

# The Ever-Popular Plastic Folkboat

*Owners of “real” Folkboats may cringe, but this close cousin has plenty of converts.*

As keepers of the narrative truths known to non-believers as mere “sea stories,” we sailors are drawn not only to the boats we desire but the stories behind them. Some might go so far as to suggest the story has as much value as the boat itself, and there certainly have been some pretty crummy boats that sold well because of the fiction their builders spun. How many times have you gone to look at a used boat and the owner has whispered seductively, “This boat has a great story behind it?”

Well, if you are drawn to stories (true stories, not marketing pap), like the idea of a tacit connection with blond-haired Scandinavians with names like Ingrid, Sven, and Tord, and can see yourself proudly tooling around in a 1968 Volk-

swagen Beetle, then the International Folkboat is definitely

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*The bottom-grinding winch on Grateful Folk’s mast has been retired. As with most International Folkboats, the halyards lead aft to winches near the companionway.*



*The International Folkboat Grateful Folk scoots across Sarasota Bay, Fla.*

a boat worth looking into. True, there are many boats that might appeal to the profile described above (some Carl Alberg sloops come to mind), but few have a story that compares to that of the International Folkboat.

## DESIGN DETAILS

The drama behind the International Folkboat began even before the boat existed. In 1939, as Hitler pushed the world into World War II, the neutral Swedes optimistically held a yacht design contest. The winning boat was to be put into production as a new popular class of keelboats. It is from that contest that the svelte little micro-cruiser that came

to be known as the Nordic Folkboat emerged. Although we’ve not the space to cover some of the juicier details of the Nordic Folkboat’s design origins, even the thumbnail view is compelling. For those interested, Dieter Loibner provides a detailed account of the controversy surrounding the design in his excellent book “The Folkboat

Story: From Cult to Classic.”

The designer of the IF Folkboat was Todd Sunden, who until he died in 1999 at the age of 90, was still fighting to establish his claim as the primary designer of the storied Nordic Folkboat, the International Folkboat’s genetic predecessor. No one questions that Sunden drew the lines of the Nordic Folkboat, but whether he deserved credit or payment for later royalties remains under dispute.

According to Loibner, this much is known: In 1941, a committee of judges formed by the Royal Swedish Sailing Association chose the best designs of its international contest for a new keelboat design. Trouble was that the judges couldn’t settle on one design. Instead, the favorite drawings were handed over to Sunden, who was tapped to come up with a new design that incorporated the “best of the best” from the contest.

The result was the Nordic Folkboat, a clinker-built sloop with a reverse transom, a spoon bow, and a low cabin that gave it simple but pretty lines. Its long keel, slack bilges, barn-door rudder, and hefty ballast ratio (just over 50 percent)





Pro: Drop-down stove



Con: Narrow V-berth



Pro: Well-designed convertible table

Con: Thin-man's head

Well-raced IFs will tend to have stripped down interiors, but some, like Espresso (above), have enough creature comforts for a family cruise. A drop-down alcohol stove (top left), a small sink, and a removable counter comprise the galley. The dining table stows in a dedicated spot in a quarter berth. The V-berth (left) is tight, but well ventilated. Some owners have installed a hawse pipe and chain locker forward, but the original boat did not have these features.

equipped it for North Sea adventures. The cockpit however—because it was not self-bailing—raised the risk quotient for any offshore ambitions. The 7/8-fractional rig gave it a conservative sail-area displacement ratio of 16.28. The length-to-beam ratio was just under 3.5. The four-foot draft appealed to the shoalwater challenged. Headroom was ideal for those wonderful creatures of Scandinavian folklore: elves.

Simple, relatively inexpensive to build, and reassuring in heavy weather, the boat was a hit in Scandinavia, even among the non-elves. In the post-war era, carried by the same back-to-basics current that swept the Volkswagen Beetle into the 1960s mainstream, the Folkboat dream gradually spread throughout Europe and beyond. In the U.S., a Danish Folkboat-disciple by the name of Sven Svendsen brought the gospel to the U.S. West Coast, more precisely to the San Francisco Bay area. In a rare moment of maritime synchronicity, a boat, a place, and a collective spirit converged just as the 1970s set in.

Out of these contentious beginnings and in the midst of these “interesting times,” the International Folkboat emerged in 1967. Conscious of the folkboat’s growing appeal, Swedish builder Marieholms Bruk contracted Sunden to

draw a fiberglass version, and, the boat eventually eclipsed its original in popularity, with 3,400 hulls built when production ended in 1984. From a design perspective, the International Folkboat shares many of the same features as the Nordic Folkboat (see table page 13).

