

CLUBMAN 36 – AUSTRAL YACHTS

words - [Vanessa Dudley](#)

Australian builder Austral Yachts' latest offering is a lively cruiser/club racer with the option of getting more serious around the racetrack, reports Vanessa Dudley

Minnon means something like "little girl" or "sweetheart" in dialectal Italian, says Joe Mezzini. It's the name he and his wife Maria have selected for their long-awaited Austral Clubman 36, and it seems to fit well, judging from our outing on the choppy waters off Adelaide.

In a moderate sea breeze, Minnon behaved herself with grace and coltish exuberance. She was easy to handle, while displaying a willingness to run fast that should return some very exciting spinnaker rides.

At this stage, there's no spinnaker onboard. The Mezzinis are taking things fairly gently, as the Clubman 36 is quite a large step up from their previous boat, an Austral Clubman 8.

Joe says he learnt most of what he knows about sailing the hard way on that Clubman 8 as an adult L-plate driver. The move from trailer-sailer to fixed keel cruiser/racer was driven by his passion for the sport and the desire for a boat with more interior room and comfort, as well as good performance for club racing.

Designed by Scott Jutson, the Clubman 8 has been a big success story for the Adelaide-based builder Austral Yachts. Founded by Adrian and Sue Keough and now run by their son Michael, the company rode the family trailer-sailer boom, but these days that market has diminished, is near-saturated with secondhand boats and the only action seems to be in the sportsboat niche.

Deciding to look towards keelboats, Michael Keough has continued the relationship built between his company and the Sydney-based Scott Jutson. This has led to the release of the Clubman Super 30 in 2001, developed from existing moulds for a Jutson-designed Mount Gay 30, and the development of a bigger new keelboat, the Clubman 36.

Tooling up for production of a boat of this size is a substantial investment: for the Clubman Super 30 there were already moulds to work from, but the 36 is "an all new boat from scratch □ not an adaption of something", Keough says.

With Mezzini prepared to commit to a boat, Keough decided to go ahead with the project. Since then it's been a long time coming. I remember looking at the boat under construction at Austral Yachts' yard in Hackham in March 2001. There were a lot of things to figure out, and in many regards Minnon is a custom boat, hence no listing in the "price as tested" category of our specifications panel.

Finally, however, Minnon is in the water, and tooling is complete to begin production □ when the orders arrive.

CONSTRUCTION

The standard specifications are for a foam sandwich layup for the hull, deck and bulkheads, using Divinycell closed cell foam, vinylester resin and tri-axial, double bias and E glass cloths. Every bulkhead is bonded into the boat and glassed in. Timber hardspots are built in for deck fittings.

The boat is designed to pass Category 1 stability requirements, and has a cast iron fin keel with lead bulb.

Structurally the boat seems to have been fully thought out. For example, a 10mm stainless steel plate is included where the keel bolts join the hull, and the chainplates attach to the major hull beam, tying the rig loads down to the keel.

ON DECK

The Clubman 36's standard rig is aluminium, but Joe Mezzini opted to upgrade to carbon fibre spars produced by Melbourne-based company Applied Composites, as well as rod rigging and a hydraulic backstay. These spars provide a much higher strength to weight ratio, producing the capacity for more power and less weight aloft, but they cost about \$25,000 more than the standard aluminium spars.

The spreaders are swept-back and no running backstays are required to keep the fractional rig standing. A non-overlapping jib is part of the package for a sail plan that's easily managed.

The standard rig has the same dimensions but features die-formed stainless steel standing rigging and a block and tackle purchase system for the backstay.

Hydraulic Specialists (Fleet Hydrol) in Sydney produced the hydraulic backstay for Minnon. It was too big for the boat, however, and the company were developing a smaller model, which was not ready for our test sail.

Occupying pride of place in the cockpit is the very large wheel set on a moulded pedestal. Austral has made moulds to produce the wheel in composite GRP; the goal again being high strength to weight ratio. Carbon fibre wasn't used for this first wheel; Michael Keough says he will probably experiment with a lighter wheel, although the expense would be greater.

The wheel is positioned much further aft than seen on the Northshore 369 and the Sydney 38, two Australian boats which also feature big wheels. Michael Keough says the difference is that the Clubman 36 is more of a true cruiser/racer as opposed to a primarily racing-oriented boat. "We've gone for maximum length in the cockpit seating area in IMS terms," he says.

Aft on the starboard side of the wheel is a 12V power connection point, the hydraulics panel for the backstay, hot/cold deck shower and deck hose outlet. On the port side are the Volvo Penta saildrive controls and electric anchor windlass control button, with gas bottle storage locker in the aft corner.

The cockpit has laid teak on the seats and floor; this is an optional extra.

Austral located a diamond-pattern surfacing material in the US, which it has incorporated in the deck moulds to provide an attractive and effective non-skid surface around the decks and cockpit. One advantage of the pattern should be to allow salt and dust, etc, to be hosed away rather than becoming trapped in the non-skid.

There is a shallow locker under the starboard side cockpit seat, while the storage compartment on the port side is huge.

Besides a CD player with AM/FM radio included in the standard package, all navigation and communication aids are options, based on Keough's assessment that people want to choose their own preferences in these areas.

