The (unbeatable) Peterson 44

Ocean Navigator March 1, 2018

To the editor: The Peterson 44 is a great cruising boat. We know this from living aboard one and putting many miles under its keel.

We came to the Peterson 44 by necessity. After three years on a full-keeled 34-footer, we needed a second cruising boat. Size and nimbleness really mattered and we were willing to give up some old-style bluewater cruising qualities to get them. It was 1995, and our yacht broker recommended the Peterson 44. She's relatively narrow for such a big boat, deep-drafted but with a decent ballast to displacement ratio and, above all, a fast but protected underbody with a long fin keel and rudder hung on a molded skeg with an enclosed prop.

The boat he sent us to see in her slip on Chesapeake Bay was pretty tired. She had a patched rubber dinghy half-inflated on deck, and while the owner paid the yard a fortune to keep up the varnish, the engine oil was dumped repeatedly into the bilge and the smell from the blackened surfaces was unpleasant.

She was, however, perfect for our purposes — basically sound with mostly cosmetic issues. We could pay cash and so we got a great deal. Five years of hard work later, we rechristened her *Oddly Enough* and set sail, zigzagging from the Pacific Ocean to Australia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and finally Borneo where after 10 years of cruising we sold her.

The P-44 was born in the mid-1970s from Californian Jack Kelly's challenge to young Doug Peterson to design a boat he would want to go cruising on. *Oddly Enough*, built in 1979, is one of about 30 commissioned by Stevens Yachts of Annapolis for chartering in St. Lucia. She's classier than the early Kelly-Peterson 44s, which had wooden port rings instead of bronze ports. Chartering accelerates wear and tear, and the inferior quality of the plywood used to core decks and build interior furnishings showed up. We called the plywood "monkey wood"; the squares that made up the deck core turned to rotten mush anywhere water could seep in around poorly bedded fittings. But after we re-cored the foredeck and partially down the side decks, *Oddly Enough* made it halfway around the world with large portions of her aft deck still spongy.



The Peterson 44 *Endymion* underway.

Tom Bailey

Doug was a racing boat designer; his first successful design was the Peterson 34, a “racer-cruiser” with a more radical design than the P-44. He went on to create many well-known big racing boats, including *America3*, which won the America’s Cup in 1992 with Dawn Riley on board, and *Black Magic*, a Kiwi boat that beat the U.S. to win the America’s Cup in 1995. It’s fitting that Doug died on June 26, 2017, as New Zealand was again winning the America’s Cup. Doug was inducted into the America’s Cup Hall of Fame a couple months before his death.

I thank *Oddly Enough* for never letting us down at sea. She had so much untapped reserve. In sailing speed, motoring and doggedly continuing in a sea, we rarely pushed her and she loped along easily.

After our first offshore cruise direct from the Bahamas to Maine, we headed down through the Lesser Antilles to spend hurricane season in Grenada before pushing off for the Panama Canal. We got to know Jim and Gail on the P-44 *Endymion* in Antigua, and as both boats were heading the same direction, I idly suggested we race. It was the glib confidence of a small-boat racer; little did I realize the consequences of tacking out against an accomplished big-boat racer. *Endymion* beat us on almost every between-island leg, but in

the process I learned I could push *Oddly Enough* in many different ways and, like a cat that's been lazing around, she sprang quietly and competently into action.

Like *Oddly Enough*, *Endymion* has been sold. I asked Jim and Gail for brief thoughts on the Peterson 44:

"We loved our P-44 of course, but it is hard to think of a particular feature we really valued. Perhaps the square cockpit with 6-foot, 6-inch benches lengthwise or crosswise for napping underway; the breakaway rudder and skeg that broke off clean at the bottom after a grounding and allowed us to steer easily to port with no serious damage or danger; backdoor access to the aft cabin. Of course we liked the low profile of the deck, except when I rapped my head in the pass-through! Then there was the feathering prop..."

We met many P-44s over the years, with names like *Second Sally*, *Wheatstrong*, *Gabrielle*, *R Priority*, *Dragon's Lair*, *Po Oino Roa* and *Fanfare*. They often made us envious with their fixed-up interiors. But none beat *Oddly Enough* for topside sailing gear fit-out, and all had experienced leaky ports and other issues and adapted in their own ways.



Ann Hoffner in the P-44 center cockpit underway to Panama's San Blas Islands.

Tom Bailey

Peterson 44s still ply the seas 30 years after their birth. There's a Yahoo group that actively pursues solutions to problems. Both Jack Kelly and Doug Peterson are dead. I don't know how long the hulls will last; fiberglass boats have long outlived their expectations.

After the race, when I asked Jim Nealon if he could have any boat in the world, he said, “I’d like to fix up Endymion the way I want and then have enough money to keep her that way.” I often thought an aluminum P-44 would eliminate the enormous amounts of teak and deck problems.

Jack Kelly is said to have gotten rid of the toolings for the P-44 when he asked Doug to design a P-46 for him. But legend lives on, and groups of Peterson owners like to indulge in rumors and tales of Cheatersons. Imitation may be a mark of respect, but I suspect it bothered Doug — the stolen plans and remakes of his designs, a number of which were poorly done and not a tribute to this great boat.

I’ve moved on to another cruiser, but if I see a Peterson 44 at anchor in some far-flung harbor, I’ll likely say to Tom, “Wow, isn’t that a beautiful boat.”

—Ann Hoffner and Tom Bailey voyaged for years aboard the Peterson 44 *Oddly Enough*. They are currently looking for another cruising boat.