



Trailer Sailor

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

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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



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 ➤



The simple interior is easily personalised



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 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 trailer-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

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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.