Our Dream Boat

So let's be honest, at present there is no such things as the perfect boat. Yacht designers and manufacturers have made some progress toward better designs and layouts that are more accessible but they have not truly embraced the concept of accessible design. Perhaps part of that is due to the definition of "accessible". Some people may think of making a bathroom accessible as nothing more than having a hand grip in the shower while others think of elevators and lifts. The reality is that there will probably never be a boat straight off the assembly line that can accommodate all levels of abilities. The best that can be done is to get close.

Monohulls are not designed to be accessible so let's eliminate those from the discussion and focus on catamarans. So what would I consider "close"?

Primary Accessibility Considerations

Here is my list of our primary accessibility considerations for making the Perfect Boat:

- To me it means that access to the boat is the starting point. You need a way to get onto the boat in the first place. The gangplank needs to be wide enough and stable enough to support a power wheelchair and its driver. A 12" cat walk won't do. Some yachts have a side wall access door with fold down ramp which makes access from a dock very easy.
- Some catamarans have aft cockpit pathways that are wide enough to get into the cockpit with a wheelchair but many don't.
- Entrance to the saloon should be the same level as the aft cockpit so there are no steps up or down into the saloon.
- The saloon needs to be unobstructed enough to permit maneuvering by a power wheelchair.
- Stairways down to the hulls need to be wide enough to accommodate a person in a wheelchair via a built in wheelchair lift or stair-lift system. We got inspiration for a stairway wheelchair lift from the Impossible Dream yacht.
- Layout of hull staterooms and head (bathrooms) should allow maneuverability by a guest in a wheelchair with their caregiver.

Additional Considerations

- Access to the forward deck area by either saloon forward door access or by side deck pathways.
- Gun walls on side decks for safety.
- Elimination of deck mounted hatches so the pathway is clear for wheelchair movement.
- Forward deck area is available to guest in wheelchair.
- If equipped with a flybridge then inclusion of a wheelchair lift. Although it would be nice to allow disabled guests access to the flybridge it is not critical and therefore we feel it is the least important accessibility option.

Most of these considerations could easily be incorporated into some versions of catamaran design. Of course the size of the boat would be the biggest obstacle. Smaller boats would require much more design planning. There are many other considerations aside from accessibility and we will discuss those as well.

In our research of catamaran layouts we have found one or two yachts that "come close" to perfection. I will use those as a reference, detailing what we like and what is lacking.

Silent 60 and 80

Accessibility Considerations

The **Silent 80**, made by Silent Yachts, is a beautiful boat that is well laid out with plenty of unobstructed space. Our perception of this yacht is that accessibility is very good overall.

Stairway widths are wide enough to accommodate an add-on wheelchair lift that could disappear into the lower floor making the floor of the hull completely accessible. There is enough space around the 2 aft stateroom beds to maneuver a wheelchair.

Access to both aft stateroom bathrooms by wheelchair is good. We're not sure about door width to the heads (bathrooms) but that is a small issue. Shower and overall size of all bathrooms is good, not cramped.

Neither of these Silent Yachts have trampolines but rather a full forward deck area making wheelchair access outstanding. Deck hatches have been eliminated on the Silent 80 and it also has optional side door access to the deck. Although the layout does show a step for side door deck access it would be very easy to replace the step with a ramp. This would make wheelchair maneuverability from aft cockpit to forward deck completely unencumbered. If money were no object then Silent 80 is the one we would choose.

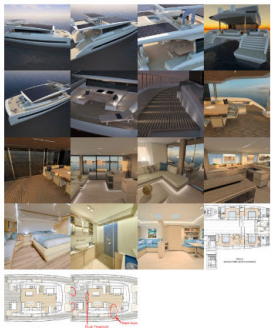
The **Silent 60** also has good stateroom access by stairways that are wide enough to include a wheelchair lift. Stateroom head (bathroom) size is adequate for maneuverability although some adaptations may be required.

The Silent 60 does have deck hatches for stateroom ventilation but depending on their design may not present an obstruction problem. In addition there are several steps from the aft cockpit to the side deck pathways so accessing the forward deck area would require a lift or other modification from aft cockpit to side deck pathway. There is no direct access to the forward deck area from the saloon.

There is at least one accessibility requirement that would be necessary on any yacht we consider and that is a hydraulic swim platform. This would be a requirement for getting someone with limited or no ability to assist, in and out of the water. This is also necessary for modified dinghy access.

Silent 60

Silent 80



Photos above courtesy of Silent Yachts.

Benefits of a Solar Yacht

The Silent Yacht series are solar powered yachts so they don't have a mast or sails but an an add-on "kite sail" is available. The benefit to not having a mast, lines and sails should be obvious but let me list the benefits below:

- Mast height for bridge clearance is no longer an issue which allows access to places other sailboats can't go. You would only be limited by beam (width) and draft (depth).
- Maintenance related to mast, sails and rigging is eliminated.
- Manufacture costs are reduced.
- Usable space is improved since equipment and sail storage is reduced or eliminated.
- Stability should be improved because mast and sail stresses are eliminated (center of gravity is much lower).

There are additional benefits to a solar powered yacht which include:

- Diesel fuel is reduced to auxiliary generator needs only and actual fuel costs could be almost nothing because of solar power generation.
- Fuel storage and fuel weight is reduced.
- Engine weight is reduced due to electric motors.
- Costs for engine repairs and routine maintenance are reduced or eliminated due to maintenance free electric motors.
- Engine fluid leaks and mess related to traditional engines is virtually eliminated.
- Engine room space is increased.
- Off grid living is as good as it gets.

The Down Side

As close to perfection as Silent Yachts get there is at least one thing I have difficulty with. Overall I like the idea of solar electric with no sails BUT part of me has a hard time letting go of the wind. The kite sail just doesn't give me warm fuzzes. It is not something I could sail at night because if you're running the motors along with using the kite sail and suddenly the wind dies you'll run over the kite without even knowing it. A kite sail is not something you would want to sail in even the smallest storm.

Other Yachts

There are other yachts that I think deserve consideration, such as the Lagoon Seventy 7 which is a beautiful boat with sails. Most people would tell you that it is too large for single sailing but one of the Lagoon people I spoke with told me that the Seventy 7 coming over from France that morning was routinely single sailed by a 75 year old captain.

Perhaps the most general accessibility feature of any yacht comes from not overcrowding. Many yachts try to cram too much into the space they have. This could be an excess of staterooms or heads. For an owner version why do you need so many heads? I grew up sharing a bathroom with family members, maybe doing so again would be a good thing. Too much furniture in the saloon is also typical of many yachts. Simply opening up some space would go a long way to make many more yachts possibilities.

As I sit here pondering perfection I realize there really is no such thing as perfection, at least not for sailing yachts. There will always be a downside. The best we can do is get close.