Gone is the clinker hull—a feature that persisted in even the fiberglass Nordic Folkboat that Svendsen pioneered. The reverse transom has been cut short, and a shallow self-draining cockpit replaces the Nordic Folkboat’s deep well. Marieholms also made room for an inboard or an outboard in a well. However, since the well was designed to fit the small British Seagull outboard, it isn’t much help with today’s four-strokes. Most owners close the hole permanently with fiberglass and put an outboard bracket on the stern, but an electric Torquedo (see page 13) will fit just fine.

Overall, the International Folkboat is a good-looking, wholesome, stiff design that is at its best when the wind kicks up. It is no wonder the Bay Area sailors have acquired a taste for them.

**ON DECK**

The International Folkboat is well set for single-handed sailing. Although the original boat had mast-mounted halyards, nearly all the boats today have

the halyards routed back to winches near the companionway. The mainsheet halyard runs on an aluminum track traversing the back of the cockpit, and the jib sheets lead through a rail-mounted genoa track to winches on the coaming. Early models came with bottom-grinding primary winches, but many are equipped with Lewmar single-speed winches. The mainsheet traveller is a notorious shin-whacker, but it makes for easy sail-handling from the helm.

The cockpit seats are 14.5 inches wide and 65 inches long, too short and narrow for non-elves to nap. Seat backs are 11 inches, too low to offer much back support, but about what you can expect from a boat of this size. Two 16-inch-by-19-inch cockpit lockers aft are not self-draining, so if you want to follow in the footsteps of some Folkboat adventurers, dogging these down will spare you a tedious bailing routine. Four 1.5-inch cockpit drains (exceptional for a boat this size) and a 12-inch bridgedeck reduces the risk of cockpit flooding.

The cockpit is tight for more than three adults, particularly if the wind is up. However, with one other person on board, it is a nice feeling to be wedged back behind the traveler. The cockpit is narrow enough that you can tuck behind the traveller and brace your feet

Top photos courtesy of Frank Costello

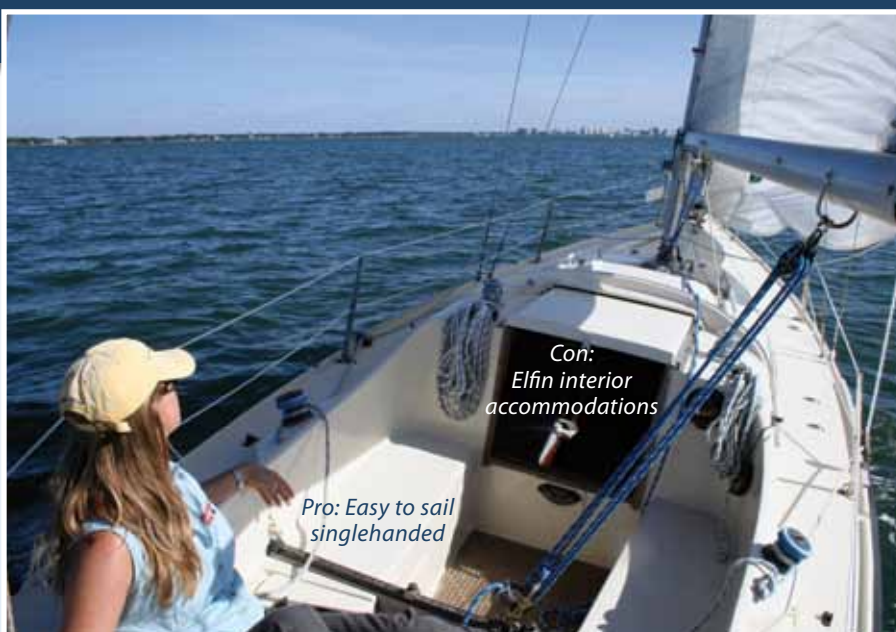


## PROS

- Well-ballasted, narrow hull presents plenty of secondary righting moment.
- Wide sidedecks with handrails make for safe passage forward.
- All sail controls are easily tended from the helm.
- High coamings keep cockpit dry.

## CONS

- Headroom belowdecks is just 55 inches.
- Cockpit is small compared to modern racer-cruisers.
- Traveller divides cockpit in half.
- Outboard well is ill-suited for today's four-stroke engines.



