

USED BOAT NOTEBOOK

By John Kretschmer

Irwin 52

The boat that started the big boat deck-saloon revolution

The Irwin 52 was a trend-setting boat. It was a deck-saloon cruiser before there were deck-saloon cruisers. What's more, the Irwin 52, with more than 250 hulls launched, may be the most popular big boat, 50-foot-plus, ever built. These beamy ketch-rigged cruisers offered no apologies for their motoryacht-like interior accommodations, spacious cockpit, wide side decks and raised bulwarks. It boasts of good performance under power as well as sail. Hmm, come to think of it those features sound awfully familiar? When you take a look at many of today's larger cruising boats, it seems that Ted Irwin was a visionary.

Ironically, the Irwin 52 has a better reputation today, 30 years after it was first introduced, than it did when new. Ted Irwin was an enigma in the industry. He was a designer, builder and world-class sailor, and during the early 1980s, his company was the largest privately owned sailboat firm in the country. He sold a lot of boats, especially big boats. Irwin claims to have built more sailboats longer than 50 feet than anyone in the world. Still, despite his consistently innovative designs,

his company garnered a reputation for producing cheap boats. Ask sailors who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s what they think of Irwins and they'll likely scowl.

However, time has shown that some complaints about Irwin's quality have turned out to be spurious. Older Irwins, especially the larger models, are in high demand on the used market. "If you can find a Series II 52 for a good price, even after totally refitting the boat, you'll make money," said Gene Gammons. Gammons knows of what he speaks. These days he is a yacht broker but previously he was the project manager for the Irwin 52 and his Web site, www.irwinyachts.com, provides a wealth of information about all Irwin models. He worked side-by-side with Irwin for years.

Launched in 1976, the Irwin 52 caught the sailing world off guard, suddenly it was possible to own your own small ship. While many 52s were employed as crewed charter boats there is no denying that privately owned models started the shift toward larger cruising boats.

First impressions

The Irwin 52 has plenty of freeboard and a moderate sheer accentuated by a rakish bowsprit. The raised aft deck irked purists, who still existed in the 1970s, but provided plenty of headroom for the luxurious aft cabin, and along with the wide cove stripe, became something of a 52 trademark. It does take some getting used to when navigating the big step on deck, especially in the dark with lumpy seas. The cabintrunk includes large side and forward facing ports that flood the interior with light. I remember the dire warnings we experts issued about taking "big windows" offshore. Today most sailors can't get enough of the deck-saloon concept.

Although Irwin knew that he had to build cruising boats if he wanted to stay in business, his

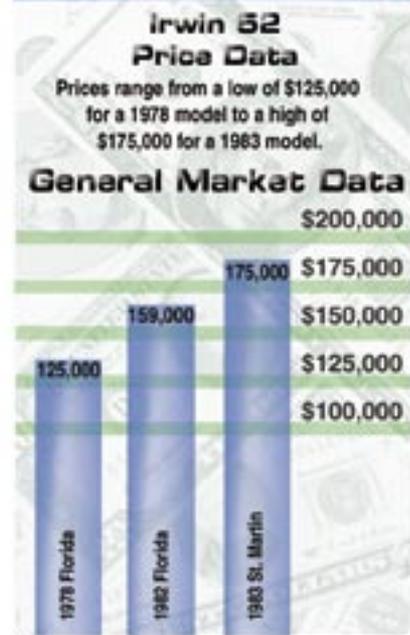
heart was always in performance boats. The 52 sports a generous rig with more than 1,350 square feet of working sailing area. The underbody is refined with a cut-away long keel and a partially balanced rudder. The 52 moves under sail. Indeed, with its long 44-foot waterline it reaches along at 8 knots steadily. I have logged a lot of miles delivering 52s and I am always impressed with how well they sail. Although it is not particularly close winded, the Irwin 52 is a much better performer than other big cruising designs of the period, including the clipper bow designs of Bill Garden and blunt bowed Out Island series by Charlie Morgan. Most 52s were centerboards with a board-up draft of 5 feet, 6 inches. The original air draft of 67 feet made the Intracoastal a no-fly zone, although you may well find the boat you're considering has had the rig shortened to less than 65 feet.

Construction

The bugaboo with Irwin Yachts is just how well built were they? While some of the smaller models have not held up well over the years, the bigger boats, built to heavier scantlings, have endured the ravishes of ocean and ownership pretty well. The construction of the 52 evolved over the years. Early boats had solid glass hulls while later boats, after the Series II was introduced in 1982, had Klegecell coring from the waterline up. All models featured plywood cored decks. And while plywood is not the best material for this purpose because it is heavy and prone to rot, Irwin mitigated the latter issue at least by using four-inch squares saturated with resin. The box joint of the hull and deck includes the wide bulwark and a handsome teak caprail.

