

## Deketchification of America

by Eric W. Sponberg

A revealing question recently posted in an online cruising forum spoke volumes to me: “How many yacht builders build ketches anymore?” Answer: precious few. The poster cited one American and one Canadian boatbuilder as the only known examples in Western civilization.

Thirty-five years ago, when my wife and I cruised from England to California on our 27' (8.2m) sloop (it was all we could afford), ketches were plentiful among our fellow sailors. Boatbuilding was still in the heyday of small shops and eclectic boat designs. Different rigs were offered nearly as readily as different interiors. Today, the herd that twice annually passes through our homeport of St. Augustine, Florida—north in the spring, south in the autumn—reveals the ketch as a popular cruising rig, but these are virtually all older boats from decades long past. The newer boats are sloops. In any yachting magazine today, look at the advertisements for new boats—sloops, all of them. What has happened to the ketches?

I called some well-known boat builders and brokers to ask if they ever get customer inquiries for ketches. Very few, they said. And their opinions as to why were nearly unanimous: building a split rig versus a sloop or a cutter rig was just too costly and too complex a solution for a problem that no longer exists.

Well, I can understand cost and complexity—obvious with the second mast and its rigging, but “a problem that no longer exists”? The ketch rig solved the balance problem by breaking up the sail plan into smaller, more easily handled sails. In reefed conditions, the “jib and jigger” (jib and mizzen) is an

ideal sail combination to keep the rig low and the boat balanced for an easy helm in high winds and at reasonable heel and speed. Now we're told that our equipment choices have expanded and improved so much that we can balance sloop and cutter rigs just fine, thank you very much, with a minimum of physical exertion. The examples that all my respondents cited were: in-boom furling for mainsails, friction-free sail tracks, roller-furling headsails, and electric-powered winches. They said the big mainsail is now easily tamed, and all this new equipment is reliable and readily available.

When I started thinking about this article, I thought I was going to bemoan the “deketchification” of boatbuilding, somewhat akin to “Walmartification.” Corporate America (and Europe) is maximizing the design of the basic sailboat for the broadest average of human tastes at the lowest competitive price. Forget design fringes like the ketch; the mindset of modern manufacturing is to not sell anything that detracts from maximum profit. Options or low-demand features cost money to make, increase price, and potentially decrease profit, so better to just not offer them. And as middlemen retailers seek to continually drive down price, competitors respond with even lower prices, to the point where quality suffers, or the damn thing is just no longer available. My examples of consumer products that reflect this trend make quite a long list, and I dare say you all have your own such lists. And as a consumer I am guilty of succumbing to the lure of low prices; they're good, to a point. But I give up selection and quality in the process.

I think in some respects this has happened with ketches. Since they

are not offered, customers don't even know to ask for them anymore. Quality, as far as I can see, has not suffered—boatbuilding has been on a steady incline of improving quality for as long as I have been in the business. Yet most of my survey respondents said that if they were ever to go cruising again, the ketch would be their first choice of rig. Ketches work well, and they just plain look nice. There is no reason why you cannot have all that neat equipment *and* a split rig, too, for all the advantages described above. And the mizzenmast is a great place to put stuff, like radar, antennas, and spreader lights, and a staysail for extra speed on beam and broad reaches. Let's not forget anchoring. Try setting an anchor on a sloop under sail in any kind of wind (why, there's an engine for that!), and it's a little difficult. But on a ketch with the jib and the main furled but the mizzen up and sheeted in, the bow stays head to wind while the anchor is dropped and set—a sweet accomplishment for the experienced sailor. So, despite Western corporate wisdom that denies us the option of the ketch rig, the sloop rig *does not solve all the problems* of cruising.

I suppose my lament is nothing new. What generation doesn't say, “They just don't make them like they used to”? If they make them at all. But the ketch? Maybe it won't disappear altogether; well-made boats can outlive their human caretakers. And that's a good thing. I think the ketch rig still has a place in sailing. I, for one, am not going to give it up. **PBB**

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