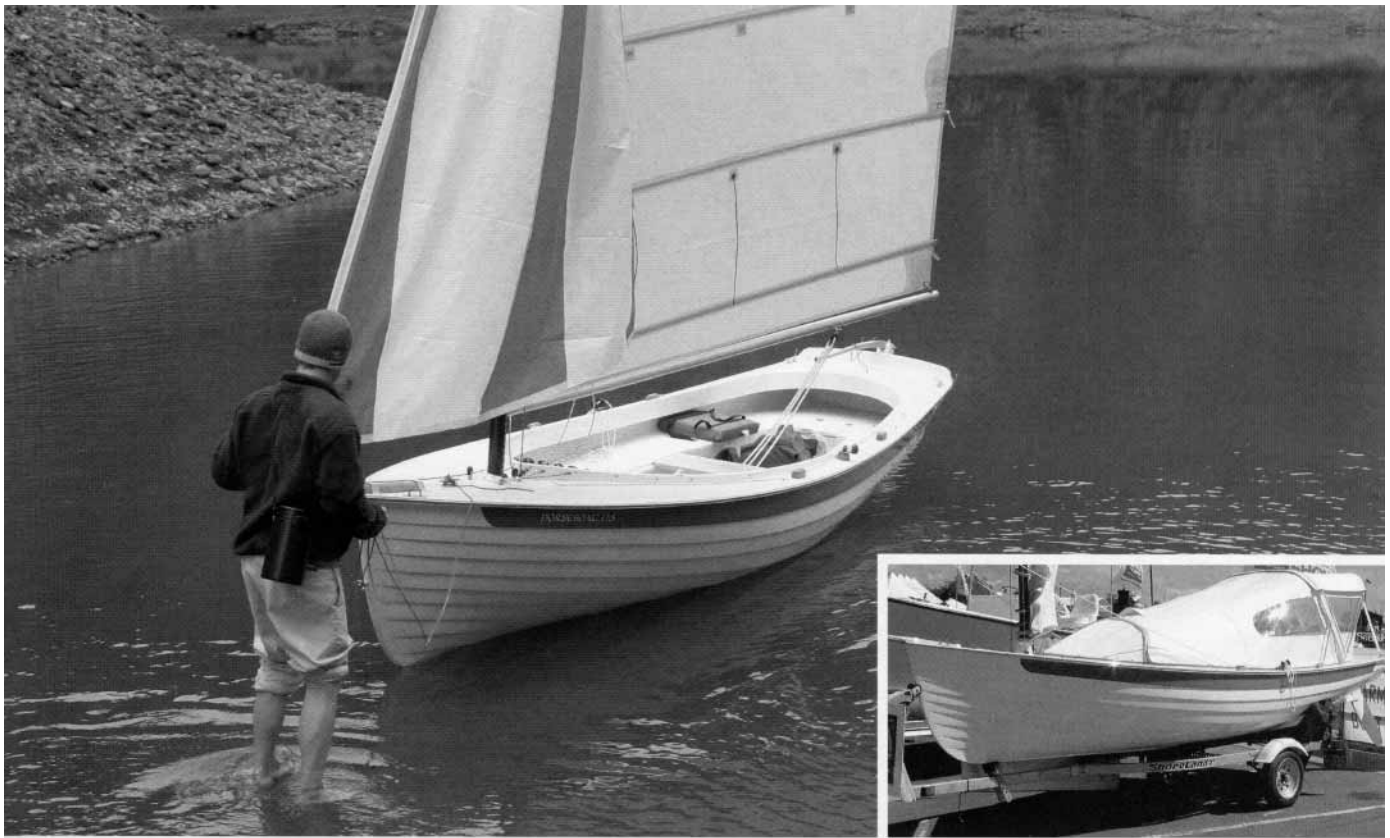
NorseBoat moved well under oar power—even with 500 pounds of crew and gear aboard. The boat is designed, it seems, so that much of the hull is out of the water until it's needed. The small wineglass transom rides

well clear and NorseBoat leaves almost no wake. We don't review a lot of boats that row, but we think NorseBoat is one of very few sailing boats we'd consider owning without an outboard. And like the Norwegian workboats that influenced her design, NorseBoat can be tandem rowed from two stations.

