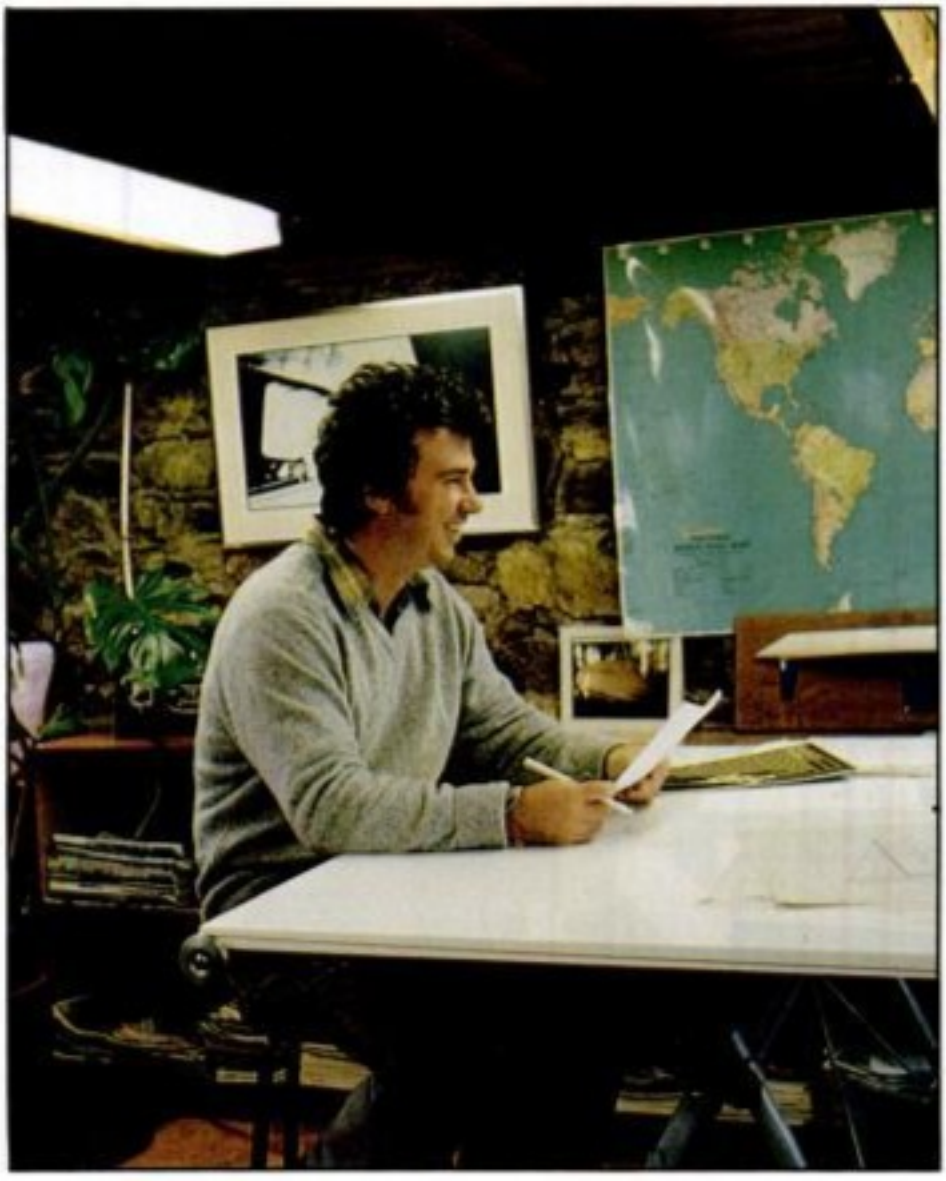

Being there is Ron Holland's idea of cruising to faraway ports

Fast Man Across the Water

by Selwyn Parker

"I'm not quite ready for my world cruise yet," says Ron Holland. And it's not hard to see why.

In his old stone design office—perhaps the most elegantly converted piggery anywhere in the world, occupying a splendid vantage point beside the fast-flowing Owenboy River in Currabinny, County Cork, Ireland—the phone never stops ringing. Secretaries scurry around clutching documents and sending off telexes, the draftsmen often work until 8 p.m. (and sometimes over lunch), and Ron usually puts in a 12-hour day. That's if he's lucky.

