



The Mini Transat Open 6.50 offshore racing class is making serious inroads into the West Coast and offers a whole lot of bang for your buck

SHORTHANDED

offshore racing has always been a bit of a fringe activity in the sailing world. Plenty of boaters are used to coastal cruising with one or two crew, but heading offshore, alone, in a powered-up lightweight racer for days or weeks on end is another story entirely.

While relatively unknown in North America outside a handful of singlehanded race participants, singlehanded offshore racing has quite a following in Europe. Much in the same way as auto racing, there are several development classes for offshore racing, with the smallest and most affordable being the Open 6.5, followed by the Figaro, Open 40, Class 40 and finally the big leagues of the Open 60.

The 21-foot Open 6.50 class—also known as the Mini, Mini Transat, Mini 6.50 and so on—was developed for the Mini Transat race, which is a 4,200-mile single-handed yacht race from La Rochelle, France, to Salvador, Brazil, with fleets of up to 100 competitors. The Mini Transat is held every two years, sailed in two legs and generally takes five weeks, including the one-week stopover in the Canary Islands.



↑ **Above** Craig Horsfield and Kurt Hoehne sailing a Zero series Mini Transat 6.50 in the Mini Med 500 in Europe.

In recent years the race has been dominated by the French, but it receives entries from all over the world. Craig Horsfield and Chris Tutmark from Seattle competed in the 2009 edition, and for 2011 there will be two Canadian entries, Nathan Baron and Diane Reid, who are both sailing Zeros imported by North American Mini Transat Ltd., based out of Victoria, B.C.

For the past several years Adrian Blunt of North American Mini Transat Ltd. has been one of North America's biggest Mini sup-

porters, and Blunt has certainly done his part to help grow the class from just 12 boats in 2007 to more than 30 by the end of 2009. There are currently two Minis in the Vancouver area and three in Seattle.

The Open 6.50 isn't the kind of boat we normally review at *Pacific Yachting*, but when Blunt phoned us up to see if we'd like to try out a Zero it was a hard offer to refuse.

The Boat Open 6.50s fall into two categories—prototypes and series. The prototypes are generally cutting edge, spare no expense, custom boats with high-tech materials, canting keels and water ballast systems. Series boats are made with more traditional materials to keep the costs down, have fixed ballast, and are built to strict one-design class standards. Prototypes tend to be faster than the series boats, but racing in both categories is hotly contested.

The Zero is a series boat designed by Marc Lombard, a naval architect known for his fast Mini Class, Open 40 and Open 60 designs, and built by MOS Composites of Spain. It has a retractable keel that makes it ▶

convenient for road transport without the need for special permits.

Against other boats in its class the Zero is considered a generalist and a good performer both up and down wind. Most long distance offshore races have a significant downwind portion, so most boats built for that purpose feature large spinnakers and wide hulls designed for downwind performance. This is perhaps the biggest downside for anyone considering an Open 6.50 for general racing in our area. With a PHRF rating of around 110 (remember, this is a 21-foot boat) it is very hard to compete in most conditions. However, in anything more than 50–100 miles in downwind surfing conditions the Zero will slay giants.

On Deck As a boat designed for single and double handed racing, the 6.50 can be sailed easily and safely by a shorthanded crew. All controls are led back to the cockpit within easy reach of the helm—which controls twin rudders—and the loads are relatively small and manageable.

The cockpit is a nice size for two or three people, and features a centre console at the rear with backstay and mainsail controls, and an enclosed transom.

The cockpit seats/side decks are angled outward to create a very comfortable and secure seating area while heeled, and the

↓ **Below** A Zero getting prepped for offshore racing.



centre console is a nice place to put your feet while driving. It's plain to see the Zero was designed for long hours of comfortable cockpit time.

Down Below You can't expect much by way of accommodations on any 21-footer, especially one that's designed to be as light as possible, but the Zero's interior does a more than adequate job of covering the basics for long distance travel.

The key here is to store and organize all the extra sails, gear, food and personal supplies in a way so they're easily found and the weight is evenly distributed. Each sailor has their own preferences for storage, but the test boat was equipped with a nifty sail cloth pocket system that covered much of the interior.

The Zero's living space centres around the keel box, which serves as the cooking, eating, navigating and repair area. Due to space restrictions meals will likely be freeze-dried, so the Zero has a gimballed single burner stove for heating water.

There are technically berths for four with a double V-berth and a single bunk down each side, but four people sleeping overnight would be a stretch. The V-berth on most Open 6.50s will be used primarily for sail storage.

All this said, it wasn't too long ago that a 21-foot boat was considered a very cruisable length, and for what it's worth, the French do cruise Open 6.50s in the Mediterranean.

Rig and Systems The Open 6.50 class is traditionally a testing ground for new technologies and systems, and the Zero is no exception. While most of the boat is relatively straightforward, its sweptback spreaders, runners, articulating bowsprit and the fact that the top spreader is twice as wide as the bottom spreader should draw a few stares at the dock.

These boats are typically set up with the skipper's choice of electronics, autopilot and safety equipment. The autopilot in particular needs to be top-notch in these boats, as they are required to run for hours at a time while racing in ocean conditions.

On the Water Predictably, the Zero sails at really fat angles upwind and definitely prefers to have the sheets eased. The helm feels stiff, stable and balanced, and even with plenty of heel it steers very straight with no weather helm—straighter, in fact, than any boat I've driven.

We sailed the boat upwind in around 10 knots of breeze and were making 4.8 to 5.5 knots of boat speed, which is about max for the waterline. After sailing upwind for an hour or so we cracked off and hoisted the large asymmetrical kite. Pushing 8–9 knots on a bit of a surf we made it back downwind to our starting point in less than 15 minutes. I was very impressed.

Final Comments Blunt says he isn't so much interested in selling these boats as he is in building the fleet on the West Coast, and after talking to him about his plans and hearing some of the lengths he's gone to deliver these boats to his customers, I believe him.

North American Mini Transat Ltd. is the importer for several Mini Transat series designs, most of which are built to order in Europe and can be shipped anywhere in North America.

Several of these boats are available as kits or without electronics or sails, but for a fully loaded, ready to race Zero, expect to pay around US\$65,000, plus another \$4,000 for a double axle trailer.

Compared to many of the other race boats available this is a downright bargain, especially when you consider the money saved on bar tabs for the crew! ☺



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