TRAILERING AND LAUNCHING:
"The boat is very light and floats off easily. One needs to be careful getting back on the trailer to line up exactly so that the skeg winds up on the rear roller. I have not been able to recover the boat yet without wading" David Nabors, NorseBoat Sea Raven

"(Ease of trailering) is excellent due to low profile on trailer and light weight." Bob Chesley, 2004 #4 Otter

Trailering the 400-pound NorseBoat



was unanimously described as effortless. The boat is light and sits low on her trailer, making her particularly suited to something like trailersailing mountain lakes.

It turned out Ron Loe had invited us for a sail on what was the maiden voyage of his NorseBoat. Before we could rig, we literally had to peel back the shrink wrapping. Even without rigging instructions we were able to make the boat ready in 30-45 minutes (although I'm not sure we did everything by the book). With practice we expect the boat could be rigged in 10 minutes or less.

To rig, we slipped the mainsail and gaff yard's wood hoops over the bottom section of the mast, dropped the bottom section of the mast into the mast step (through the foredeck), ran halyards through the top section of mast and fitted the top mast section onto the bottom section. Then it was just a matter of attaching the boom, attaching the main-sheet fiddle block (snap shackle) and adjusting control lines.

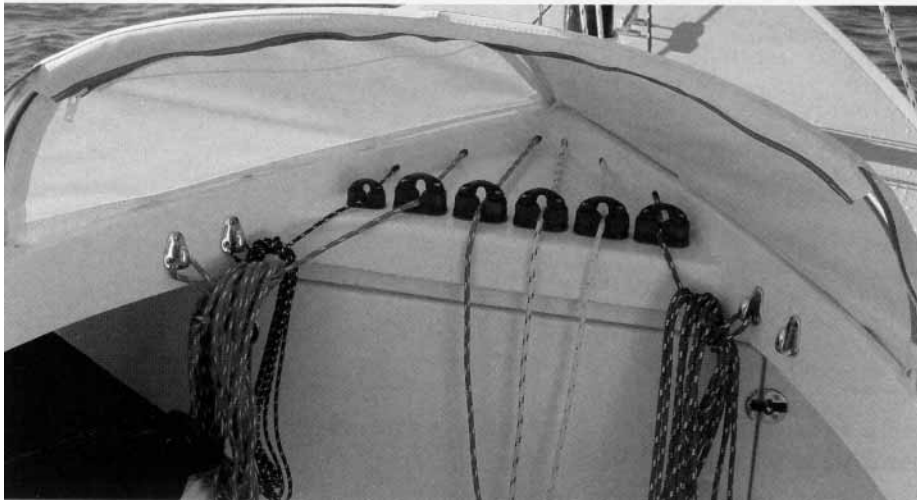
Launching was painless, but as one owner suggested, recovery does require some attention to make sure the boat is properly lined up. Simple trailer guides would minimize

this concern.

SEAWORTHINESS:

"The NorseBoat is much more stable and sea-friendly than dinghies of the Capri 14.2 or Coronado ilk." David Nabors, NorseBoat Sea Raven

"In the 'Everglades Challenge we sailed for 18 hours in 5 - 8 foot seas (see article in [www. watertribe. com](http://www.watertribe.com)). The boat did amazingly well. Always stiffened out around 25 degrees of heel. We broached her twice in 10 foot seas, she came back up with the sail up by just throwing our weight to windward.



(Top): A good shot of the cockpit and bimini. NorseBoat no longer uses the oar as boom.
(Below); Lines running aft through coaming to cam cleats. Also note dodger.

Even though she was full of water (positive flotation core) we were able to regain directional control and bail." Bob Williams, 2004.

We think the NorseBoat, with its classic sea-kindly hull shape, substantial fore-deck, quality fittings and positive flotation, is plenty capable—especially for its size. She is not, of course, exempt from the realities of a light,

relatively narrow, mostly open boat, and should be sailed more like a dinghy than a keelboat. However, her exceptional rowing characteristics, and that she can be easily beached, add greatly to her overall safety.

As we expected, the NorseBoat felt somewhat tender initially, and weight distribution had a noticeable effect, but with her round bottom

NorseBoat gets bigger as she heels—firming up nicely at 20° or so. The NorseBoat is not self-bailing, but the factory offers an optional bilge pump. With her dodger in place she is said to be dry-riding.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

" I would rate her for four adults for day-sailing and best for two camping on her. The boat is designed for what I would consider 'backpacking' boat cruising (minimalist approach) with storage doors forming a sleeping platform between the seats. No built-in head, and cooking is done outside in the cockpit. Storage includes a large cuddy locker in front and a small lazarette at the rear." Bob Chesley, 2004 #4 Otter

One of the things that makes the NorseBoat unique for a 17' 6" boat without a cabin is her potential cruising accommodations. The doors to each of five stowage bins lift out and combine with the two movable thwart to form a solid sleeping platform—still comfortably below the cockpit coamings.



