SEAQUEST PRIMA 38 BUILDER OPENS DUBAI FACTORY

Boat Owner MIDDLE EAST

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SPANISH CONQUEST

Spain's Rodman 56 takes on the Italians

FULL STORY INSIDE

"You have to put your emotions in a box, applying logic and experience. Panic kills"

Pete Goss, MBE

PLUS MACGREGOR 26 • **DUBAI DHOW RACING** • CLASSIFIEDS
AMPHIBIOUS RINSPEED SPLASH • KNOTIKA'S MARINE MALL

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Trailer Sailor

Avoiding the hassles of berthing, long passages and deep keel mooring restrictions, is the MacGregor 26 the answer to Middle East weekending?

WORDS TOBY HAWS **PHOTOGRAPHY** ALAN DESIDERIO

"This peninsular is the most perfect sailing environment," beams Raymond Sabbah, Director of Sea Dunes Sailing. "You can almost sail all year round and there are so many different places to go." I look at him questioning, as this seems totally at odds with what most people tell me about sailing in the Arabian Gulf. "If the weather isn't right," he continues, "you just put the MacGregor up on the trailer and drive off to the Fujairah coast, up to Oman, wherever you want." The US-built MacGregor 26 is not a new boat, having been in production since the 1960s, but with a 2005 model recently released it is by no means past its sell-by date. In essence, the MacGregor is a happy compromise between a sailing yacht and a powerboat, which can be launched from a trailer or left fully rigged on a pontoon berth. "Though even with antifouling, we have found it is worth keeping her on a trailer in the yard because of the high fouling," explains Raymond.

Using water ballast and a daggerboard for stability, the MacGregor is easily rigged with its light aluminium wing mast, which is raised and lowered with an innovative cradle. Sporting a 50 hp outboard engine (the best power-to-weight ratio model) between the twin dagger rudders on the transom, the sailing characteristics of the MacGregor can be quickly translated into a planing powerboat, with the daggerboard and rudders raised, and the water ballast dumped through a self-draining mechanism to allow the boat a 20 knot top speed.

Raymond Sabbah helms the MacGregor, with the editor relaxed on the mainsheet

The simple interior is easily personalised

Raymond didn't set out to be a boat dealer; he, his brother and a friend were simply looking for a sailing weekender that they would find easy to handle, and would be able to trailer on land so they could go exploring without having to put in long passages between 'the interesting bits'. Finding the MacGregor on the internet, Raymond was offered the dealership if he bought two boats – obviously getting them at dealer rates. It seemed like too good an offer, particularly when without even trying he was able to sell six in the first year. Juggling a fulltime profession and commissioning the yachts at the weekend, after two years Raymond decided to dedicate his time to the ever-growing fleet of MacGregors and their owners. For while MacGregor might be better known in Europe for its trailer sailing, Raymond is particularly looking forward to the UAE debut of the MacGregor 75, which he hopes to bring in next year.

But in the meantime, especially with the lack of water berths available, he is finding a growing interest in the little MacGregor, as it is an ideal boat for the individual or small family that wants to get into sailing without having to sacrifice a massive investment in capital. "The Dubai market is not yet settled," explains Raymond, "so many companies have started up and jumped on the high end of yacht sales. But I don't think that is where the market is. Those that are on average incomes will be the market. The average person. A proper keelboat is a massive investment, which most people will then have to add to their 'get rid of' list when they leave Dubai. The MacGregor can simply be put on its trailer and then into a container, and shipped anywhere in the world."

As Raymond related the delights of trailer sailing in Oman (told overleaf), the concept of trailer sailing began to take shape as an adventurous alternative, especially for those who like the whole camping in nature idea. Anchoring just off the beach with its flat bottom and 30 cm draft, dancing around a beach bonfire, lying on deck looking up at stars... but what is the boat actually like? Do you have to moor near a beach simply to get off in a hurry?

Dwarfing the J/22s beside it on the pontoon, not so much in length but certainly in freeboard, the MacGregor looks deceptively larger than her seven-metre length. With the under-sole water ballast full, the high freeboard does not offer anything but protection from the ravages of the ocean's surface, particularly when sat on the

Equally at home on trailer or water berth

transom helm seat or deep within the cockpit. High bulwarks further enclose and protect the cockpit from flying spray, making it a great family boat for younger children.

Stepping down the steep wooden companionway, the simplicity of the MacGregor comes to the fore – an open plan layout, with bench seats down both sides and a central unit around the daggerboard casing and coachroof-stepped mast, which incorporates the seawater heads. As well as the sailing advantages of a daggerboard, the interior space also benefits a vertical-raising set-up, as opposed to catering for an entire centreboard case that would split the cabin in two. While the newly-released 2005 MacGregor 26M has an upgraded interior, with an innovative sliding galley bench mechanism that can be moved up and down the port side, this older model simply has a galley area that can be fitted out depending on the needs of the owner.