If this 35-year-old New Zealander, one of the top yacht designers in the world, went off on a world cruise, a lot of potential owners would be extremely unhappy. You don't throw everything up and retire when your star is rising rapidly in a business this competitive.

And that's Ron Holland's dilemma. Here's a man who as a schoolboy in Auckland spent dreamy hours in class doodling square-riggers on his math book.

"My books were full of drawings of topsails," he recalls. He saw so little relevance in his school subjects that he never saw the need to learn to read. That is, until a teacher spotted the reason why. He loaned the "backward" pupil that rhapsodic classic about a sailing holiday in England's Norfolk Broads, Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*. Holland devoured the book and became a passionate reader.

When he first met his wife, Laurel, he talked about his dream to sail around Cape Horn in a square-rigger. This, and more, much more, clashes oddly with his worldwide reputation as a designer of hot-shot racers who spends his days trying to shave a millimeter off a yacht's stern to increase upwind speed by a tenth of a knot.

From his earliest sailing days, the lad with the Prince Charles mop of curls used even his racing dinghies as cruisers. He frequently launched his 7-foot P-class dinghy in 30-knot gales and, at age 10, he flogged up and down past the ochre-colored cliffs of the east coast bays. "I only had to be rescued once," he says with some pride.

When he graduated to a Flying Ant, a two-man dinghy with a spinnaker and trapeze, he began to roam all over Auckland's bays, exploring nooks and crannies in a boat with about 4 inches of freeboard!

By age 14, he'd cheerfully survived his first gale in a cruising race around volcanic White Island on New Zealand's east coast.

By age 16, he had an intimate knowledge of the islands of the Hauraki Gulf, having cruised most weekends (while still in school) with the Mullet Boat Fleet. And, before he was 22, his yen for adventure had brought him around the world aboard yachts, including a voyage aboard the 33-

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foot *Spirit* from San Francisco to Australia, diving into the Pacific Islands along the way, without the benefit of an engine.

"That," he says now with particular feeling, "was an experience I'm still very proud to have been associated with."

As sailing master aboard the late George Kiskaddon's yacht, he didn't suffer a single mishap. Only once did he get a fright and that was when, snoozing below, he half-heard his crew on deck admiringly talking about some beautiful coral they could see close by. He stumbled out of the cabin, jibed the boat and in a menacingly light breeze that hardly provided headway, inched away from the knife-edge of disaster. The South Pacific idyll of soft breezes, warm sun and sparkling seas had mesmerized the crew into a false sense of security.

He talks feelingly about those years of cruising and racing across the world. They were fun years, relatively carefree and adventurous without being foolish. And they have left the designer with a feel for the cruising yacht. It's a strong individualistic one, a blend of an insistence on speed (the Flying Ant was his first fast cruiser!) and on romance ("My God! I'd love to go cruising in a square-rigger"). It's obvious that Ron Holland hates lolling about.

"I like my cruisers to go fast," he points out, citing a batch of recent designs for prestige builders like Nautor, Jeanneau and Ericson. But speed must not dominate romance—"A cruising boat must look good."

In conversations over a period of time, several things about the man become evident. First, despite his sometimes less than polished appearance (he looks positively uncomfortable in a tie and jacket), his mind is unusually tidy and orderly. He hates shooting from the hip. Frequently, he will stop in the middle of a discussion and say, "Look! I just haven't thought that one through. Give me a bit of time to think about it." Having done so, he will come back with a considered opinion which he doesn't recant or qualify.

Second, he's extraordinarily knowledgeable. When, for example, he talks about the way a cruising yacht should be built, one is surprised by the depth and range of his information—until it is remembered that he started out in nautical life as a craftsman, working as an apprentice in a yacht-building yard in Auckland. And, later, working for Charles Morgan in the United States, his main job was troubleshooting on the production line. Also, with his partner Butch Dalrymple-Smith, he's dropped in on so many yards around the world, from Taiwan to Palma and beyond, that he's kept pace with the radical changes in construction methods.

Ron Holland's knowledge is not of the textbook variety and, indeed, he seems quite proud that he never graduated or set foot in MIT or any other school of naval architecture.

