

Alerion-Express

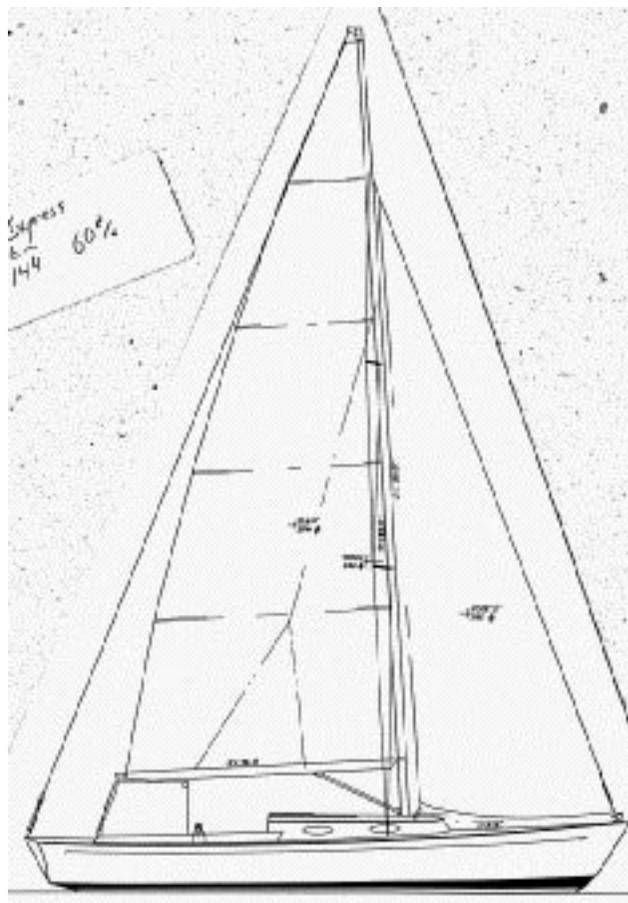
The Alerion-Express is an updated, fiberglass version of a Narragansett Bay classic daysailer.

The first Alerion was the 26-foot mahogany-planked daysailer Nathaniel Herreshoff built for himself around 1912, and which now reposes at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. Many years later, in the 1970s, his grandson Halsey Herreshoff built a 25-foot version, a one-off that made its way to Florida where it was admired—and bought—by Alfred Sanford, father of Nantucket builders Alfie and Edward.

The Sanfords liked the boat so much they sought out the plans (Nathaniel's, not Halsey's) and began building a cold-molded carvel-planked 26-footer. The boat was faithful to the original, but half a foot beamier (for the inclusion of a modest interior), a bit shorter on the waterline, and with a small cutaway in the aft section of the keel. Like the original, the newer Alerion pointed high and was fast in light air, but was still capable of handling heavy weather. Halsey, meanwhile, produced about a dozen of his 25-foot models, in fiberglass, which reputedly were also good sailers.

The Sanford Boat Co. launched its first Alerion in 1978 and eventually built 20, raising the price over the years from \$21,000 to \$44,000. Edward Sanford says there are still several around, and owners have included such notables as America's Cup winner Bill Koch and singer Jimmy Buffet.

But a wooden boat, even a sweet sailing one like the Alerion, is not for everyone, so in the late 1980s Ralph Schacter, a sailor from Southport, Connecticut, commissioned West Coast naval architect Carl Schumacher, designer of the Express 27, to draw a boat that combined traditional appearance with modern materials and contemporary "go-fast" thinking. The result brought so many comments and inquiries that Schacter joined with Holby Marine of Bristol, Rhode Island, to build the boat on a produc-



Specifications

LOA	28' 3"
LWL	22' 10"
Beam	8' 2"
Draft	4' 6"
Displacement	4,400 lbs.
Ballast	2,000 lbs.
Sail area	352 sq. ft.

tion basis. Holby built seven of the Alerion-Expresses in 1990, then sold the molds to Tillotson-Pearson Industries the following spring. By late 1992, some 25 had been built.