Early models were classic production boats using three massive interior pans. These molded units were tabbed to the hull. As with any large secondary bonding, there is the potential for problems, and it limits access to the hull. Also, these pans restricted the interior options—the layout

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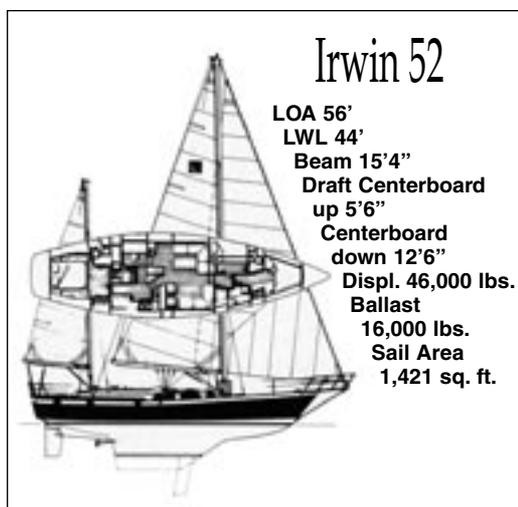


was the layout and you either took it or left it. The Series II boats featured all wood interior construction with bulkheads and facings fiberglassed directly to the hull, which allowed customized plans.

What to look for

The key to making a smart purchase of an Irwin 52 is to know just what model you're looking at. Series II boats, which were substantially upgraded and are easier to retrofit, were introduced in 1982. This is not always reflected in the price of used 52s. It seems as if owners and brokers just look at other boats on the market and price theirs accordingly. This can work to the advantage of the savvy shopper. Also, don't confuse the 52 with the 54, which is quite easy to do because they are basically the same boat. The 54 replaced the 52 in 1988 and typically costs significantly more.

In addition to typical age-related issues, one problem common to most 52s was the iron maststep. It was down low, in the bilge, and over the years it corroded. This is a well-known problem and may have been addressed by previous owners. Also be wary of delaminated floors around the mast, which were glassed-over wood. These members were often used



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SAILING Magazine's Value Guide

Irwin 52

(5-sailboat rating system)



PRICE: The 52 just may be the best-priced

big cruiser on the market. You can find a boat in decent shape for around \$150,000. Take that same budget to a boat show and compare.



DESIGN QUALITY: Ted

Irwin really shook the world with this design. It was the first deck saloon. It sailed well and the centerboard arrangement made it a great boat for shallow water destinations like the Bahamas.



CONSTRUCTION QUALITY: If only they had built these boats as well as they were designed they would have been classics. Of course they would not have been affordable then ... the old trade-off.



USER-FRIENDLINESS: The

livable interior is extremely user-friendly, in port. Underway, it is a bit different. The many systems are a mixed bag; they offer convenience but at the cost of time spent dealing with them.



SAFETY: There is safety in

size, and the bulwarks and wide decks are nice features. The overall construction could be better and it is tough to function down below in a seaway.



TYPICAL CONDITION: It

seems the 52 has reached the point where many boats on the market have already gone through refits. The value of the 52 has steadily risen as a result of caring owners.



REFITTING: This depends on

the model, pre-1982 boats are harder to work on, or at least to alter, and even new boats can be frustrating with older systems needing to be replaced.



SUPPORT: Gene Gammons is

the best source of information. E-mail him at captaingene@msn.com. His Web site is good source of information: www.irwinyachts.com.



AVAILABILITY: When it

comes to big boats, the 52 had one of the most successful production runs and there are always plenty of boats on the market. Florida and the Caribbean seem to have the most boats listed for sale.



INVESTMENT AND

RESALE: Ironically, after

years of having a poor reputation, the stock in older, large Irwins has risen dramatically. You will get your money out of a 52 if you take care of it.



OVERALL 'SVG' RATING

to mount new gear, from water-makers to air conditioning compressors, and if the holes drilled for fasteners were not well sealed they were prone to delamination. Other problems may include leaking chainplates, spars in need of repainting, and spider cracks and delamination on deck. Also, 52s were manufactured during the pox period, and most boats will have had a blister repair job or two somewhere in their past.