"This office," he says without a hint of apology, "never got into yacht design in a theoretical sense." Although his shelves contain plenty of theoretical books, he doesn't seem to have much time for the calculations they contain. But, perhaps oddly, he reveals a fascination for the numbers of new technology. After all, it was Holland who saw the potential of the "bird-cage" frame that buttresses stress points in a hull. And he tapped NASA technology for new keel shapes for his racing boats. In short, there's a seat-of-the-pants touch legitimized by a recognition of—but not a devotion to—the mathematics of yacht design.

'If you've got a fixed amount of displacement, go for the longest possible boat'

Finally, he's an independent thinker. Ron is quite calm about being different. He trusts his own judgment. His whole life, in fact, suggests a stubbornly individualist streak.

At age 15, he just left school and told his mother later. At age 18, he walked out on his boatbuilding apprenticeship because he wanted to sail the world, not toil with plane and hammer over someone else's boat. Trusting his own design, he and Laurel once lived for a week on orange juice and bean soup because his quarter-tonner, *Eygthene*, which later won the world championships, had swallowed all the housekeeping money.

For this yacht designer, at least, cruising is arriving rather than voyaging. Day after day at sea is not Ron's idea of Elysium. Much better is a fast passage, allowing extra days in an interesting port.

"People nowadays tend to have less time to play around. There's a premium on time," he explains. "This means that if you have a faster cruising boat, you can achieve more with it. You're more likely to go further and you will be more likely to use it more often."

And length, he points out, is one certain way of going faster.

"For X amount of money you can automatically get X amount of displacement. I think that, if you've got a fixed amount of displacement, you should go for the longest possible boat. This means that you reduce the displacement/length ratio below that which evolved from the traditional working boat [from which cruising shapes originally developed]."

He hurries to point out that he's not advocating extremes. Extremes in any yacht design offer many inherent problems. A really heavy yacht has one set of inherent problems, such as difficulty in handling and expense. And an extremely light boat requires a very high quality of workmanship because you have potential structural problems which are acceptable perhaps in a racing yacht but completely unacceptable in cruising. Also, the motion of a very light boat is quicker and jerkier. So both ends of the displacement/length ratio are wrong for a cruising boat.

"In the middle range of displacement/length ratios there is a great variety of possibilities and, if you accept displacement as being the prime deciding factor for the size of one's cruising boat, going to the light side of the centerline of all the possibilities allows you to have a longer boat for the same internal volume and finance.

"Generally, people make a mistake choosing the length before they choose the displacement. This is the fundamental error in the traditional choice of the boat. Length has less to do with cost than does displacement. By going to a conservatively light displacement/length ratio, you are ending up with a boat that in certain size ranges can be 10 feet longer."

Extra length, he points out, buys a more stable working platform, a sea-kindlier shape, and extra performance "that can be looked at as a capital investment, i.e., the more miles covered equals increased use of the boat. My own personal feeling is that 35 feet is the minimum for comfortable, efficient ocean passages. Up to 50 feet is viable for shorthanded ocean cruising."

Ron's thoughts always relate to a yacht capable of circumnavigating, and therefore one that will have to deal with a variety of climatic, sea and berthing conditions.

"There is very little wrong with a long keel and attached rudder concept. With a long keel there's little problem drying the boat out and if you go to places where there aren't any marinas—and that's surely one of the points of cruising—that's very important. Also, a long keel is less likely to be damaged in a grounding.

"Although drop keels and centerboard keels give good sailing performance, they also have a disadvantage. And that is you have another potential mechanical problem and quite high maintenance problems." Ron cites metal fatigue, especially if the boat is anchored in an area with electrical currents in the water, and the risks of bending if the boat grounds.

"A cruising boat should be simple," he adds. "Every aspect of the yacht's design and construction should be analyzed to simplify it. All that transmits back into less maintenance.

"Twin keels' main advantage is that you can dry out with the boat level, but I think dragging two keels around is inefficient. Also, they are more expensive because of the extra engineering needed to