Design

Schumacher, a member of the California-Santa Cruz-ULDB school of design, might seem an odd choice to update a traditional design. But Schumacher's Alerion-Express is a happy hybrid (if such is possible) of the traditional and the contemporary, even if it's truly an Alerion in name only. "This is a modern yacht, not a warmed-over re-creation," Schumacher states in company promotional material.

Above the waterline, the new boat is, if anything,

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The Alerion-Express is a very pretty boat, with low freeboard and graceful sheer.

more “classic” than its namesake, with increased overhangs and a fine rake to the bow (Herreshoff’s original 26-footer had a relatively long 22-foot waterline, making it slightly stubby in appearance). The nine-foot-long cockpit is the same as the original, but Herreshoff’s 7’ 7” beam has been increased to 8’ 2” with three berths (four in the latest design) added below.

In place of the old bunter rig is a Hall Spars aluminum extrusion, fractionally rigged mast (the same section as on the J/27), fully battened mainsail and small, self-tacking jib.

But it’s below the surface that Schumacher’s mark is evident. Herreshoff’s short keel (2-1/2 feet) and centerboard combination (5-1/2-foot draw with the board down) has been replaced with a racer-type elliptical keel and equally modern spade rudder on a basically flat bottom. The design, coupled with lightweight foam core laminate construction (instead of Nat’s mahogany-on-oak), makes for a low-resistance boat that’s swift, especially off the wind.

Construction

Tillotson-Pearson has gained a reputation for high-quality construction, and the craftsmanship on the Alerion-Express maintains that standard. This is a good-looking, well put together boat, with no rough edges and no sign (to our eye) of slipshod technique. With a base price of \$33,000 in 1992, this level of quality should be expected.

Hull and deck are vacuum-bagged end-grain balsa covered with uni- and bi-directional glass (of Tillotson’s own formula) and a layer of vinylester resin to deter osmotic blistering. Construction techniques have reduced the weight several hundred pounds from the Holby model, according to chief

engineer Phil Mosher. Like all TPI boats, this one comes with a limited 10-year warranty against blistering. The hull and deck are through-bolted and bonded with 3M 5200.

This is an attractive boat: the hull is white with an inlaid 1/4-inch gold stripe; the deck is gray nonskid. An afterdeck adds to the traditional appearance. There’s enough wood to catch the eye—a teak toerail, teak handrails and teak and Thiokol sole the length of the cockpit. Exterior teak comes sanded and oiled. There are four fixed Bomar ports on the cabin house, and a smoked Lewmar deck hatch. All fittings are quality, from the Lewmar winches to the Harken fairleads and jib track.

The Hall spar is keel-stepped, and TPI had reinforced the area over the external lead keel with a solid fiberglass transverse floor. The rudder stock is carbon fiber with Rulon bearings; the prop shaft has been changed from Holby’s stainless steel to carbon fiber composite.

Performance

Schumacher designed the Alerion-Express to be a quick, lively sailer in keeping with the spirit, if not the form, of the Herreshoff original. TPI intends the boat for the experienced sailor, rather than the novice, who expects good performance but with a minimum of fuss and few if any crew. “Everyone who has bought the boat has had larger boats,” Mosher said.

With its light weight, shallow bottom and low-drag keel and rudder, we expected the boat to be nimble, and it was. In 12 to 14 knots on Narragansett Bay, the boat quickly accelerated to hull speed under its big, fully battened main and 100-percent jib. With a total of 352 square feet of sail (206 in the main, 146 in the jib), the Alerion-Express is not overcanvassed, but carries plenty of sail for its weight (for a sail area/displacement ratio of 20.97, which is quite high). The boat has a PHRF rating of 141, slower than the J/

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rope clutches—is intended to concentrate operations in the cockpit and generally make life easier, especially for the singlehander. Our particular main proved difficult to raise (even cranking the #7 winch) and lower; maybe it was sticky sail slides. The Shore sail was fitted with special load-bearing slides at the battens to make hoisting easier, but we still had problems. On the other hand, one Alerion-Express owner said he routinely raises his UK Sailmakers main by hand.