(Above): NorseBoat four-oared, with bimini and dodger in place. (Right): Two shots of NorseBoat enjoying a breeze in warmer climes. Photos by Liza Wendt

When combined with the optional camping tent and some sort of mats or cushions, you end up with a spacious enclosed double berth. There's even room for a portable head beneath the foredeck, although it would need to be dragged out to the cockpit for use.

NorseBoat offers a couple of optional features that improve comfort aboard for cruisers and daysailors. A canvas dodger snaps to the front of the cockpit providing some protection from wind and spray, and a handy fold-down bimini protects sailors at the helm from excessive sun exposure.

Stowage lockers provide adequate space for the essentials and a few extras.

QUALITY:

"Basic construction seems very good. I experienced a number of minor problems initially though. Gooseneck is flimsy given the weight of boom and size of sails. Other rigging hardware seems to be top notch." David

Nabors, NorseBoat *Sea Raven*

Even at a glance it's apparent the NorseBoat is well-constructed. The clean lapstrake appearance of the hull, the ash bowsprit, the detailed contours of the cockpit—everything looks refined. It's the less obvious things too that show her manufacturer appears committed to quality. The mast isn't a section of aluminum, it's an unstayed carbon-fiber spar that breaks down to ride completely inside the boat. The mainsail isn't your typical stock cheapie, it's a cream-colored, fully-battened beauty, with NorseBoat logo, made by North Sails—and the peak is held up by a gorgeous curved spruce yard. The hardware isn't "as good as Harken," it *is* Harken.

As for specific construction details, Kevin Jeffrey told us the NorseBoat's fiberglass hull is laid up in one piece and vacuum-bagged, eliminating voids while saving weight. The interior liner with centerboard trunk and the forward compartment are bonded in and flotation foam is installed. Then the hull/liner

assembly is taken out of the hull mold and the deck is installed using 3M-5200 and over 70 screws through the stainless steel rub rail.

A couple of the NorseBoat owners we communicated with mentioned minor problems, but in both cases they appeared pleased with overall quality. The most significant issues were a gooseneck pin that had sheared off, water splashing in around the centerboard bolt and centerboard pendant hole, and some minor cracking or crazing of the gelcoat at the cockpit seats from standing on the wooden thwarts. We didn't encounter any of these problems on our review sail, but it's not uncommon with a brand new design to see bugs being worked out in the early models.

COMPROMISES:

"People upsizing from sea kayaking, canoeing or wed to minimal camping should find the NorseBoat a pleasant alternative. She is

also a really nice boat for pure daysailing. It is an open boat however and with no head, or privacy to have one, there are some limitations—depends on what you are used to and where you will use her."

Bob Chesley, 2004 #4 Otter

Besides the usual compromises associated with her small size and lack of fixed-cabin accommodations, owners didn't see much as a sacrifice. As we've mentioned already, being relatively light, the NorseBoat will need to be sailed attentively when the going gets rough, but if she were much heavier her rowing characteristics would suffer. The NorseBoat seems an appropriate compromise to meet specific goals.

MODIFICATIONS:

As most owners haven't had their NorseBoats long, we heard about very few modifications. One owner added running lights, a power distribution panel, and a trolling motor wired from batteries in the forward compartment back to a plug receptacle on the aft deck. Another owner plans to add an oarlock to the stern for sculling, and one said he intends to improve the rowing station in some way for long-distance rowing.

VALUE:

"Kevin is a very nice guy working very hard to put out a quality product. I appreciate the work and risks he is taking to make a boat that is so close to my ideal, and wish him and his company all possible success. The world would be a better place with more NorseBoats (and SeaPearls, and dories, whaleboats, and other traditional craft) and fewer 200 hp monsters shattering the beauty of the outdoors with noise, fumes and spilled fuel." David Nabors, NorseBoat Sea Raven

At \$12,495 for the base rowing/sailing model, a few owners we interviewed called the NorseBoat a bargain, or an excellent value, primarily because of the boat's versatility. For others the decision to buy a NorseBoat is something different and much less tangible; Perhaps it's the promise of adventure, or just the way she sits so photogenically on the water. Whatever it is, like one owner told us, "It's an emotional thing." Sometimes that's the best way to buy a boat. •SCA•

