by Tom Dove

Epic Saga

Fast, efficient and proven, the Saga 43 is a good choice if your plans include any kind of long-distance cruising.

JOHN BILDAHL

We crave adventure but ask technology to shield us from the danger. We seek beauty but want shelter from rain and wind. We choose sailboats instead of power because we like the ride and the potential for distances—but we always want to go just a *bit* faster.

That's where the Saga 43 comes in. Bob Perry broke from tradition once with his Passport designs in the early 1980s, perhaps the first boats to be called "performance cruisers." He broke from it again with the Saga, moving up a healthy notch in technology and speed while preserving comfort and safety offshore, and adding modern construction and easy handling to the mix.

I sailed the second Saga 43 to hit the water, in 1996. That one was followed by a steady flow off the Canadian production line as many folks decided that it was time to leave the rat race and go sailing. Recently I sailed a new boat, hull No. 48, and demand has remained undiminished. Jerry Cann of Saga Marine in Annapolis calls it his "bread and butter" boat. This is a fast, handy, comfortable boat that's lots of fun to sail. Very few vessels possess that combination of traits.

Test Ride

Not much has changed about this boat in the past seven years, proving that Perry knows his stuff and Saga builds them right. A 2500 rpm cruise speed produced about 8.5 knots of boat speed and a 78 decibel sound level, which is subdued but not exceptionally quiet. Stopping, turning and backing were easy and predictable, and the turning circle is about one boatlength.

The sail plan has a tall, roached mainsail and two headsails, but this is not a cutter. You choose either the big high-cut reacher on the forward stay when off the wind, or the blade jib on the inside stay when beating to windward, rolling up the one you aren't using. This simple arrangement works beautifully, eliminating the common cutter problem of the outer jib hanging on the inner stay, while providing lots of area off wind and a self-tacking sail to windward. A 12-knot breeze greeted us on the Severn, and the standard sail plan gave 7.5 to 8 knots of boat speed. We expect racing boats to perform this way, but for a 43-foot ocean cruiser, it's exceptional. It was no fluke; hull No. 2 had performed well in 10 knots of wind when I sailed it.

Some sailing couples try to avoid frequent tacking in standard sloops because it requires releasing one sheet, muscling the jib across, and winching in the new sheet on the other side. Half a dozen such tacks can be your aerobic workout for the day if the breeze is up. By contrast, tacking the Saga 43, with its self-tending jib, is so easy that I looked for excuses to do it. Look around, turn the wheel, and you've tacked. No sheet trimming, no panic, no problem.

The helm feels solid and responsive, the hull tracks straight and there's no tendency for the balanced rudder to become overpowered in puffs. This is not a stiff boat, but it doesn't feel too tender, either. The boat heels down to its lines, locks onto the course, and just goes ahead with an easy, smooth motion.

On Deck

The cockpit seats go straight back to the transom, which has a door for easy access to the water. Moving about the wide cockpit is easy, and the seats are long enough for sleeping under the stars.

My wife Pam and I liked the good visibility and wide variety of choices for seating. To avoid a bulky bridgedeck, the cockpit sole slopes very gradually up to two small step-overs at the companionway; it's a clever idea and it works. There's a cockpit locker sized to fit a six-man valise life raft abaft the large, deep general-stowage locker. Another locker is vented for stowing gasoline for the dinghy's outboard, and yet another is vented for the propane tank.

This boat has a clever anchoring system that other builders could emulate. It's self-launching through an angled bow roller, with the forward roller mounted lower than the aft one and the chain leading through a large tube. The anchor chain is stowed low and out of the foremost bow, so the angled tube keeps the chain out of the foredeck storage area. There's space for two anchors; the test boat had a Bruce.

I like the long grab rails along the cabin top and at the mast. Too many boats leave the crew mercilessly abandoned to the elements a few feet ahead of the cockpit. While the rig on the Saga is designed to minimize trips forward, that little adventure will certainly be necessary sometime during a cruise.

Current boats have Harken deck equipment, while earlier models used Lewmar. The molded-in diamond-shape nonskid is effective but won't sandpaper your bottom when you sunbathe. This deck was designed by people who understand what's important.

Cabin

You'll discover in shopping that all the boats look very much alike. "We're a low-volume shop, not a custom shop," says Allan Poole, president of Saga. The builder will make some small changes to accommodate a buyer, but don't expect lots of variation from one to another. That said, hull No. 47, which I inspected dockside, has an optional center-island double berth forward. If you want a big master cabin, look for this version, as it provides much more headroom and general spaciousness than the standard, or "classic" layout (it's also much easier to make up an island bunk). The classic layout has Pullman berths forward and a head in the forepeak, with the master cabin aft under the cockpit.

JOHN BILDAHL PHOTOS

Above: **The current model of the Saga 43 has a center-island double berth in the forward cabin.** *Left:* **The galley has plenty of counter space and is well laid out.**

The hull ceilings are light-colored ash and very pretty, with an excellent varnish finish. Varnish work is done before, not after, the parts are installed in the hull. This makes it possible to achieve a uniform, smooth coating and to cover all the surfaces completely. It's also more efficient for the factory to do it that way.