Con: Elfin interior accommodations

Pro: Easy to sail singlehanded



Con: Shin-whacking traveller



Pro: Well-backed winches



Con: Tight squeeze in outboard well

on the leeward coaming or cockpit seat. With the mainsheet close at your side, you can confidently press to windward when others are still at the dock waiting for the whitecaps to ease. Some spray will cross the bow, but most International Folkboats come equipped with a cockpit dodger, a worthwhile investment.

Going forward, the sidedecks are wide, and the foredeck offers plenty of working space. Two aluminum handrails are on either side of the cabin-top. The standard boat did not come with a hawse pipe or bow anchor roller, but many owners have added these features. Although the area at the base of the mast has some nonskid patches, the rest of the cabintop is dangerously smooth. Since the boat's thin gelcoat wears through with age, many older boats have painted decks, and these boats usually have improved nonskid on the deck and cabintop. The nonskid pattern on the sidedeck and foredeck is adequate, although it is probably worn

to the point of being useless on some older boats.

The hardware is well-fastened with through-bolts and backing plates. This was the first 26-footer we've seen in a while with 10-inch cleats. Some of the hardware is marinium, an alloy common in the 1970s that is a poor substitute for silicone bronze, but these components are beefy and seem to be holding up on older boats. The deck-stepped, anodized aluminum Proctor masts with swept-back spreaders (7.5 degrees) are holding up as well as can be expected. The mast has sheaves at the base that allow the internal halyards to be routed to the cockpit. Owners or prospective buyers should check spreader tips for corrosion and remove any tape that does nothing but invite further corrosion.

## DOWN BELOW

Featuring just 55 inches of headroom, the interior of the International Folkboat is hardly palatial, but it can serve

quite well as a weekender, if properly equipped. The range of amenities can vary greatly, and many of the options described here are likely to be absent on a boat that has been stripped down for racing. For sleeping, you have the choice of two long settees that stretch aft from the main cabin and tuck under the cockpit (with 35 inches of clearance), and a 72-inch-long V-berth forward with an 18-inch-by-24-inch hatch overhead. You could bridge the settees to make a double-berth athwartship, as some owners have.

For cooking, some IFs have a convertible galley comprising an alcohol two-burner Origo stove that folds down from a locker over the port settee near the companionway. A filler board "counter" drops in between the stove and the small sink near the mast, effectively forming a fore-and-aft galley. Just forward of the sink is a small hanging locker. Across from the locker is a ridiculously cramped head that is

## Folkboat's Bulletproof Hull-to-Deck Joint Set It Apart

*Although not immune to the problems that plague older boat, the IF has stood up well to the test of time.*

**A**part from some well-reported problems typical of all old boats—clouded windows, corroded hardware and worn gelcoat—the International Folkboat has held up well over time. Boats that have been raced hard will need a closer inspection. The builder Marieholms Bruk no longer builds the boats, although it still offers support to owners.

**Hull:** The hand-laid hull is solid fiberglass: five plies of 1.5-ounce mat plus one ply of 21-ounce woven roving. Two 2" x 3/4" marine plywood stringers provide longitudinal support. Two partial plywood bulkheads provide structural support at the mast. Stick-built furniture, tabbed to the hull, provide further rigidity. The gelcoat may have worn away on older boats, but chipping and blisters are not a common problem.

**Deck:** The deck is mat and fiberglass cloth, with marine plywood core. All

hardware is well backed. Deck rot is not a serious problem although some owner-installed deck hardware has resulted in isolated core rot on some boats.

**Hull-to-deck joint:** The International Folkboat's deck is bonded to the inward-turning flange in the hull with bedding compound sealant, mechanically fastened, and then fiberglassed together from the inside, forming a strong monocoque hull. This time-consuming process makes for bulletproof, watertight bond.

**Keel and rudder:** The Folkboat's iron ballast keel is encapsulated in fiberglass. If the ballast cavity is penetrated from above or below, corrosion can follow, but this does not appear to be a problem with International Folkboats. Pintle and gudgeon hardware has had to be replaced on some boats, and these should be carefully inspected.

**Rig:** The Proctor mast and boom extrusions have generally held up well on these



*The hull-deck joint is glassed from the inside. Genoa track bolts, also shown here, will need inspecting.*

boats. Both are grooved for boltropes or round slugs. Although the sheaves for internal halyards were designed for wire, they are easily converted for all-rope halyards. Suspicious chainplate eyes should be pulled and inspected for corrosion, as should at least one or two through-bolts for the genoa track.

too narrow to be of much use. Many boats have turned this token nod to civility into another locker and put a port-a-potty under the V-berth. Above the settees on either side stretch a row of lockers, fine for storing small lightweight items. For mealtime, a removable table fits into a socket in the main cabin. The table also fits into a similar socket in the cockpit.