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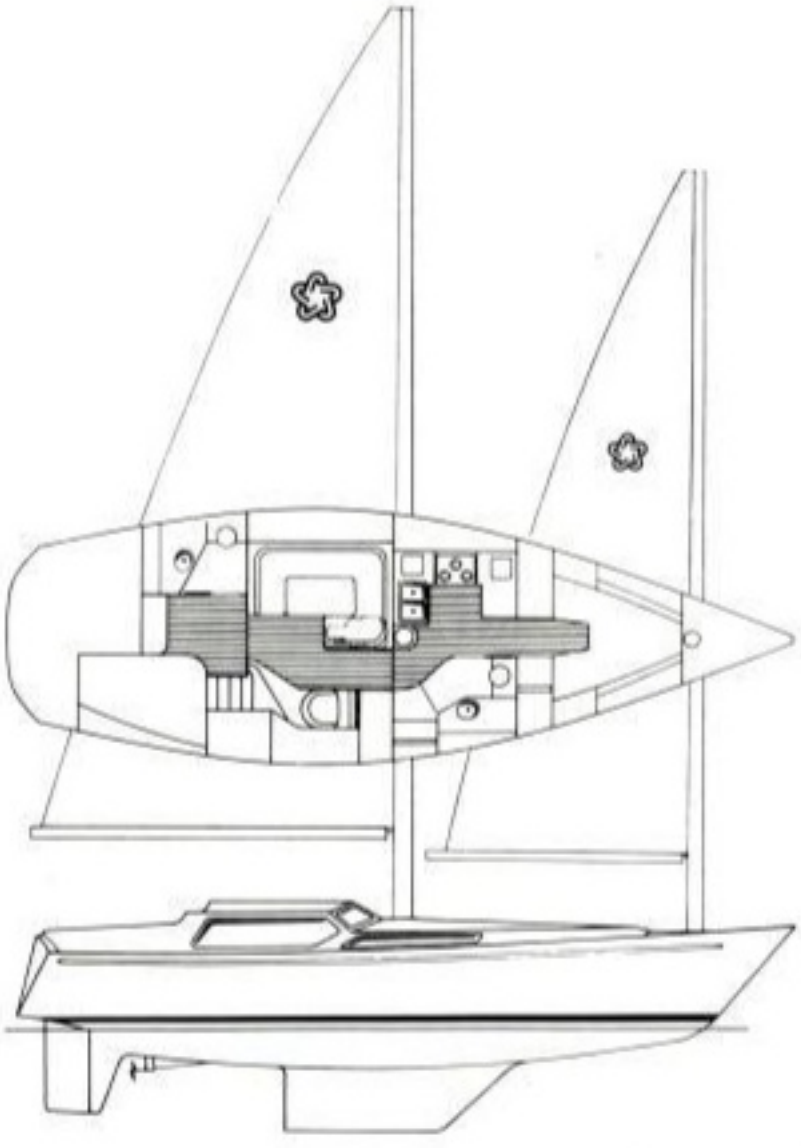

Fig. 1 Since Laurel Holland raced a Freedom 70 in the 1981 Two-Star, Ron has become interested in unstayed rigs. The Freedom 39 is the outgrowth of that interest. It is schooner-rigged and dispenses with the wraparound sails and wishbone booms of the other, earlier Freedoms. Garry Hoyt says that all Freedoms are now available with this mast and boom arrangement, as well as fully-battened sails, the subject of Hoyt's newest advertising push.

spread the loads. But the main thing—and here you come back to the traditional aspect of a cruising yacht which is very important—is that having two keels is not in keeping with the traditional and aesthetic angle. If the truth be known, that's why people don't go for twin keels."

How about fin keels?

"There's no reason to have a small fin keel. The extra speed gained on the average medium to light displacement yacht is very small. We know because we've tested that."

On the subject of construction, Ron has equally emphatic opinions.

On wood: "There's very little wrong with wood but the expertise is dying quickly. Also, you could say that the standard of timber isn't what it used to be. It's very difficult to get well-seasoned, marine-quality timber."

On steel: "Its strength is much more than you reasonably need. Its use is mostly related to the psychology of having a strong structure and it's true that a steel boat can go on the rocks and still have a pretty good chance of surviving even in an extreme situation. But the disadvantge is a high maintenance problem with rust and galvanic action. Maintenance is much more of a problem than with a well-built, modern, epoxy-finished wood boat or a well-built fiberglass boat. And it's hard to build a small steel boat anywhere near the weight of a fiberglass or wood boat."

On aluminum: "A lot of builders would do a good job in aluminum. It has a very good weight-to-strength ratio so it's efficient from a performance point of view. The disadvantage, once again, is maintenance. To have a good finish on an alloy boat you've got to apply some sort of a filling compound and that's susceptible to temperature changes and being chipped when lying alongside docks and that sort of thing. There's also the potential for electrolysis-type problems."

