

The Sigma story...

Tested almost to destruction in the infamous 1979 Fastnet Race, the Sigma 33 was the first in a range of fast, tough cruising and racing yachts which today make superb second-hand choices, says Peter Poland

Some new boats get tested. Some get thoroughly tested. But the first Sigma was tested almost to destruction – although it wasn't intended that way. When the Offshore One Design Council set out to select three cruiser racer models to adopt as official One Designs way back in 1978, it finally opted for the Jeremy Rogers-built and Doug Peterson-designed OOD 34, the rakishly slender Danish-built 101 and the simple but sensible David Thomas-designed Hunter Impala 28. But David Thomas had submitted another design: a 33 footer (10m). And when the 101 got the nod instead, he (and many

others) reckoned the Council had made the wrong choice. But rather than take it lying down, Thomas and sailor/surveyor David Hopkins submitted the design to Princess and Moody builders Marine Projects down in Plymouth. And, to cut a long story short, Marine Projects MD David King said yes.

The plan was to make use of Marine Projects' ability to produce large numbers of identical yachts to a competitive price and then market the product through a new Marine Projects subsidiary to be called Sigma Yachts. So Tom Richardson and his team at the Elephant Boatyard at Bursledon, on the Hamble, set about making the plugs with almost daily visits from and consultation with the mega-experienced duo of David Thomas and David Hopkins. Then the plugs went west to Plymouth, and Thomas and Hopkins continued to make regular visits to supervise the detailed deck layout and construction of the prototype. This was the first One Design that Marine Projects had built, and designer Thomas knew there was only one chance. It had to be right first time.

The prototype was duly launched and immediately started to rack up a string of successes. Thomas had wisely designed the Sigma 33 to be competitive under the IOR rule while sufficient numbers were building up to make One Design fleets viable. And then came Cowes Week, followed by the Fastnet Race: the 1979 version. And so began the ultimate boat test.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Poland crossed the Atlantic in a 25ft (7.6m) yacht in 1968 and later went on to spend 30 years as co-owner of Hunter Boats. When the company was sold in 2003 Peter became a freelance journalist

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The Sigma 33 went on to be one of the all time great cruiser-racer successes

The Sigma 33's first adventure came off Portland. Thomas said, 'We were trying to tack around the Bill against a strong tide in the middle of the night. On the fifth attempt, we went in even closer and hit a large rock very hard. I flew through the air and ripped my trousers on the main sheet track. Breakage number one. No water seemed to be coming in, so we carried on. Later inspection showed that the impact had cracked the leading edge of the cast iron keel but done no damage to the attachment and hull structure.'

The great storm

Then, way out in the Irish Sea, the Sigma and her crew came upon the great Fastnet Storm. As it transpired, she, like many other yachts of similar size, was in about the worst area and suffered the worst seas. Luck of the draw. 'In all, we suffered three B1 knockdowns – rolled 90° by big breaking waves. One huge sea landed straight on top of the cockpit, ripped out the grating and the liferaft and split the companionway washboards.

(Subsequent Sigma 33 companionways had strong back panels added).

'Then another huge sea smashed one of the saloon windows. Luckily we were carrying emergency wooden window covers, so Hoppy (David Hopkins) bolted one on. (Subsequent Sigma 33s had smaller windows).'

'What happened next?' I asked. 'Well,' replied Thomas, 'we were all inside the cabin by now. We were towing a couple of sails in their bags as drogues, and it was far too dangerous to sit in the cockpit. Then I heard a loud hooting coming from outside, so popped my head through the hatch. And there – rolling in the huge seas – was a Dutch Naval vessel. They asked if we wanted to get off. I consulted with the crew and although Penny (a lady crew member) was standing with her handbag over her shoulder, and David King had broken his collar bone after being thrown against a bulkhead, the consensus was that we'd rather stay with the boat. So off sailed the ship.

'As the weather improved, we made sail and carried on towards the Rock. Everything seemed fine. But when we tuned into the BBC, the Fastnet storm and resulting dramatic rescues were getting major coverage. So we decided that we and the Sigma had proved our point and first headed back to Newlyn so as not to worry family and friends awaiting news ashore, before going on to Plymouth where

the Frenchman who had bought this particular Sigma was waiting for his new boat.'

Having survived the ultimate test, the Sigma went back to the Marine Projects factory to see how the structures had stood up to the pummelling. David King wanted to strip her down and inspect everything. He was not an experienced sailor, but wanted to make the best use of his baptism by storm. The only damage was a hairline crack in the angle where the cabin sides joined the flat decks – an area beefed up on subsequent Sigmas. Oh, and the Stowe trailing log no longer worked properly. They found the spinner had been damaged when it had ended up in the crosstrees after a knockdown.