The Alerion-Express comes with a Hall Quik Vang for easier adjustment. Generally, the fully battened main requires some careful trimming of the boom, backstay and at the batten adjustments at the luff. The self-tacking jib is sheeted to a car on a custom Harken track. Because the track is short, sailing wing-on-wing requires use of a pole. Fortunately, there's a grooved storage area outboard of each cockpit seat, making storage of the poles and other gear easy and convenient. Harken roller furling for the 100-percent jib comes standard.

The Alerion-Express, like its early namesake, is a vaunted light-air performer. Mosher said it will reach hull speed in five knots of wind, a claim we find credible. One owner we spoke to said his boat points high, reaches beautifully and is only a bit cranky dead downwind. Initial tenderness or no, Mosher said he's been out in 30 knots with no difficulty—"It doesn't fall on its ear."

Accommodations

Because of the nine-foot cockpit and shallow hull, there's not a lot of room down below, but enough to qualify the Alerion-Express as an overnighter and occasional weekender. The hull and bulkheads are an airy white, set off by wood trim and a teak and holly sole. The interior plan is simple, with a V-berth in the bow. Unfortunately, the portable head is located beneath it. The current plan has a settee berth to port in the main cabin with a small seat between two storage compartments on the starboard side. The arrangement doesn't make a lot of sense, so TPI plans to replace the seat/storage area with a starboard settee.

A 38-gallon ice box inside the companionway does double duty as a step down. Behind the cooler, access to the engine compartment is easily achieved by removing either a front or top panel. The engine of choice, which cost an extra \$5,300 in late 1992, is a 9-hp. Yanmar diesel, noisy in the extreme at low revs, but which moves the boat well.

Ample natural lighting flows through the four elliptical ports and the smoked 19" x 19" hatch forward; we can't be sure, but we suspect the three small interior lights make for dim lighting—fine for relaxing, possibly hard on the eyes for reading. A 12-volt DC system runs off an 80 amp-hour marine

battery, controlled by a Bass electrical panel with six circuit breakers. There's a standard Guest battery switch.

The interior is a bit cramped for headroom, a problem TPI hopes to improve somewhat by converting the hatch to a double-slider. The house designers are also contemplating widening the companionway by nine inches. Cockpit hatches to port and starboard provide access to the aft regions below; there's further storage under the afterdeck.

Life on the Alerion-Express is meant to be lived in the cockpit, which is deep, comfortable and dry—except for occasional spray to remind forward passengers they're under sail. The seats are wide and comfortable, especially with the addition of cockpit cushions, but if anything the cockpit is a little too wide forward. That's fine when the boat sails flat, but heeling makes it necessary for a shorter person (say, under 5' 9") to scrunch down uncomfortably to brace their feet against the opposite side. On a long beat this could cause lower back fatigue.

Under the afterdeck is a teak rail with handy cup holders. A manual Whale bilge pump on the port side empties, unfortunately, via a ribbed plastic hose at the stern—a jarring touch in an otherwise genteel appearance. Cockpit drains consist of two Elvstrom-type openings at the rear of the cockpit, as on a J/24. They can be fastened shut, which is just as well because the leeward side tends to admit, rather than expel, water. Finally, one owner complained mildly about the need for stern chocks.

Minor criticism aside, the boat, inside and out, is functional and reasonably comfortable. The optional teak table that sits on the barney post is an inviting call to stay topsides. Removal of the post, however, which we'd prefer, means end-boom sheeting, which performance sailors probably won't like. It also raises the question of where and how to set up a table for the brie and chardonnay.

Conclusion

At a base price, in 1992, of \$33,000, plus another \$8,500 or so for sails and diesel, the Alerion-Express is a costly little daysailer/overnighter. What you get for your money is a well-built, lively 28-footer that sails as well as it looks. On the other hand, a Beneteau First 285 has a base price of about \$46,000 and a Tartan Piper 28 about \$60,000; but then, of course, they have substantially more accommodations.

It's still too soon for the Alerion-Express to have developed a resale market (no historical price data is available as yet), but the boat's traditional good looks and solid construction should help maintain its value well—especially if it catches on with that niche of the market that is looking for an easily maintained/sailed boat that provides some fun out on the water.

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