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NEW BOAT TOFINOU 9.5

Nic Compton finds the modern reincarnation of this classic daysailer not quite what he expected. 'A Dragon for modern times,' says its builder. Not enough strings to pull, reckons Nic

When I was asked to go to France to review the 'new Tofinou', my heart leapt. For years I had admired those elegant daysailers built near La Rochelle and strangely reminiscent of the English X-Boat Class. The prospect of finally sailing one was too good to miss, and I eagerly agreed to go. When I got to St Martin, on the Ile de Ré, however, I was in for a shock.

With its lagoon-like natural harbour lined with impressive stone buildings, St Martin is one of the most picturesque towns on what is one of France's most fashionable west coast resorts. The quayside is lined with small cruising yachts and dayboats, including a good number of 'old-style' Tofinoux - I was later told around 30 of them are based here, in their home town. When I arrived, several Tofinoux were already heading towards the harbour entrance and, worried that I might have missed my lift, I

hailed one down. "Non, non," I was told by a rather gruff crew member, "Il n'est pas comme ça!" And, with the help of some frantic arm gestures, I was directed to the place where "le nouveau bateau de Monsieur Joubert" was moored. And that's when I got my shock.

Instead of the pretty little gentleman's yacht from another age, I was greeted by a powerful-looking speedster, with metallic-silver trim, colour-coded running rigging, wedge-shaped coachroof and carbon-fibre mast. All right, she had a teak-finished deck, varnished mahogany coamings and a cove line just like her older sister, but in most aspects of her design and construction, she looked remarkably modern. For a moment I thought I had the wrong boat, but Tofinou's affable British agent Charles Watson spotted me and waved me over. "No, this boat really hasn't got much in common with the old Tofinou," he conceded, "Except for the name!"



■ NEW BOAT TOFINOU 9.5

Later, back at the Latitude yard on the outskirts of St Martin, Tofinou/Latitude boss Philippe Joubert explained the thinking behind the new boat: "Our typical Tofinou owner is probably a little older, in his 50s and 60s. His children have gone, his wife maybe prefers to play tennis or golf, and so he finds himself on his own. He has probably already sailed a lot when he was younger and thinks to himself, 'The Tofinou is good, but it's not very fast!' The solution for us was either to remodel the old Tofinou – but it's always difficult to repeat success – or keep the teak and nice details and put them on a very modern boat, which is easy to handle and fun to sail."

Which is exactly what he did. The design process was entrusted to Philippe's brother Michel Joubert and his colleague Bernard Nivel – both more accustomed to designing Open 60s and the like, than modern classic dayboats.

"Our priorities were for strong aesthetics and ease of handling," says Philippe. "The aesthetic requirement suggested a narrow hull and, to give the required stability, deep draught." At 8ft (2.4m) wide, the 9.5 is by no means a skinny boat (compare that to the Spirit 37's 7ft [2.1m] beam) but, with her canoe hull and pencil-like

keel, there's precious little of her underwater. She is therefore dependent on her 1.76-ton retractable bulb keel for stability. In fact, when originally conceived, the boat was designed with internal ballast, but that was eventually done away with when the aluminium mast was replaced with carbon fibre, thereby drastically cutting down on the amount of weight aloft.

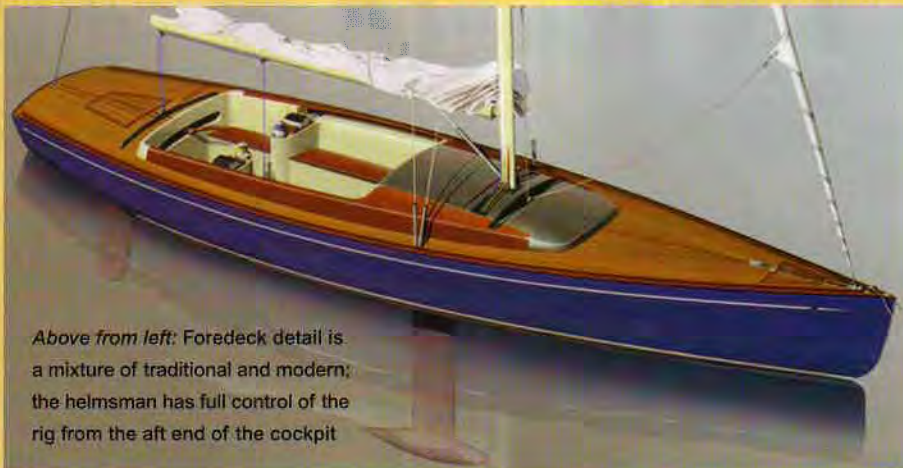
"This boat," says Philippe, "is like the Dragon for modern times. People buy Dragons not because they are great boats and not because they are very fast, but because of the spirit – because they are beautiful and because of the wood. But a Dragon needs crew, whereas the Tofinou 9.5 can be sailed by one person. Even with the spinnaker up, two people can manage it. That's why we chose an asymmetric spinnaker, because it's easier to handle."