Because of Raymond's beach cruising, he decided against fitting a gas burner, preferring to grill his food ashore. But by leaving the space open, the potential owner sees a white canvas from which they have the freedom of customisation. While the saloon can be turned into a large double bed, the forepeak makes an ideal single or children's space, with the area under the cockpit being used either as another large double berth or for storage. I suppose it was this open and free nature of the interior that got me thinking of early Beneteau and Jeanneau models, which only provided space for the odd sail bag to be used as bedding – how times have changed. Does increased luxury set us free or further bind us?

Skipping past the heads, that just about had standing room, and returning on deck, it was time for a quick sail. The wind topping 20 knots, it was a fantastic time to see how manoeuvrable the MacGregor was at close quarters with a wind on her topsides. The water ballast had already been filled by opening the transom valve and letting gravity take its course, providing almost 50 per cent more stability – so much so that fully filled the MacGregor is self-righting. Though we would later open the valve to drain it under power, it was for now closed to secure its load.

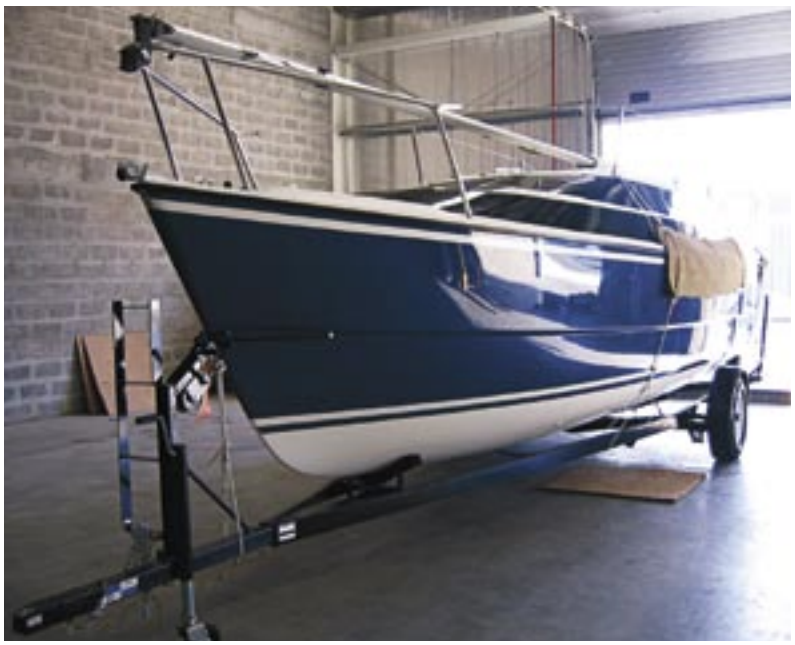
Sliding easily out of her berth, it was apparent she was more than catered for by the 50 hp engine, which turned her quickly and kept her nose into wind. Rigged with a dinghy's simplicity, the topping lift moves forward to become the main halyard, keeping the rigging outside of the mast. Though I had a little problem with the mainsail feeder, the main went up quick enough, despite the wind, and she was soon heeling over as the daggerboard and twin rudders bit against the main's pressure. With both operated by lines running to the cockpit, each can adjusted to depth and sailing conditions easily.

Stopping the engine, it was fun to find she had the manoeuvrability and responsiveness of a large dinghy, like a Wayfarer. This may not be as instant as a Laser, but is more than adequate for cruising or short tacking within a harbour. The advantage of the light rotating mast is that it automatically aligns itself to the proper angle of the wind, guiding the main's luff with it. This helps the sail to set smoother, perform better and makes sailing under main alone more practical. The foresail is easily unfurled with the roller-rolling mechanism from the cockpit, meaning that as soon as the main is up and set, the decks can be left clear.

"Easy to sail, easy to handle and bulletproof"

The headroom offered by a seven-metre is not to be underestimated

The deck-stepped mast ensures simple sailing and rigging procedures



The MacGregor is easily de-rigged and made trailor-ready for the next adventure

I was surprised at how much like a dinghy she was to sail. And that is no bad thing – on the contrary it makes the MacGregor the perfect boat for the learner sailor, or the person who wants to learn but also wants to get out on the water as quickly as possible. Forgiving under the wheel helm, on the dropping of the main and the electric starting of the outboard, she very quickly had the manoeuvrability of an RIB as we went out into the growing swell outside the protective breakwater at DOSC. Surfing back in on the waves at 15 knots, the true capabilities of the boat became clear. Like an urban SUV, she could cope with most coastal weather conditions, but above all was a smooth and simple platform while doing so.

By owning a MacGregor himself, and spending his weekends and test sails on it, means that Raymond has become exceptionally knowledgeable about the boat. Not simply in regards to handling, but also in terms of finding accessories, spare parts, modifications etc. "The MacGregor is a simple boat, and it is one for everyone. It highlights the simple pleasure of being out on the water while avoiding a lot of the problems associated with boat ownership." The sailing mechanism, like the interior, is both basic and completely open for owner customisation. Simple running gear prevents breakages or too many strings on the deck, but if an owner wanted a complete lazy-jack system suspending their beautifully flaked main, there would be more than enough scope to make it happen.