On deck

The Irwin 52 cockpit transformed center-cockpit design. Unlike most center cockpits of the time, it was large, comfortable and not just squeezed into the space above the engine room or distorted to allow for headroom in the pass-through to the aft cabin. You can sleep comfortably on either side. Sitting at the wheel it seems like you are looking downhill at the bow, the visibility is terrific but you do feel a bit exposed—you can really feel the freeboard. Early boats came with Barlow or Bariant winches. The midboom mainsheet included a triangular arrangement on deck designed to displace the mainsail loads in lieu of a traveler but it was not wildly efficient. On a boat I delivered we ripped two of the mainsheet blocks out of the deck. Sail controls may or may not be led aft, and most boats on the used market have conventional spars with slab reefing.

The wide side decks and substantial bulwarks are great features of the Irwin 52. The stanchions are tall but only adequately supported. Early boats had the pulpits screwed to the teak caprail, later boats had them through-bolted. Handrails on the trunkhouse are the perfect height to be useful. The aft deck features huge lazerettes. "This is the place for bikes, sails, awnings and other gear that cruisers need but have no place to store," Gammons said. Forward, the bowsprit houses double anchor rollers and there is a large chain locker forward. Hawsepipes through the bulwark enclose mooring lines, although on early models in particular, the deck hardware was a bit undersized, especially for a 44,000-pound boat.

Down below

Interiors sell boats. It was just as true in the 1970s and 1980s as it is today. And few boats have

more inviting interiors than the Irwin 52. Whether or not you want to head offshore in this interior is another question but for coastal cruising and living aboard it is hard to beat. A friendly Australian family recently purchased one of the last Irwin 52s built and moored it behind my house to prepare it for the long crossing home to Sydney. "The three-cabin layout is perfect for the kids," Donna said. "I like all the room to work on and add new systems," Brett told me, adding with a laugh, "Of course all that room means you can spend a lot of money too."

As mentioned earlier, models prior to 1982 all featured the same plan. This includes a drop-down galley to starboard, a large nav station to port and a palatial saloon. The aft cabin has an athwartship double and private head and shower. Forward, there is a large V-berth, a quarter cabin with upper and under berths and a second large head. There is no shortage of elbowroom. Series II models often used the same basic plan, however changes included island berths in both fore and aft cabins and different uses of the quarter cabin.

Decadent features like a stand-up fridge and freezer, ample counter space in the galley, including a breakfast bar with built-in stools, air conditioning, generator, hanging lockers that are sized like closets, and a full shower with enough tankage to make long, hot showers possible, make the 52 a good choice for those having a hard time downsizing from the land life to boat life.

Engine

Most 52s came standard with the Perkins 4-236 85-horsepower diesel. These workhorse engines are well respected by industry pros. They are reliable, relatively easy to work on, and although they've been long out of production, parts are still widely available. The engine is located beneath the saloon cabin sole, and access is terrific. This position also makes repowering an easier proposition. Most center-cockpit models have the engine squirreled away under the cockpit. You need to take a hard look at the mechanical systems in any 52 you are considering. Items like a 7.5 KW Onan generator, LectraSan macerator system and old watermakers seem alluring

but in reality they add little value and much aggravation maintaining, repairing or replacing.

Irwin 52s have extensive 12- and 110-volt electrical systems, and if they are original, they will need to be updated. Don't underestimate this job, replacing wiring is time consuming and frustrating, some of the runs are incredibly long. Remember, on pre-1982 boats, access is not very good.

Underway

Although most cruisers buy an Irwin 52 for the size, they are often pleasantly surprised by the sailing qualities. Under full canvas the 52 moves smartly in light to moderate airs and truly comes alive in the trades. Brett and Donna have averaged 165 miles a day so far while crossing the Pacific. They are currently in Tonga and although they've had some mechanical issues with the boat they are pleased with its performance. They are also pleased with its heavy weather capability.

"We had to beat to safe harbor in Cuba to avoid Hurricane Ivan," Brett wrote in e-mail, "and it was rugged. Force 9 gusting higher, the boat did well with a deeply reefed main, mizzen and staysail."

The versatile sailplan makes Irwin 52 balanced and it adapts well to autopilots. The mizzen can be used to trim the helm, making the autopilot's task easier. Brett and Donna don't hesitate to fly their cruising chute off the wind, although in typical tradewind conditions they find the 130-percent genoa poled out pulls them along at close to 9 knots without any stress. The 52 handles extremely well under power and with a feathering prop it backs true. I know, not long ago I had to back a 52 out of a long canal for a sea trail, and once I gained momentum it was a piece of cake.

Conclusion

If you are interested in an Irwin 52, don't apologize. The boat has design features that can only be found in new boats costing many times more. The 52 represents a unique blend of living space and underway performance. It may not be the ideal ocean crossing machine but it sure makes living aboard a lot less painful. With prices ranging from \$125,000 to just over \$200,000 it is a lot of boat for the buck.