Minnon has been set up with Simrad autopilot, wind and log instruments on the steering binnacle, with repeaters either side of the companionway, plus a Plastimo Offshore 135 binnacle compass and GME Electrophone stereo system with cockpit speakers.

The deck fitout is race-quality Harken hardware. There are Harken 44 self-tailing winches for the primaries and Harken 40s for the halyards and sail controls.

The traveller is a Harken high-beam model curved to match the arc of the boom and to support the full load of the 6:1 purchase mainsheet. The traveller control lines cleat onto either side of the traveller car.

BELOW DECKS

Four alternative layouts are offered below decks. This one is the owner's version, featuring two double cabins forward and aft, plus a four-seater settee in the saloon, which could be converted to a double berth. There's a longitudinal galley and one large bathroom.

Other layouts provide more conventional three cabin layouts, either with the same saloon layout as Minnon, or a U-shaped galley and forward bathroom.

The interior joinery is in light-coloured Victorian ash, which combines with the clean white painted and glass surfaces and blue furnishing materials to provide a fresh and light atmosphere.

The headliner is simply closed cell foam with vinyl stuck to it, held in position with velcro; very light in weight, but it could get a bit tatty over time.

The outward facing nav station features a plastic swivel chair and benchtop with three drawers but no storage space for paper charts (probably best achieved by hanging a tubular container in the aft cabin. There's a Simrad CR40 chartplotter, BEP Marine electrics panel, a couple of bilge pump switches, a Sony CD player, 12V plug, anchor windlass breaker/isolator and the ICOM IC-M45 VHF radio, plus a Rule water alarm.

Most of these instruments are mounted on the doors of a cupboard, which open with barrel bolts so you can get at the back of the electrics when and if required.

The galley along the port side of the saloon has a stainless steel sink forward with storage cabinets underneath. The hot/cold pressurised water is a QL (Volvo) system.

There is a Plastimo Neptune 2000 gas oven and stove (standard issue, however, is a metho two-burner stove), plus a big compartment cooled by 12V/240V Cold Logic eutectic refrigeration.

The galley is set up for 240V appliances as well as 12V.

Opposite is the lounge area/dinette with seating and table. Alcantara fabric has been used to cover the settee, as well as the double berth in the aft cabin. There are cupboards above on either side of the saloon and storage behind the settee.

Forward is a double cabin, which can be closed off from the saloon with a sliding door that runs on rollers. The double vee-berth has vinyl covering because there may come a time when spinnakers get dragged down here dripping wet. This whole area could be devoted to sail storage on a more racing-oriented boat.

Aft of the bunk are two storage areas □ shelving to port and a hanging locker to starboard.

Back in the saloon, aft of the galley is the bathroom, which is big for a 36ft boat and has a separate shower compartment aft of the toilet and vanity unit. There is a wet locker/hanging compartment still waiting to receive its waterproof cloth cover. There are teak grates on the floor for the shower and toilet and also a seat in the shower, which will come in handy at bouncy anchorages.

The Volvo Penta MD2030 engine, which on Minnon drives a three-bladed folding Volvo prop (a two-bladed folding prop is on the standard list), is located in the standard position under the companionway steps, but with a difference. To provide more space for the big aft cabin, the engine has been turned back to front and fitted with a reverse leg. With the companionway steps removed, access to the engine is very good.

Insulation material had not been fitted to the engine box at the time of our test, but the noise level was not overly offensive.

The batteries are located under the double berth (Minnon has six Optimar 55Amp/hr batteries, but the standard list has two), and a Master Volt battery charger has been fitted as an extra.

FEATHER-LIGHT HELM

Out sailing, Minnon's helm was as light as a feather. The steering has roller bearings, which must help, and the large wheel made the task comfortable with good vision whether seated or standing. Upwind, the boat proved very sensitive to sail trim and would sail in whichever direction we directed by adjusting the main or jib, while leaving the helm alone.

According to the instruments, the breeze was in the 14-16kt range, gusting to 18kt occasionally, and we averaged around 6.5kt with a slightly roller-furled headsail and full main. I believe the speedo was under-reading by about half a knot.

Because Mezzini was waiting for delivery of the correct hydraulic unit, we couldn't apply a lot of tension to the backstay, so we weren't able to depower the rig fully in the stronger gusts. I'd imagine this problem has since been sorted out.

Downwind we slipped along very nicely, and it was easy to imagine the boat surfing happily under spinnaker. On this occasion we were restricted to main and jib only, but performance was still quick.

THE CHALLENGE

With lively performance, a friendly, no-nonsense interior and good storage space, the Austral Clubman 36 is an engaging entrant to the family cruiser/club racer field.

I enjoyed sailing the boat and believe it has the potential to perform well if set up for racing. Meanwhile, it offers a degree of comfort for family cruising.

That said, carving out a market will be a challenge, due to the number of rivals in the field. On the racing side, other local boats like the Northshore 369 and the Sydney 38 have already got a headstart and the numbers to attract the racers. On the cruising side, there are a number of imported craft offering less sailing performance, but the inclusion of more home comforts