

# THE HIGH LIFE

A SKIPPERED CATAMARAN IN SARDINIA OFFERS A VERY SPECIAL CHARTER EXPERIENCE, AS **HELEN FRETTER** AND FAMILY FOUND OUT

**B**eam. Or beam and volume. Those are the dominant characteristics that spring to mind about cruising catamarans. You expect huge full-width saloons and cabins spread out across metres of multihull.

But standing on the flybridge of the Lagoon 620 *Lady Fiona*, gazing down at a teal and turquoise Sardinian inlet, it was the height that really struck me.

I hadn't seen my children for what felt like hours, as they scampered up and down the multi-level cat. They had bounced on the trampoline, climbed to the top deck to survey their domain, launched themselves from the

transom steps into the sea, played raucous card games on the aft sundeck and then tiptoed down to their own cabin to cosy up with a book as the waves lapped by.

*Lady Fiona* was their castle for a few days and she offered as many secretive stairwells and comfortable nooks and interesting viewpoints as the traditional towering variety.

I will admit that the first sail was slightly disconcerting. Unlike a monohull, which has a direct line of sight forward to everyone on deck, there was no one place on the Lagoon 620 where you could see where everyone was. How could I keep up my silent





## 'FAR ABOVE THE WATER, YOU GLIDE OVER - NOT THROUGH - THE WAVES'

**Above: water toys include a windsurfer, SUPs and towables**

parental head-count? But we quickly adapted our ground rules –no walking around the side decks underway without a grown up, holding onto handrails on stairs and so on – and sailed through the week without a slip.

The trade off is a spectacular 360° perspective that could not feel more different to slipping along next to the sea in a traditional cockpit. All sail controls are led to the flybridge, where there are port and starboard wheels for manoeuvring, and both sunny and shaded spots thanks to a wide bimini. Far above the water and the engines, you glide over – rather than through – the waves. Even down on the trampoline, barely a splash reaches your toes.

The stability is quite incredible. On our first morning motorsail out of Olbia, we were given a send off by a pod of dolphins before heading out into the swell. The Costa Smeralda is a millionaire's playground and superyachts roar past with impressive regularity.

Just as our hostess, Michelle, climbed the stairs to the flybridge with a couple of mugs of freshly brewed coffee, a vast motoryacht suddenly altered course straight in front of us, sending a rolling wave towards our bow. It may have been the ultimate First World problem, but clearly those coffees weren't going to survive. Yet *Lady Fiona* barely

flinched, the wave disappeared under our hulls with almost no perceptible pitching. Not a drop was spilled.

It can make you a bit lazy, knowing you can put your camera down anywhere and it won't crash to the floor. But that's nothing compared to the Olympic-level indulgence of a crewed charter. We genuinely never had to lift a finger.

DiYachting offer luxurious skippered and crewed charters on sailing yachts over 60ft (and a couple of hand-picked motoryachts). The company is founded and run by Matt and Lizzie Abbiss, a former skipper and hostess team themselves, and they know what truly works – for crew, guests and owners.

### Utter indulgence

*Lady Fiona* was run by highly experienced South African couple Greg Evans, the yacht's skipper, and Michelle Collins, a talented chef. Like all diYachting crew, they live on board for the whole season and get to know the boat and local area inside out. Three times a day the table was beautifully laid, a spectacular meal served, then magicked away, while all we had to do was decide if we'd prefer to wakeboard or snorkel or sail on next.

The paddleboards found their way to the stern before we'd decided to use them, a basket of towels would appear on deck even before we'd climbed out of the sea, while iced water and fruit plates would be waiting to refresh us. The cabins were stealthily made perfect, boat maintenance carried out so unobtrusively it was barely noticeable.

We have been lucky enough to experience a skippered charter before, on a monohull. Every skipper and host/hostess team work differently, and how they interact with each group of guests very much depends on individual personalities (diYachting offer a very informative guide to everything from crew tips to onboard etiquette on their website) but the space of a multihull changes things too.

*Lady Fiona* is the Essense model of the popular VPLP-designed Lagoon 620, and the galley was in the stern of the port hull, freeing up the vast saloon as a guest lounge. In charter mode, the galley therefore becomes part of the working area of the yacht, and being served a meal on the aft deck is much closer to a private dining experience than any kind of crew table. While Greg and Michelle would happily join us for lunch and a chat if we suggested it, for anyone who really values their privacy, a cat charter offers full service comfort without any sense that you are sharing each other's personal space.

Our accommodation was impossibly luxurious. The



Idyllic anchorages around the island of Tavolara off Capo Coda Cavallo

Francesco Dettori/Getty



The crew were fantastic with children, and worked hard to make the trip enjoyable for everyone





## 'A PRE-BREAKFAST SWIM: FROM BED TO MED IN HALF A DOZEN STEPS'



Jumping from the Lagoon's impressive freeboard was a favourite activity!

master cabin had a huge athwartships double, a study/dressing area, and then a glorious ensuite heads complete with twin sinks, separate WC and enormous shower, plus private access to the aft deck. From bed to Med in half a dozen steps: a pre-breakfast swim has to be the most idyllic start to any day (especially when breakfast is eggs cooked to order or freshly baked banana muffins).

There were two double guest cabins forward, each with bunk-level windows. The saloon was modern, subtly finished and incredibly spacious, but we spent most of our time pottering between the various outside spaces – the covered aft deck, complete with metres of seating, outside dining space and wet bar; the flybridge, covered by a bimini and with swathes of cushions including a popular sunken lounging spot tucked just abaft the mast, and the foredeck, with yet more recliners.