Specifications

LOA
7.87 metres

Beam
2.36 metres

Draft
0.3 metres/
1.75 metres

Displacement
136 kg

Water ballast
521 kg

Water capacity
18.9 litres

Fuel capacity
90.8 litres

Air draft
9.1 metres

Main and Jib
27.87 square metres

Spinnaker
32.5 square metres

Engine
50 hp max

Guide price
Dhs 125,000
(US$34,032)

MacGregor Boats are built in the USA
www.macgregor26.com
Distributed in the UAE by Sea Dunes Sailing
www.seadunes-ae.com
Tel: +971 50 382 6287

Verdict

There is no doubting the MacGregor is a simple boat that some sailors would think below them. However, for the person who wants the flexibility of launching wherever they want, the ability to go from sailing to high-speed powering within five minutes and yet still have enough room inside to sleep a number of people in comfort, the MacGregor fits the bill. Easy to sail, easy to handle and bulletproof. And all at a great price.

Discover Oman

Sea Dunes Sailing's Raymond Sabbah describes his MacGregor voyage to Musandam.

February is the ideal time for sailing in the Gulf. With a three-day weekend at our disposal and a craving to explore the Musandam Peninsula, my friend and I found ourselves at DOSC at 8 am to collect the MacGregor for our trip. Pulling her onto its trailer is child's play, a three-step ladder on the front of it helps boarding, and guides allow the pilot to simply drive fully onto the trailer and winch position. Bringing the mast down is equally simple, allowing the whole procedure to be completed in less than an hour. With food, water and fuel provisions loaded onboard we were then ready to head for the port of Dibba on the Indian Ocean.

At 11 am, we arrived. The wind was blowing strong, at 25 to 30 knots, and we decided to raise the mast ready for launch, then take lunch, hoping the wind would decrease as forecasted. Dibba is an interesting place to visit, with fishermen off-loading their catch on the pier, and an impressive row of sharks soon covered the ground. At 3 pm the situation remained unchanged, and the sea had become extremely choppy. With no hope of launching that afternoon, we locked the boat on its trailer and left for a tour of Dibba and its sister town namesake in Oman. There we witnessed an auction of fish held straight off the dock, an incredible array of colours and shapes from beneath the sea. At sunset, the weather situation was still blustery, so we decided to camp aboard the boat, which had remained safe on its trailer. After a late dinner we were rocked to sleep by a pushy wind on the hull and the whistling in the shrouds.

Dawn broke and we were able to launch, setting off at 8 am and heading north-west; the wind having dropped to 15 knots and blowing in the right direction for a fast sail. The Omani shoreline possesses dramatic beauty – rocky mountains falling sheer into the sea, small creeks ending in strips of white sand, and ripped headlands cutting the horizon. The sea below us was a deep blue, with the only noises being the wind in our ears and the water lapping against the hull. Flying fish caught us by surprise in their fervent flight above the surface. We sailed for six hours, navigating small sheltered inlets for possible anchoring spots, using waypoints with the assistance of our GPS. We even laid out a fishing line with hope of catching an indigenous dinner.

By mid-afternoon we entered a magnificent wide and well-protected cove. At its far end, a superb beach of white sand dotted with wild palm trees drew a postcard such that we expected Robinson Crusoe to appear. The water was translucent, and the air so silent and impressive that the slightest noise of lapping water was repeated by a soothing echo around the surrounding mountains; causing our normal tone of voice to become a mere whisper. The three-metre tidal forecast allowed us to anchor the boat very near the beach, so that she could settle gently on the seabed at low tide.

Going ashore for a mountain hike to take in the flora and fauna was tempting for both of us, and we decided to follow a twisting path that got more inspiring the higher it climbed. Below us blue egrets retook possession of the now unoccupied beach as we contemplated their ballet from the heights, while the boat suddenly appeared so tiny and fragile down in the cove against the enormity of this massive panorama. Our exploration lasted until the evening, when we returned to the shoreline for a campfire and a carefully-executed barbecue on the beach. Having tidied away our human footprint, we finally returned to the now floating MacGregor, to spend the night in an alarming silence. The night was of a deep black, not the slightest light polluting a sky full of twinkling stars that seemed almost close enough to reach. Such sensations are rare, almost disturbing, as we're no longer used to this type of environmental purity. Not a smell; not the slightest noise; not a single light of human existence. Nature in all its magnificence and splendour reduced us to immobility and awe of its silence.

The next day, following our quiet night, we pursued our coastal investigation before turning about, returning to our 'antmen' routines again and getting busy with the responsibilities of modern life. A pod of playful dolphins wished us a roguish farewell; a tortoise crossed our wake without paying us the time of day, and standstill cormorants stared at us from their rocky perches. Loading the boat onto the trailer and heading back to Dubai was like returning from the moon. It was hard to believe that a few hours before we were sailing on a savage planet, visiting places that were probably unchanged for thousands of years, where it seemed nobody had ever before set foot. The MacGregor's ease of being able to launch from the trailer had made this escape possible, maximising our time in this natural wilderness.