

TEST: SONATA 6.3

# Sonata stretches a good idea

The ever-popular Sonata trailer sailer range could have a potential new hit with a bigger, better version of its Golden Oldie, the Sonata 6. James Hill reviews and tests the new Sonata 6.3. Photos by Glen Cameron.

**L**aunched about ten years ago, a smart and racy-looking trailer yacht called the Sonata 6 became not only one of the biggest selling TS's of the time, but also one of the most influential new designs in the market.

It would be fair to say that the Sonata 6 metre was one of the first trailer sailers to achieve the looks and styling of bigger racing yachts and was a fast performer to boot. Designed and built by Sydney sailing enthusiast Jim Voysey, the Sonata 6 combined the styling of bigger quarter and half-tonner offshore racing yachts in a size of boat which was both easy to trail and inexpensive to build.

The Sonata 6 was in fact initially de-

signed to fit into the newly created international Mini-Ton class, so it was not surprising to find in it the strong family resemblance to IOR offshore yachts.

The Sonata 6 was such an instant success that Voysey had something like 10 boats on order from just his first few ads in *Modern Boating*. Within the first year Voysey went from producing one boat a week to the point where the Sonata Yacht Company factory was building one boat a day!

Why the Sonata 6 was such a success is not too hard to understand. Not only did it give buyers the big yacht styling they had found lacking in many contemporary TSs, but it had an attractive wedge-profile cabin with the long one piece smoke-finished cabin port

which is almost *de rigueur* on racing yachts these days.

However, while it proved to be a successful cruiser/racer and not a bad race performer with its optional fractional sloop rig, the Sonata 6 in time lost market support from being a little too small inside.

While the Sonata 6 was still in the market and doing well the Sonata range was expanded with a seven and eight metre boat and later by another mini-ton design, this time a 6.7 metre from Gary Mull of the USA.

The Sonata Yacht factory was a victim of the late Seventies recession, but in time the range was picked up by central coast builder Investigator Yachts, with Jim Voysey becoming the





southern NSW agent for the range with a new company called Shoreline Yachts.

Today Investigator build the Sonata range together with their own range of trailer sailers. The Sonata 6, however, is no longer part of the lineup; it has been replaced by a bigger, roomier 6.3 metre which looks like the old six metre's big sister.

As Voysey puts the situation, while the Sonata range was off the market he and his new builder were able to re-think the whole range, coming to the conclusion that while it was a great little boat, the original six metre was no longer what the market wanted. Voysey designed the new 6.3 metre to deliberately be a 'blown up' version of the old six. In fact, the plug for the new boat used virtually the same underbody shape up to just above waterline level. It then followed much the same flow of lines as before with a bit more length, beam and freeboard.

The first 6.3 metre hit the water about two seasons back, and while it has not sold in the same numbers as the old 6 metre it is doing well in the currently depressed state of the trailer sailer market.

Recently I had the pleasure of testing the 6.3 metre for the first time. Jim Voysey of Shoreline Yachts, as Sydney and southern NSW agent, organised the test on a boat he had just fitted out as a demonstrator and competition racer in TYA events. Shoreline, at their small Mona Vale factory, fit out each boat to suit buyers needs, keeping down freight and other costs in the final price.

At first sight I couldn't help but think I was looking at a bigger six metre Sonata but on closer examination I saw that the resemblance was only superficial. The new 6.3 has much more of a raked bow, higher freeboard and more rounded free-flowing sections than the little six. In many ways the 6.3 looks more like the bigger eight and seven metre Sonata boats, and it's interesting to see how some of the ideas from the larger range have been incorporated.

The 6.3 metre features a fractional sloop rig without fixed backstay of runners. The old six had a masthead rig as standard, but since Voysey had found fractional rigs worked better on such new Sonata designs as the eight and 6.7 metres he had no hesitation in going for fractional this time around.

Some fractional rigs are complicated by the use of runners, but the rig used on the 6.3 metre is a simple arrangement which is as practical for racing as it is for knockabout sailing. Originally it was meant to have an adjustable backstay, but experimentation found that the

rig could work quite well without it and so in the cause of simplicity it was left off subsequent new boats.

Overall I came away from this new Sonata design with the impression that it is a big improvement all-round on the early six. It's a prettier looking boat with more room and certainly more speed, all within the same price range.

## Test

We did not have the most ideal day for a test sail; we rigged and photographed the boat in sauna-like conditions while a gathering southerly front threatened to dump gallons of water upon us. As often happens when a front approaches conditions became gusty with the wind varying from a moderate 10 knots or so up to 25 knots at times. While we were really overpowered at times, I found it easy enough in flat water to 'feather' the light fractional rig up in the hard gusts and so have enough sail on in the lulls.

As we see-sawed our way up the bay, we changed down from the number one genoa which I had somewhat optimistically ordered. We hanked on the non-overlap small jib which comes with the standard boat package and were immediately more comfortable in the gusts.

Given the variation in the winds, the 6.3 metre handled the conditions very well. While inclined to heel quicker than some other boats, the 6.3 tracks fast through the water and does not round up hard like some small TSs when hard-pressed. With a beam of seven feet tapering towards the waterline the 6.3 is not overly wide for its length, so it's encouraged to be easily driven even when it has a heel up and the gunwales are getting wet.

