ISLAND HIDEAWAY

Looking for a liveaboard? Try the new Hylas 54

BY MICHAEL A. SMITH

It's missing a collection of Jimmy Buffett tapes, but otherwise *Romany Life* is a get-away-from-it-all sailor's dream. And that's what Gary and Glenis Leitch have done. They live aboard their new Hylas 54 in the British Virgin Islands for eight months every year, spending only the hurricane season in cooler, more mountainous surroundings. *Romany Life* is the second Hylas the Leitches have owned, so the company must be doing something right. I flew to Virgin Gorda in the BVI to find out what.

One smart move the Hylas folks made was to engage German Frers to design the new 54. As *Romany Life* approached the dock at the Bitter End Yacht Club, I first thought I was watching the wrong boat. Her plumb bow, flat sheer, tall rig and beam carried well aft makes her look more like an ocean-racing sled than an easy-to-handle cruiser. By ordering their boat with a dark-blue hull, the Leitches enhanced the 54's gunslinger profile, especially in a locale known for white, sun-reflective yachts. The deck is light-colored, white with gray nonskid, so it doesn't soak up the tropical heat. The belowdecks atmosphere is made even more pleasant by three-zone Cruisair a/c, optional but worth the $11,800.

Big windows in the 54's raised doghouse could lead you to mistake it for a pilothouse. It's not: the raised house just creates a lofty 6'11" of headroom in the saloon, along with admitting lots of natural light. Portlights in the topsides at the saloon and master cabin, aft, brighten both. Unfortunately, you can't see out the doghouse windows without standing on tiptoes, but neither can outsiders easily see what's going on inside, so I figure it's a fair tradeoff. Hylas also offers a Raised Saloon version of the 54, which eliminates this problem, for anyone who considers it to be one.

The RS version, with a cabin sole 9" higher than the one aboard *Romany Life*, also has greater tankage—555 gallons vs. 455 for the standard boat; the tanks of both models are under the sole. It's the customer's choice as to dividing the tankage between water and fuel. Since the Leitches carry a 33-gph Village Marine Tech watermaker and usually sail around the islands, they opted for more fuel and a minimum of water. Watermaker-less bluewater cruisers, or those with less confidence in mechanical gear, usually choose greater freshwater capacity. In any case, the multiple fuel and water tanks are plumbed together with a well-labeled, easy to reach manifold—with so many tanks, gauges are a must. There are two independent freshwater-pump systems, and two bilge-pump systems.

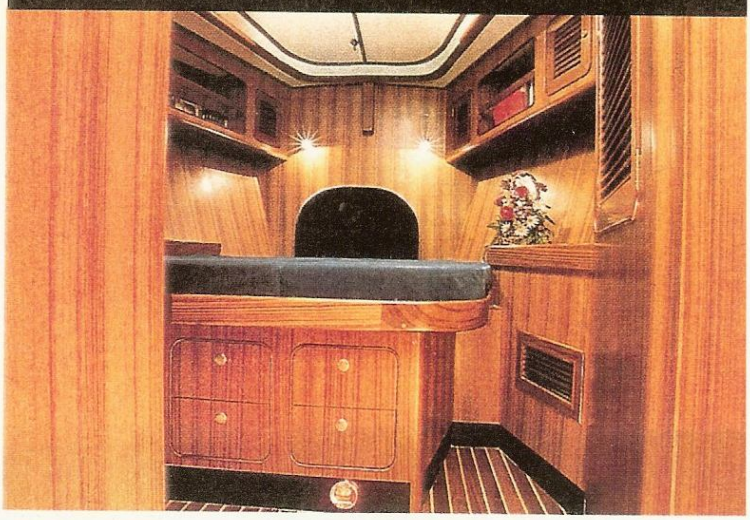
Because each Hylas is built to order by Queen Long Marine in Taiwan, buyers have a lot of latitude in modifying the accommodations plan, often without incurring great extra expense over the $536,000 sail-away price—already a bargain compared with similar boats. While the Leitches chose, basically, the Hylas 54's standard layout, they modified it somewhat in keeping with their liveaboard plans, especially in the galley. By moving the optional washer/dryer ($1,750) and trash compactor ($980), they created a giant locker for stowing pots and pans. Combined with the standard pantry, top-and front-loading refrigerator and freezer, double sink and other accoutrements typical of a boat of this type, the galley has the wherewithal for keeping the Leitches well-fed, not to mention caring for a boatload of guests. Glenis proved this by whipping up a casual-but-elegant three-course luncheon, which the five of us aboard for the sea-trial enjoyed alfresco at the foldaway cockpit table, while the boat swung at a mooring off The Dogs, a favorite BVI snorkeling spot.

Since they often sail alone, the Leitches rigged *Romany Life* for maximum ease of sail handling. Along with the standard roller-furling 130-percent genoa, they added a Selden roller-furling mainsail ($26,500) and electric Lewmar 66 self-tailing primary winches ($10,340). Instead of the permanent inner forestay, they chose a quick-release set-up ($1,650) to make tacking easier, but Gary reckoned that next time he'll stick with a permanent stay. He likes flying the staysail, and doesn't find the inner forestay much of an impediment. Naturally, the boat has a full complement of electronics, including an autopilot, which is engaged almost all the time while the Leitches take life easy.

What a pity: Sailing the Hylas 54 is a gas, even under what some hot-shot whippersnappers consider a retirement rig. While I still prefer the look of a conventional or fully battened mainsail, as I meander along the sea lanes of life I find the philosophical tenets that were inviolable in my 20s are now rather flexible, especially when blindly adhering to them involves additional physical exertion. One of them is the prohibition against roller-furling sails. Other than a marginal loss of aesthetics occasioned by the batten-less, roach-less mainsail, I didn't feel that *Romany Life*'s sailing ability was at all compromised by her easy-to-handle sails. It's the rig I'd choose, for sure.

In the conditions typical of the BVI—20-knot trade winds, cerulean skies, puffy white clouds, sapphire-blue seas topped with creamy whitecaps—we cranked off 9 knots on our beam reaches, 8 with the apparent wind at 30 degrees. We recorded these speeds without being obsessed with sail trim, i.e., I peeked out from under the Bimini top now and then to check that everything was copacetic, and never drove the boat hard enough to make life uncomfortable for anyone belowdecks. Off the wind, *Romany Life* skipped over the whitecaps like a flying fish, asking me for just an occasional spoke or two of wheel input. Does the phrase "another miserable day in Paradise" ring a bell? There was brief talk of setting the spinnaker, but after a couple of minutes with cold compresses on our foreheads, it went away.

Sailing the 54 is a gas, even under what some consider a retirement rig

Don't get the idea that the Hylas 54 is a namby-pamby yacht intended only for sheltered-water sailing. It's a true bluewater vagabond, built tough with a composite Twaron and fiberglass

The forward cabin (below) is as inviting as it looks; in fact, it might be hard to persuade your guests to leave. If you're into entertaining, the 54's saloon (opposite, top) is ideal: There's lots of seating, plenty of places for drinks and hors d'oeuvres, and deckhouse windows high enough that folks outside can't see in. The galley (below, opposite) has 12' of counter space, and can be fitted with every convenience, including a washer/dryer and trash compactor.