The Sigma 33 then went on to be one of the all time great cruiser-racer successes. An active Class Association has always managed to run a busy calendar of events afloat and an equally well attended social calendar ashore. And does so to this day. Designer David Thomas stresses that

These boats are pedigree yachts that look good and sail superbly

a successful One Design class is as much about the types of owners and crews that it attracts as it is about the boat itself. The name of the game is fun. Sigma Yachts

went on to sell an amazing 408 of its Sigma 33 model between 1978 and 1991, of which 364 were the full blown One Design version and 44 the cruiser '33C' version that sported a smaller masthead rig and slightly shallower keel.

Comfortable cruising

From the word go, the Sigma 33 had a wide appeal. David Thomas gave the design a practical but nonetheless comfortable interior layout. The boat had to cruise as effectively as it raced. The forepeak and amidships heads compartment are as spacious as any you will find on most similar sized cruisers of this era. And the saloon would have done justice to any cruising yacht. Indeed, in one respect it is better than most, thanks to the addition of a fixed pilot berth outboard, to starboard. If you want to sleep snugly and securely on passage, a pilot berth is the place to go. What's more, being located above the settee, no one will sit on your head or spill coffee on your face. And when it is not in use for sleeping, a pilot berth makes a great place to lob loose gear. Then, opposite to port, the Sigma has an array of decent-sized lockers and a couple of open fronted shelves/bookcases. It's all highly

practical. The saloon table is a decent size too. The galley and navigation areas are also excellent and the navigator has a cosy quarter berth right aft.

Indeed, the whole interior layout bears a considerable similarity to that found in the other popular cruiser of that era, the Westerly Fulmar – except that the Fulmar does not have a pilot berth. The two boats' vital statistics are strikingly similar. At 31ft 10in (9.70m) the Fulmar is slightly shorter, but its waterline length of 26ft (7.92m) is on a par with the Sigma's 26ft 3in (8.00m). The Fulmar's beam is 10ft 11in (3.32m) so a smidge more than the Sigma's 10ft 6in (3.20m) and at 9,900lb it is a bit heavier than the Sigma (9,500lb). The Fulmar draws a little less at 5ft 3in (fin keel version) compared to the Sigma at 5ft 9in and its ballast ratio is around 42% compared to the Sigma's 40%. So the two boats will display a similar degree of stability. And their sail areas (main and No1 Genoa) are virtually identical. So any sailor looking at a fin keel Fulmar might consider a Sigma 33 as well – unless of course he wants twin keels, in which case the Sigma can't help.

And how does the Sigma 33 perform? Like all Thomas designs, she is very close winded. And she has just enough width to her stern to scoot downwind without too much alarm. Whether you want to race in One Design events, enjoy club handicap events, just go cruising, or all three, the Sigma's performance is a real asset. The helm itself also has a typical Thomas feel: sensitive but quite firm. And like any performance cruiser, there is no need to push her hard when cruising in a blow with a light crew. The Sigma's generous sail area is great for light airs, but you can always shorten it down when you're not in a hurry. A yacht that needs to be reefed when the wind gets up is preferable to one that is so under-canvased that it 'sticks' in the light stuff.

And then there is the question of aesthetics. A boat with nicely balanced ends, elegant tumblehome on the topsides, a well proportioned rig and a sleek coachroof is so much easier on the eye than a short-ended, slab sided and tubby boat with a tall roof. Of course it does not matter to some people whether a boat looks good or just average. But the Sigma is definitely a 'looker'.

Sigma 36

Next boat on the Sigma slipway was the 36. Although very much a 'big 33', the 36 never set out to become a One Design class, but is no less a



Sigma 36
from £30,000



Sigma 362
around £49,500

performer for that. She was offered with tiller or wheel steering and to this day, the 36 remains a potent weapon in club handicap events. The rig remains 'fractional' and the interior layout is much the same as the smaller 33 (although offering more space of course). But the aft quarter-berth becomes a roomier affair that can accommodate a couple at a pinch, and the extra beam allows a second pilot berth to be fitted in the saloon.

Sigma 362

The 36's later development however, the Sigma 362, is a very different kettle of fish. David Thomas kept the original 36's sweet hull lines, but the deck moulding, rig and accommodation plan are completely different. This model spread the Sigma message to a far wider audience.