One of the first things that strikes you about the boat is the unusual cockpit arrangement. Some 1.9m (6ft 3in) long, it is divided into two distinct areas by a pair of two-speed winches set on two fixed partitions. All the running rigging on the boat feeds back to these two winches, through a bank of jammers located next to each winch. This means that the rig can be entirely controlled by the helmsman

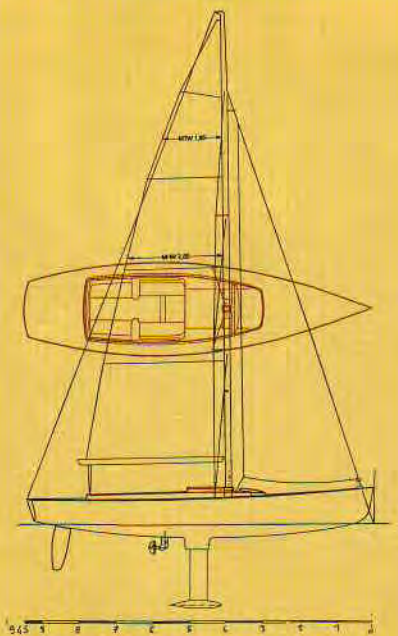
from the aft end of the cockpit, leaving the forward area completely clear, if required, for non-participating crew. More active crew can choose to either join the helmsman aft or work from the forward station facing back. It's a neat arrangement and one which goes to the heart of this easily managed craft.

There are a lot of very nice touches in the finish of the boat too, including retractable cleats, a large stowage area aft and easily accessed engine bay. And there's all that cleverly hidden running rigging, concealed on either side by removable mahogany coamings – removable so that the varnish can be looked after in the comfort of the owner's home. There were also some less clever touches, such as the 'matting' finish cockpit seats (to be replaced by teak on future boats), locker lid hinges screwed into end-grain plywood, and a 'bouncy effect' under-specced glassfibre hatch (to be strengthened in future).

Below decks is simplicity itself, with a short V-berth/stowage area up forward and two long settee berths aft of that. A toilet is provided, but apart from that, it's all pretty basic. And it's sitting headroom only – don't forget, she is just a dayboat.



Above from left: Foredeck detail is a mixture of traditional and modern; the helmsman has full control of the rig from the aft end of the cockpit



Tofinou 9.5

Designers: M Joubert / B Nivel

LOA: 31ft 2in (9.5m)

LWL: 26ft 8in (8.1m)

Beam: 8ft (2.4m)

Draught: 4ft 7in - 7ft 2in (1.4 - 2.2m)

Displacement: 4,851lb (2,200kg)

Mainsail area: 511sqft (47m²)

Jib area: 183sqft (17m²)



Main picture and right: the spinnaker is easily handled by two people. The straight sheer is elegant but is that stern a bit too full?



A 9hp Saildrive gives enough vim to manoeuvre out of the berth with ease. It's not a big engine for a 31ft (9.5m) boat, but with such an easily driven hull it should be adequate in most inshore conditions – big seas are another matter, but you shouldn't be out then in the first place in this kind of boat!

Raising the mainsail and jib is a five-minute operation, if that. The gentle Force 3 breeze blowing off St Martin that day was hardly going to test this boat's mettle, but she made the most of what there was, soon flying along at a comfortable 5-6 knots.

As Philippe promised, handling the boat was a piece of cake. For a start, the jib is self-furling and self-tacking, with the sheet running through a traveller set into the coachroof and then up from the traveller to a turning block about 10ft (3.1m) up the mast, before being fed back to the cockpit along with all the other running rigging. The 'give' on the line means that the tack of the sail can swing through its arc and settle in its natural position without significantly changing the amount of tension on the sheet. And the boat is almost alarmingly

quick in its stays – particularly if, like me, you are more used to traditional long keel boats.

Before the spinnaker was raised, I decided to take Philippe at his word and skip onto the camera boat hovering nearby to see just how easily two people could handle a 31ft (9.5m) boat with nearly 100m² (1,076sqft) of sail. I needn't have bothered. The telescopic bowsprit was eased out of its housing using a couple of pulley lines, and the next thing I knew the boat was speeding off downwind at what must have been easily 7-8 knots. (Philippe later told me they have clocked 7.5 knots sailing upwind and up to 13.8 knots off the wind.)

The payback for all this is that the 9.5 does feel very much like the modern boat she is under sail: nery, exciting but not the most relaxing ride in the world. And then there is the aesthetics. That bold, straight sheer and angular cabin, combined with the tall, narrow rig certainly looked elegant and purposeful to me, but I found it harder to come to terms with the boat's full stern sections and large transom – surely a carry over from the designers' beloved Open 60s, with their famously large posteriors.