### Archipelago days

After leaving Olbia we first popped into Porto Rotundo, a much-smartened former fishing village that now welcomes an eclectic selection of yachts and well-heeled visitors. We made a beeline for Bar del Molo, a traditional gelateria that's been serving home-made ice cream from a tiled kitchen since the '50s, before reaching up to Caprera.

Caprera, a small island in the Bonifacio Straits, is a nature reserve and popular cruising spot. The butterfly-shaped inlet of Cala Coticcio offered a sheltered spot for the night, while the morning revealed a sandy cove hidden deep between rocky outcrops for idyllic swimming and paddleboarding expeditions. But Coticcio's beauty is well known and by lunchtime dozens of small motorboats had poured into the bay, so we set off for a gentle sail to La Maddalena.

La Maddalena is the larger of the seven islands that make up the Maddalena archipelago off the north-east tip of Sardinia, and connected to Caprera by road bridge. This forces yachts on a pleasant circular route around – rather than between – the island group. We dropped anchor in Monte D'Arena, where the shore was dotted with small hotels and campervans, but the water much quieter.

With a wider bay allowing him to pick up some crosswinds, my husband took the yacht's windsurfer out for a spin, while my daughter and I explored some of the miniature rock islands and tiny sand pockets scattered around the bay that were accessible only by paddleboard.

The characteristic boulders that decorate the shoreline also litter the seabed of Sardinia's coast and care would be needed exploring on a self-skipped yacht. It seems obvious, but some of the best professional navigators in the world have been caught out whilst racing in these waters and approaching some anchorages after dark would require a good deal of confidence.

Fortunately, while some spots were very busy during the afternoons, the majority of visitors were dayboats that returned to port by early evening, leaving our anchorages relatively uncrowded overnight. We came across no flotilla fleets, and usually found ourselves sharing with larger private yachts, and one or two glossy superyachts.

As the wind swung more to the south, there was little incentive to leave Monte D'Arena and we stayed on to enjoy the water for longer before motoring back down the eastern coast of Sardinia. Besides swim steps on each hull, one of *Lady Fiona's* most impressive features was a hydraulic semi-submergible platform which lifted to house the 4.3m tender when under way and provided an aft swim deck and handy water toy launching point that was in constant use from the moment we dropped the hook every day. When a couple of inflatables blew off the boat, Greg also proved just how quickly the tender could be launched from the platform as he went to retrieve them, making it a great safety feature.

Later we passed Porto Cervo, enjoying our top-deck view



Breakfast is served on the aft deck

of some of the Wally crews that were out training ahead of the Maxi Worlds later in September. For a brief glimpse of how the high-rolling set experience the Costa Smeralda, we spent an afternoon off Cala Petra Ruja, listening to the Balearic beats drifting from the famous Nikki Beach resort, before continuing south.

### A tiny kingdom

The reach towards Capo Figari proved to be the best sail of the trip, *Lady Fiona* eating up some 16 miles easily, nudging double figure boatspeeds as we cruised under towering cliffs. Just rounding the headland we were slightly too headed for the big cat, but were later able to ease sheets and continue our sail toward the imposing island of Tavolara, its summit hidden by a frosting of candyfloss white clouds.

We found a spot in the shade of Tavolara on its south-western edge, the bay rapidly emptying of day-trippers to reveal what must be one of the most spectacular anchorages in the Med. There is a single restaurant on the island, but its other draws are the walking and climbing trails up its 1,800ft limestone rock faces.

Tavolara, at 5km by just 1km wide, is known as the smallest inhabited kingdom in the world, and is technically ruled by the Tonino family, who lord over just 11 subjects and a herd of wild goats. However, at anchor that night it was us who lived like kings, as Michelle produced a show-stopping lobster pasta dish.

We rescheduled our final day to spend a memorable morning watching bottlenose dolphins play as the sun rose over Tavolara's dramatic silhouette, before paddling over to a sandy isthmus that offered good snorkelling grounds – the island is part of a marine protected area and rich with sea life. Tavolara might be the smallest realm in all the land, but it's a powerful little place and we struggled to tear ourselves away. The last remaining compensation was a brisk broad reach back to Olbia, enjoyed from *Lady Fiona's* flybridge with its master-of-all-you-survey viewpoint. Coming back down to earth would be a wrench.

Perfect lookout from a seat on the guardrails



## CREWED CAT CHARTER



### ■ MULTI-LEVEL LIVING

A couple of things surprised us about our big cat experience. One in particular was how the split levels change the dynamics – *Lady Fiona* offers both large sociable spaces and private quiet areas, which can be hard to achieve on even a substantial monohull sailing yacht.



It was also remarkable how quiet the Lagoon 620 was – no engine noise or generator hum and zero slapping at anchor. We all slept like babies.

Realistically, on most modern cruising monohulls, only one or two charter crew would be actively involved in sailing at any one time. On a catamaran the big transformation was how the experience changed for anyone who was not helming. Life underway instantly became much more relaxed.

### ■ FIVE STAR SERVICE

Clearly a skippered and crewed charter is a luxury option, but we were blown away but just how impressive the whole experience was. Meals were restaurant quality, the living accommodation as comfortable as a very high-end hotel, the crew warm and professional.



The water toys were also superyacht spec – a 14ft fast tender, windsurfer, two SUPs, waterskis, wakeboard, and towable banana boat (which I suspect was the highlight of my children's entire summer, the grins were plastered on their faces for so long afterwards).

### ■ THE COST

This is trip-of-a-lifetime territory, but with the sheer space available the cost could easily be split between families. For anyone considering buying a new cat, it may also give a much closer comparison than a bareboat charter yacht, so could be money well spent as a way to experience life aboard a full-spec multihull before making a major investment.

A week on *Lady Fiona* costs from €19,000 in low season, rising to €26,000 in July and August.

[www.diyachting.co.uk](http://www.diyachting.co.uk)