A 25-gallon water tank was optional, and some early models had the spigot in the cockpit, which according to an early review in *Boating* magazine was put there so that the cockpit scuppers could be used as sink drains. Many boats have creative tents fashioned over the cockpit area, which greatly expands the amount of "living space," such as it is.

Many owners use their boats for weekend or long-solo voyages. Adam Correa sailed his International Folkboat in last year's Single-handed Transpac Race, and Blondie Hasler's famous *Jester* (a modified Nordic Folkboat) crisscrossed the Atlantic many times. Given the limitations of the boat's

smallish interior, those attracted to the Folkboat concept but in need of a little more "cruisability" might want to look into the Contessa 26 or the Cheoy Lee Frisco Flyer—both derivatives of the Nordic Folkboat. The Contessa has made many notable offshore voyages, including circumnavigations by Tania Aebi and Brian Caldwell, both of whom circled the globe while still in their teens.

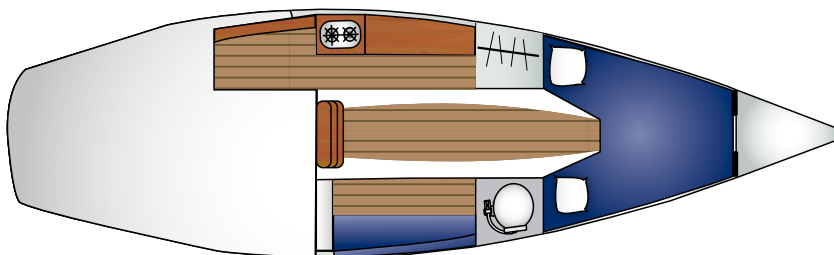
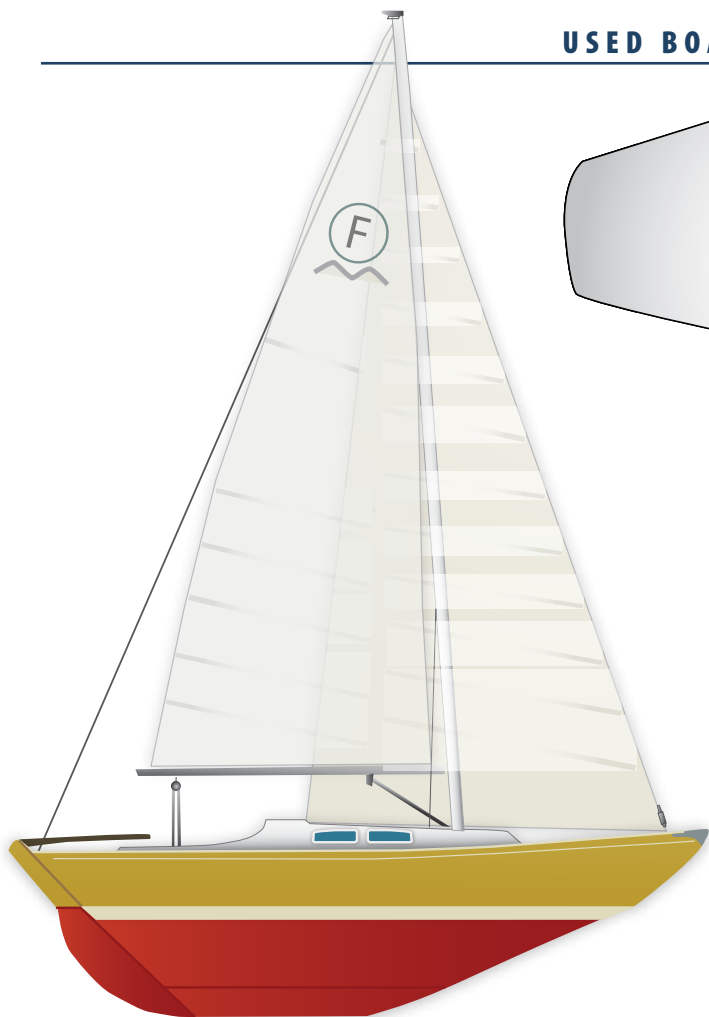
### PERFORMANCE

One of the most highly praised virtues of the International Folkboat—as well as all its various relatives—is its performance under sail when the wind pipes up. While waves will come aboard offshore, in a stiff bay chop, the high surrounding bulwarks do a good job of keeping the cockpit surprisingly dry. There is no shortage of photos of International Folkboats (and Nordic Folkboats) shrugging off San Francisco's famous winds with a single-reefed main. In such conditions, the jibsheet is often cross-sheeted and the two-man

crew stays fairly high and dry on the windward rail.