Ironically, while Philippe has undoubtedly succeeded in his objective of creating a boat that's easy to handle with minimal crew, I couldn't help feeling that there wasn't much left for anyone except for the helmsman to do. After all, part of the fun of going sailing is pulling strings, and certainly the best way of getting people involved in the activity of sailing is to have plenty of strings for them to pull. But then, this clearly just isn't that kind of boat. I can almost hear M Joubert saying, "M Compton, for you we have this very beautiful old dayboat, which is strangely reminiscent of the English X-Boat Class..." Or perhaps I just need to wait a few more years, when my kids have left home and my wife is playing golf, before I'm ready for the fast boat. ☺



TOFINOU REGATTA



While testing the new Tofinou, Nic caught up with the originals at the annual Blue Wind Regatta, a social get-together, cunningly scheduled around lunchtime

When Margaret Thatcher made her famous pronouncement that “there’s no such thing as society”, she obviously hadn’t been sailing with the Tofinou fleet on the Ile de Ré. If she had had the pleasure (unlikely, I grant you) she would have seen what can only be described as ‘society’, French-style, in action – because the French are big on ‘society’. Give them a table and a few chairs, and before long you’ve got the whole village gathered around.

Or, if you’re at the Tofinou’s annual Blue Wind Regatta, a table, a sandbank and a few boxes of oysters will do. Confused? Let me explain. Every year, off the town of Ars at the western tip of Ile de Ré, a fleet of boats gathers to celebrate a design that was born on the island some 70 years before. The original wooden Tofinou still sails with the fleet, but all the other boats are near-identical glassfibre copies built on the island since 1989.

The regatta itself is timed so that at lunchtime, after the first race, the tide is such that the assembled fleet can position itself over the still-submerged Banc du Bucheron, drop anchor, and wait to be grounded. If the timing is right, within a few minutes of mooring up, one by one the boats start heeling over onto their sides. Once the sand bank is revealed, tables are erected and crates of wine, oysters, bread, cheese, salad and apple tarts are unloaded. And before long, the crews gather round and start eating, chatting and drinking –



Left and inset: Lunchtime and tide wait for no one – preparations on the Banc du Bucheron; above: The Tofinou fleet – all built locally – massed at the start line; below, facing: Quai West

apparently oblivious to the fact that the sand they are treading on was several feet underwater only a little while before.

After a couple of hours, most of the crew head back to their boats for a well-earned siesta. By the time they've awoken, the tide is starting to rise and one by one the boats lift themselves off the sand and start to bob at their anchors again. Once all the boats are floating, it's time for the next race.

I was fortunate enough to join the Tofinou fleet for their annual get-together last August. Unlike most yachting regattas, which are carefully scheduled around a weekend, this year's Blue Wind Cup took place on a Monday and a Tuesday to make sure the tide was right for lunch. As a result, there were fewer boats than the current record of 38, but the fleet of 26 still made an impressive blanket of sail on the start line. Nearly 200 Tofinoux have been built so far, and the yard still produces a steady 16-17 hulls every year. The biggest fleet is based in nearby St Martin, but the boats have been sold far and wide, including around ten to the UK, 20 to the US and even the odd one to Japan and Abu Dhabi. The majority of boats competing for the

Blue Wind Cup are French, although there are two British-flagged boats and two others with British crews on board.

John Milbourne has owned *Papillon* for six years. Although usually based on the Beaulieu River in the UK, he took her down to the Med two years ago, taking part in regattas in Portofino and Venice before bringing her to St Martin to take part in last year's Blue Wind Cup. "It's pretty exciting sailing, although you do need a good wind to get the boat going. Some of the helmsmen here are very professional – we're seriously a bunch of amateurs and after six seasons we've got a belly in our mainsail, so despite some good starts we don't do that well." *Papillon* (named after the famous Devil's Island prisoner, Henri Charriere – incarcerated for a time at St Martin) finished 23rd overall.

Doing somewhat better for the Brits was Crispin Loide with his brand new boat *Wish*. A former owner of X Boats, Dragons and J24s, he confesses that buying a Tofinou is "an act of complete indulgence". "The motivation is purely aesthetic," he says. "It's a touchy touchy, feely feely kind of thing. It's impossible to explain!" *Wish* finished 7th in the first race and 13th overall – but then they did have Tofinou's UK agent, Charles Watson, at the helm for most of the time.

But overall winner by one point was another brand new boat, *Aurelia*. Her owner, Eric De Turckheim, is a company

director based in London who was brought up racing on the RORC circuit. "The Tofinou is not an easy boat to sail fast," he says. "Also, conditions here are always changing; there are lots of currents and the wind shifts massively, so local knowledge is very important." It no doubt helped that his crew included the 2001 Melges world champion as well as a Figaro race veteran.

Aurelia had already raised a few eyebrows because of her unconventional colour – a kind of "1950s Formica and MG Midget yellow", as Eric puts it – and there were dark mutterings about it not really being in keeping with the class. By the time Eric climbed onto the podium to pick up first prize, however, the consensus seemed to have changed, and the yard will now, no doubt, find their order book full of requests for the "lucky yellow".

The community theme carried over to the evening celebrations. After the prize-giving on the second night, the harbour road was cordoned off and a stage erected across it. The whole village seemed to turn out for the buffet dinner and endless free wine. Looking around at the mix of people brought together that night, their faces lit up by hundreds of fairy lights from the Café du Commerce, you couldn't help but feel that here, at least, in the land of Tofinou, the community spirit is alive and well. Maggie Thatcher eat your heart out.

A table, a sandbank and a few boxes of oysters