On fiberglass: "It's low-maintenance and easy to insulate. With the sandwich-type construction you have built-in insulation whereas with a metal boat you have to add insulation. But the real advantage is that you can duplicate the design at a relatively low cost and it's inherently strong."

Asked if wood might make a comeback, Ron says quickly, "There's absolutely nothing wrong with wood but the skill required in construction is higher. The number of people around the world who can build wood boats is decreasing and the number of people who can build fiberglass boats is greatly increasing."

Discussing rigs, Ron reveals the same sort of open-mindedness, a tolerance of innovation that characterizes his racing designs. For example, having run the shop while Laurel raced across the Atlantic in a 70-foot Freedom with an unstayed rig, he's since become interested in the concept. In May, Freedom Yachts launched

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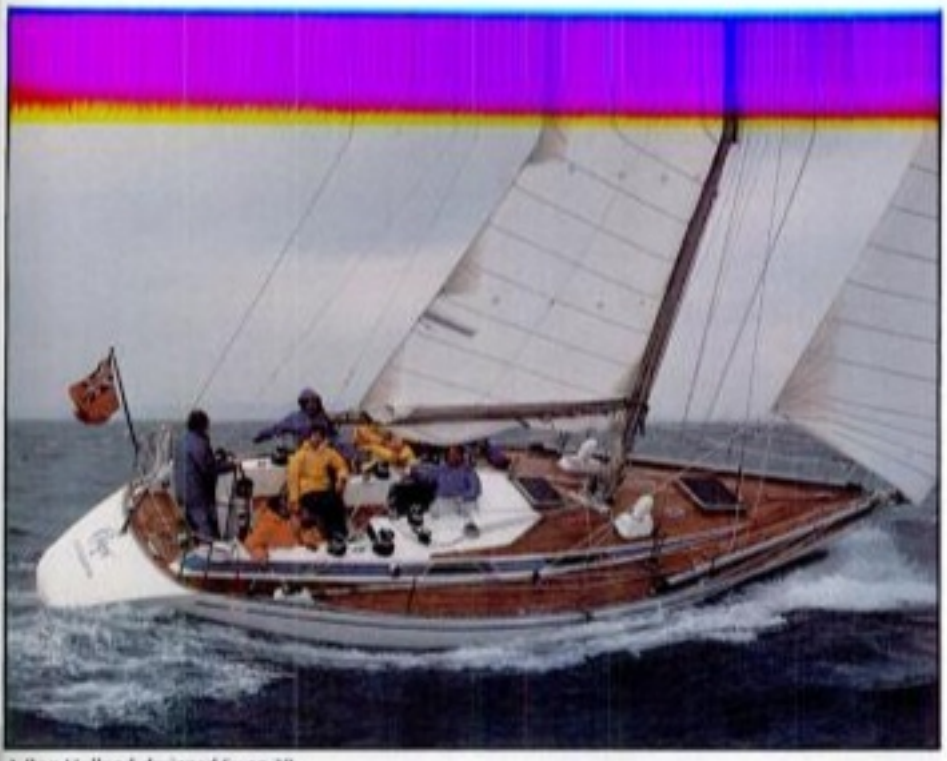


A Ron Holland-designed Swan 39.

the Holland version, the Freedom 39 (Figure 1). Typically, it has a faster hull shape than earlier Freedoms, which accented more traditional lines.

"Simplicity is the prime goal," Ron says. "And the unstayed rig is simple and cost-effective. You don't need chain plates, rigging and things like that. It's in its early days of development and there's still work to be done. But, there are very few problems. In early designs, the loads on the running rigging were higher than anticipated and some maneuvers were hard work."

Regarding traditional rigs, he says, "They have the advantage of small jib and small spinnaker which are easily handled. They work up to a size range where you can use swept-back spreaders to achieve a tight headstay rather than running backstays. But as soon as running backstays are needed, which is on boats from about 35 feet and longer, the advantages of a smaller foretriangle are more than offset, in my opinion, by the disadvantage of having runners.

"You just can't beat a masthead rig for simplicity. All boats of up to 50 feet in length can be handled fairly easily by two people, especially using roller-furling systems, which are now engineered to a point where they are almost problem-free.