The boat we sailed, *Grateful Folk*, is owned by Stephen McCormack, who uses it mostly for family daysails and local racing. McCormack, with a generous PHRF rating of 316, sailed the boat to first in the pocket-cruising division of the local racing fleet in 2009. Although the interior was a work in progress, the boat, overall, was in good shape given its age. The decks had been painted, the deck hardware was still in good condition, and apart from some minor pitting on the boom, the rig showed nothing worthy of serious concern. The loose-footed, partially battened mainsail and 120-percent genoa were basic cruising sails, typical of a family daysailer. Winds during our test sail on Sarasota Bay in Sarasota, Fla., were about 8-10 knots.

*Grateful Folk* was due for a bottom job, so we didn't expect much from it in such light winds, but were pleasantly surprised. The boat did not, of course, accelerate in puffs like a modern fin-



The International Folkboat's interior (above, right) allows enough room and berths for weekend excursions for a couple or family. The full keel allows for excellent directional stability. Design numbers (right) reveal the obvious similarities between the International Folkboat, the Nordic Folkboat, and the Contessa 26, all based on the same basic design.

INTERNATIONAL FOLKBOAT IN CONTEXT			
	INT'L FOLKBOAT	NORDIC FOLKBOAT	CONTESSA 26
LOA	25' 9"	25'3"	25' 6"
LWL	19' 9"	19' 8"	21'
BEAM	7' 5"	7' 3"	7' 6"
DRAFT	4'	3' 11"	4'
DISPLACEMENT	4,740 lbs.	4,300 lbs.	5,400 lbs.
SAIL AREA (100% foretriangle)	269 sq. ft.	268 sq. ft.	302 sq. ft.
BALLAST	2,750 lbs.	2,300 lbs.	2,300 lbs.
ENGINE	4-6 hp. OB/ 10 hp. IB	4-6 hp. OB	10 hp.
WATER	25 gal. (opt.)	Jerry jugs	10 gal.
FUEL	Portable tank	Portable tank	12 gals.
SA/D RATIO	16.28	16.22	15.70
D/L RATIO	271	252	260
PRICE*	\$7,000- \$10,000	\$10,000- \$15,000	\$15,000- \$20,000

\* Median price of online search; actual prices can vary.

keeler, but it reacted positively to prolonged gusts. We were able to hold a steady 4.8 knots to windward, 5.5 knots reaching, and 5.2 knots deep-reaching off the wind. Unlike the Nordic Folkboat, the International Folkboat Class does allow for a spinnaker, although our boat was not equipped with one. In around-the-buoy races, McCormack is content to pole out the jib on downwind legs.

Tacking angles were precisely 45 degrees, although we would surely be able to aim higher in more wind. Three features struck us about the boat under sail. First was the ease with which the boat could be tacked and jibed single-handed. Frank Costella, whose former boat, *Espresso*, is featured in John Vigor's book "Twenty Small Sailboats to Take You Anywhere," has many fond

memories of sailing the boat by himself in a heavy breeze.

"I'd tuck right back there behind the traveller, with the jib cross-sheeted and watch the spray fly," he said. "We put the windows under only a couple of times, but the cockpit rarely got very wet."

**CONCLUSION**

Selling for about \$10,000 on the used-boat market (if you can find them), the International Folkboat has four essential attributes that make for a good value. First, it has a long, mostly glowing history that ensures a loyal, almost cult-like following. Second, there are enough iterations of the class, particularly on the West Coast, that you can race and rally with a community of like-minded owners. Third, it is a very well-built boat

for its size, with many features—like a quick-draining cockpit and monocoque hull—that inspire confidence off soundings. Finally, the boat is no longer being produced, so should you decide to resell your boat, you won't be competing with a new boat market.

Fans of the original Nordic Folkboat will contend that the International Folkboat is not as gorgeous nor as desirable as the original, and there is some merit to their argument, but in many respects, the IF is a more practical boat... and the story behind it is no less intriguing. ▲

**CONTACT**

**INTERNATIONAL FOLKBOAT ASSOCIATION, [www.ifboat.com](http://www.ifboat.com)**