The hatches in the cabin sole have positive catches and gaskets. This should be standard on all offshore craft (in a knockdown, you don't want hatches flying around the interior), but is actually quite rare. There's a fair amount of panel space in the nav station, but it's not huge; the table is sized for a chart book, not full charts. The panel space is adequate for basic instruments. That's realistic in today's electronic world, where plotters and radar screens can be installed at the helm instead of at the nav station, saving a trip below to figure out where you are.

The galley has a proper grab bar, and you can brace against the companionway ladder in a seaway. This linear galley layout doesn't feel as secure as a U-shaped one, but it does give a very workable space. The fridge opening extends down in front of the cabinet as well as into the countertop for easy access—no more diving headfirst to find the carton of milk at the bottom of the box.

The cabin has solid, well placed grab rails to help you move around when the wind and waves build up. Counters have nice fiddles to keep lunch plates from going adrift and redecorating the bulkheads in the middle of the Gulf Stream.

Hull and Engine

This design shows strong influences from long-distance ocean racing, which makes it fast and, to my eye, handsome. The hull has a plumb bow with a sharp entry and a narrow, long waterline, while the stern is broad and flat. Paint a couple of corporate logos on the sides and others in the anchorage will think you're a racing rock star. Shorthanded racing is a sort of extreme version of mom-and-pop sailing, where the boat and crew are not only challenged by the weather conditions, they are seriously understaffed for

making fast passages. A cruising couple doesn't need to reduce weight or carry as much sail as a racer, but seakindliness, speed, safety and handiness are beneficial to either one. Starting in 2002, Saga 43s have a new keel with a longer chord that's more efficient than the original version. The older boats are no slouches, though, so don't put too much emphasis on the new blade when you're shopping for a brokerage boat since the draft remains the same.

The boat is powered with a 56-hp, four-cylinder Yanmar diesel. Batteries, drivetrain and the transmission end of the engine are easy to reach in the aft cabin. There's an excellent oil change setup, with pumps that make the transfer easy. Early models had more limited access to the sides of the engine than later ones, and the oil change pump was optional. You want it.

Construction

The company changed from polyester to vinylester resin with hull No. 49, but all the boats are laid up conventionally with unidirectional and bidirectional E-glass and blister-resistant resins. I've heard of no chronic problems with blistering or other gelcoat maladies with any of these boats. There's Baltek core in the hull and deck, except along the keel line and behind all mounted parts, where it's solid glass. This builder does regular tests during production, including core analysis and burning sample laminates, to ensure proper catalyst/resin mixture and uniform layup.

Sagas are not vacuum bagged. "The construction relies on the quality of the labor force," says Poole. "If you're looking for quality, you have to look farther than just 'it's vacuum-bagged.' " I found tinned wiring, ample bus bars and proper panel protection over the AC section, along with a GFCI for safety. The plumbing and wiring are routed neatly and tie-wrapped for security and chafe prevention.

Prices and Availability

This boat's base price was $249,500 in 1996, and like most quality sailboats, Sagas have held their value well. I found a 1998 one for exactly that price, a 1999 for $295,000 and a 2000 model with the large double forward for $298,000. This year's boats are in the $364,000–$465,000 range.

Sagas go sailing all over the world, so their owners aren't as localized as some other popular sailing fleets. But Annapolis dealer Jerry Cann sponsors a summer rendezvous on the Bay (410-280-8900 or *Cann Yachts@aol.com*). On the web, see *www.sagaowners.com* for more information about the boats and regional events.

Conclusions

"People buying these boats the last couple of years have been saying, 'I'm retiring in a couple of years, I'm buying a boat, and I'm going on a world cruise,' and they're actually doing that," says Poole. The boats do well on ocean passages, with 170-mile days commonplace. If you're in the market for such qualities, you'll find a few Saga 43s available. Their owners tend to keep them, but eventually every cruiser comes ashore and the boat comes up for sale.

Fast, handy, comfortable, modern sailing cruisers like the Saga 43 are a real alternative for sailors who are beginning to find their more traditional boats a bit too much to handle. With powering and sailing speeds over 8 knots, easy sail handling and the ability to tack without effort, the Saga 43 can sail you through retirement. ■

SAGA 43

Manufacturer	Saga Marine 423 Lakeshore Rd. St. Catharines, Ontario Canada L2R 7K6 800-560-SAGA *www.sagayachts.com*		
Production	1996–present		
Designer	Robert Perry		
LOA	43'3"	**LWL**	38'11"
Beam	12'	**Draft**	5'7" or 6'7"
Displacement	21,000 lb		
Sail area	952 sq ft (100% foretriangle)		
Fuel	75 gal	**Water**	133 gal
Price range	$249,500–$298,000; 2003 models $364,000–$465,000		

Displacement/length 159 (moderately light); sail area/displacement 2 (moderately high); ballast/displacement 0.40 (moderately high); US Sailing screening value 1.7 (below 2.0 recommended for offshore sailing); comfort value 29 (moderate).