I spent a week cruising a Sigma 362 around the crystal blue Mediterranean waters of the Greek islands, so perhaps my vision of the boat is a bit rose tinted. But I did come to appreciate just how

versatile this nippy cruiser is. Firstly the masthead rig with its roller furling genoa (which was selected to appease died-in-the-wool cruising folk) works well. It has plenty of horsepower and it was always fun to duff up far larger charter yachts, whether slicing upwind in a stiff breeze or powering downwind with the spinnaker up. The wheel steering is always precise and the 362 has pure Sigma performance. She is a very successful club handicap racer as well as a commodious cruiser. There is also a shallower draught winged keel version offered as an option to the deeper draught fin keeler.

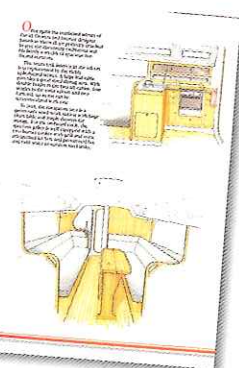
And what of the accommodation? The 362 adopted the more modern layout, with a big aft heads compartment replacing the traditional amidships affair and an enclosed aft double cabin giving extra sleeping space. But there's still enough beam to retain a pilot berth in the saloon. My week on a 362 was shared with three other chaps, and we never felt cramped. The owner took the stern cabin, the cook used the saloon double berth, the sailing master used the settee berth opposite, and I commandeered the forepeak. It was all highly salubrious, despite the heat at night. What's more the cool box kept drinks at the right temperature, the galley served up fine breakfasts and lunches and the chart table made navigation a pleasure. What more could a team of four semi-senile delinquents require?

Sigma 38

The next Sigma One Design to be launched was the 38. When David Thomas and Sigma Yachts

TOP Very much a 'big 33' the Sigma 36 was offered with tiller or wheel steering

ABOVE The Sigma 362 is a nippy, versatile cruiser offering precise steering and good performance even against bigger competition



A page from the original Sigma 38 brochure

Sigma 38
around £50,000



announced the new design, many reckoned that a 38ft (11.58m) One Design represented a major gamble. Bear in mind that this was 1987, when a 38-footer was a substantial boat. Would there really be enough takers to make the class work? The doubters were rapidly proved wrong, as a big order book built up. The smaller Sigma 33 had proved that the modern One Design cruiser racer was a popular option. Marine Projects had proved that it could build boats at speed and to a very competitive 'all in' price. Bear in mind that even the spinnaker and its gear were included as standard. The bigger 38 just built on this momentum and the class roared ahead from a standing start. In all, a total of 125 hit the water. And to this day the Sigma 38 Class Association runs a multitude of enjoyable events and regattas (celebrating its 21st anniversary this year) as well as maintaining the viability of the class rules.

Like its smaller sisters, the Sigma 38 is an elegant yacht. It looks the part. A powerful twin spreader fractional rig towers above the deck and a ballast ratio of almost 42% makes sure she stands up to her sail. The coachroof is low and sleek. And the discreet Sigma tumblehome stops the hull from looking slab-sided. From every angle, this yacht looks the business.

ABOVE The Sigma 38 was a One Design gamble that paid off. This pale green example sports the favoured hull colour of Sir Owen Aisher's Yeoman stable. Prince Philip often helmed her at Cowes Week

BELOW The 41 was the largest Sigma to be produced

Sigma 41
around £49,500



show the experience of the designer. Everything is in the right place and works. The helmsman's position behind the wheel is comfortable. Sheets, controls and winches are all perfectly positioned so that they fall easily to hand. Whether you are racing hard or cruising casually, this boat is a joy to work.

Sigma 38 owner Dr Phil Meakins summed it all up very well when he told me, 'It is interesting how as classes wax and wane, the Sigma 38 still hangs in there. The 38s win in RORC, JOG, and when organisers take them out of One Design, they win under IRC inshore as well. Much of this is down to an enthusiastic bunch who run the class via the website, which is gradually being improved as a resource to help keep these boats going.'

'One problem is that the 38 makes a seriously good cruising boat as well, which might dilute the racing side of things. But most folk are attracted to them because they want to do both, and it would be difficult to find another boat that covers both these roles without spending more than double the money. But then I am probably biased!' He is, but then again, he's right.

Sigma 41

The biggest Sigma to make it to the production line was the 41 (a Thomas-designed 46 was tooled up but sadly never saw the light of day). The 41 is sought out by canny sailors who want a tough, long distance cruiser that can move fast and take nasty weather in its stride. At the price, there's little to match it. Unlike the smaller Sigmas, the 41 was offered with a variety of rigs. The masthead version sold well, the fractional rig looked a bit sexier and sat well with handicap rules, and the bigger US rig