With all 225 kg of lead ballast concentrated in the bottom of the vertical-lift centreboard the Sonata 6.3 goes well to windward, pointing high and showing good acceleration through tacks. Downwind the boat lacks waterline length and hull form power to be a really hot performer in the fresh winds we sailed in, but it is quick downwind or beam reaching in light airs.

The boat is designed to essentially perform with the small number three jib and large mainsail to keep costs down. The boat would be a bit short on horsepower in light airs with this rig, so Shoreline offer a 150 percent overlap genoa to give that bit of extra get up and go in winds of 12 knots or less. Anything much over 12 knots would suit the standard rig and there would be little point in fiddling around with an in-between sized number two headsail.

As Voysey points out, in this size of

boat there is about as much room on the foredeck as on the kitchen table so it's not a good idea to do a lot of headsail changes, but rather have a big mainsail and take reefs if you have to.

The advantage of the small jib which doesn't overlap the mast is that it can be sheeted in close to the centreline of the boat, creating the optimum slot between headsail and the mainsail. There are short fore-and-aft tracks for the jib fairleads on the outside edge of the cabin roof.

Since the small jib is only some nine square metres in area (about the equivalent of a largish sailboard sail), it has a simple 2:1 rope purchase on the jib sheets and no snubbing or sheet winch. I think most male adults will find this mechanical advantage acceptable even in strong winds, but for some less strong females and teenagers the optional second Arco 6 sheet winch would be a good idea.

To keep the boat simple and costs down, the Sonata 6.3 comes standard with a single Arco 6 mounted on the starboard side to handle all the halyards. The halyards are cockpit-led and are routed via turning blocks back along the starboard side of the cabin roof to the winch. The optional genoa kit available comes with a second Arco, which is mounted on the opposite side of the companionway hatch. Forespar (USA) jammers allow several halyards to be serviced by the one winch.

There is also an optional spinnaker kit, complete with JYRU style double-sided spinnaker, pole, control lines and extra cockpit cleats, as well as quarter turning blocks.

While the swept back single spreaders do not allow the most optimised setting for the genoa, it would be good enough for the average cruiser/racer sailor who only occasionally races.

If you were a real racing fanatic you would probably, as Voysey argues, be opting for a more race-oriented boat like the Sonata 6.7 metre with its sophisticated double spreader and runner-style fractional rig.

The rig on the Sonata 6.3 is in fact very much in keeping with the latest trend for TSs to go fractional, at the same time not forgetting the cruising sailor. Like the 6.3 the new Sonata 26, featured elsewhere in this issue, also has a simplified fractional rig with swept back spreaders that can support the mast without need of runners.

One of the drawbacks with not having a backstay is that in light airs the mast can sometimes be too stiff for the mailsail, which makes it hard to get the sail setting right. As it was in our test sail the untapered Sheerline 5100





Sonata 6.3 lends itself to launching by one person if required.



Top: New Sonata is light enough to be launched by one person. Above: Interior features galley to port of centre case.



Above: Simple and clean cockpit layout provides backrests with stowage pockets. Note lockers aft . . .

section mast gave enough deflection to allow the mainsail to take up its natural luff curve and look really efficient. In the lulls it appeared as if mainsheet tension was enough to keep the tip bending, but I am not sure if this would always be the case. In any event, it would be a very inexpensive exercise to add a lightweight 'tweaker' backstay with adjustable block and tackle to mechanically bend the mast tip when you wanted.

The performance of the Sonata 6.3 metre is quick enough to make it a good boat for the younger sailor, yet will appeal to older people. Some people might not like the boat's initial tenderness but if they can accept the fact that the boat stiffens up at a wider angle of heel and at that point becomes very stable, they should accept it easily.

Overall, on the performance side the 6.3 appears to be a reasonably good all-rounder with a leaning perhaps towards lighter winds. It's not an out-and-out racing boat, but it still managed to place fifth overall in an open trailer yacht event at Canberra several days after our test. And that was without any previous tuning.

On the score of general practicality the boat shapes up well. With a simple three-point style rig it's quick and easy to rig, the mast is not hard for one person to get up and the dry trailing weight of 650 kg is not beyond the scope of many big four and six cylinder cars these days.

The cockpit is of adequate size given the essential day-sailer nature of the boat, with room enough for three adults to sit side-by-side. There are handy side nick-nack pockets in the coamings, which are raised to give some degree of security.

While I found the side decks a bit on the narrow side, I had to admit that this was a reasonable trade-off for the extra room in the cabin. In this size boat the crew are more likely to stay in the cockpit rather than side deck rail-ride, so you may as well keep the side decks as a narrow gangway.

On deck the boat is well laid out, with non-skid on all the right places, anchor foredeck hatch with lid, cockpit lockers moulded as part of the cockpit so they don't drain below, stainless steel tabernacle on the cabintop for the centre-board lifting tackle, large pop-top with integrated sliding hatch and slotted alloy toe rail which looks good and actually strengthens the boat.

One of the most impressive features is the moulded fibreglass rudder stock which saves several kilos in weight, and most importantly saves many dollars.