"Ketches, yawls and schooners all tend to fall into the following category: You choose them because they look good. There's a romance about them. But between 30 and 50 feet they aren't very efficient. The size just doesn't warrant the problems with the systems. But where going to windward isn't a top priority—and it shouldn't be in cruising—they are efficient enough. But you pay more for them because there's more work in them."

When asked to describe his own ideal time for, he said:

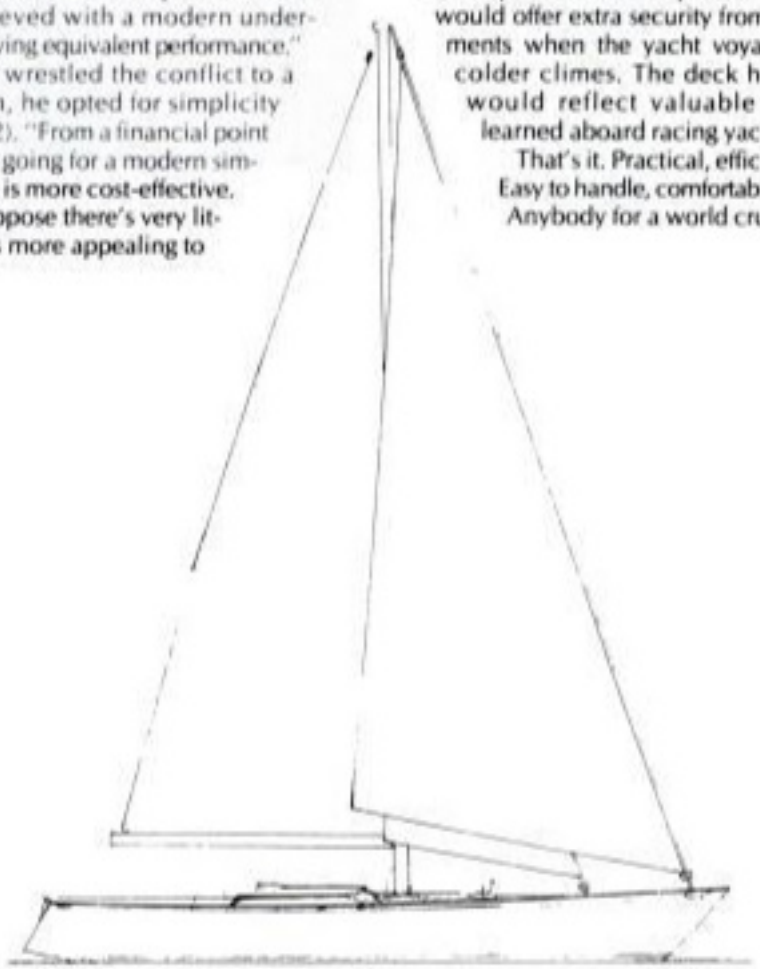
"I must say I'm torn between having an ultra-fast, modern cruising yacht and appeasing my own romantic feelings with a more traditional concept which could be achieved with a modern underbody, giving equivalent performance." Having wrestled the conflict to a solution, he opted for simplicity (Figure 2). "From a financial point of view, going for a modern simple boat is more cost-effective. But I suppose there's very little that's more appealing to me in life than a schooner sailing along with square topsails and a long raking bowsprit. I'm completely torn..."

What he finally emerged with was a 52-footer with the volume of a 40-footer. "You can't beat length for comfort and ease at sea," he explained. "Standing on the dock, people would probably look at it and say 'Look at that 50-footer. She's a bit light and narrow.'" It would have a cutter rig, with the mast set back a little further than usual to reduce mainsail size. The foretriangle would be split between the staysail and the genoa. Both foresails would be on roller reefing.

While cheerfully admitting that many cruising people may be shocked, Ron would insist on a strong engine. "It helps you achieve more because you aren't so reliant on the wind. I'd use the boat more because I would be confident that the engine could get me back to the office at a fixed date."

The interior would follow established arrangements. "Some yachts have departed from the traditional pattern but it's more of a gimmick." The deck would be as clean as possible, preferably allowing swimming off the transom. A coaming would protect the cockpit and a dodger would offer extra security from the elements when the yacht voyaged into colder climes. The deck hardware would reflect valuable lessons learned aboard racing yachts.

That's it. Practical, efficient, fast. Easy to handle, comfortable, strong. Anybody for a world cruise?



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