

Red Sky at Night, Sailors' Delight—And So Is the Flying Lateen

An unsolicited article by the late Justina Dinghy

The Flying Lateen is a new sailboat rig that resurrects the ancient lateen sail. It sports one large triangular sail that, unfurled from a luff spar supported near its center up top at the “hounds”, pivots down below around the middle of the boom. Its steeply raked spar evokes visions of the past but it is modern in every other respect and is touted as being the world’s easiest boat to sail. Dame Dinghy, a fictitious former British America’s Cup Skipper who was visiting friends in Southern California when she wrote this article, was sadly lost at sea last year and is remembered fondly by the entire sailing community.

I WAS INVITED to sail aboard the new Flying Lateen recently, docked in Dana Point harbor, and showed up at “C” dock in Dana West Marina at 2:00 sharp on a beautiful and windy Thursday afternoon.

The Flying Lateen’s 20' keel boat is a delightful little open cockpit daysailer with a skipper’s cockpit aft (from which literally everything is handled), a large center cockpit for guests (and I was going to say “crew” but actually absolutely no crew is needed) and a small forward cockpit for kids, anchor handling and what have you.

But the boat itself, as attractive as it is, is not what sets this little ship apart. It is the rig, which they call the Flying Lateen. Words can’t quite describe it. You just have to see it! Better yet, come sail it! My first impression was that it is beautiful, next that it is BIG but most of all, it is clean...simple and clean! Not the clutter of rigging and lines that most sailboats, particularly readying to get underway, exhibit.

Although I was on time, I was the last to arrive so I stepped aboard and we cast off. The boat is side tied in a very narrow canal leading out of the “C” docks into the harbor. At low tide, it is only about 10 or 12 feet wide. So I was a little surprised, particularly in lieu of the tight quarters, at the relaxed attitude of the others (there were three of us besides the skipper). Relaxed is an overstatement actually. They were literally doing nothing but sitting comfortably in the center cockpit, talking quietly with the skipper, who was equally relaxed as he guided us silently down the narrow channel. I was starting to wonder what was propelling us when I realized that the big lateen sail was actually being deployed as we glided along, gaining us way as it unfurled from the luff spar. The furler on this particular rig is actuated by a small 12 volt DC motor which makes securing and unfurling the sail, as we were now doing, a non-event. It seemed almost an afterthought.

No one was doing anything!

By the time we reached the harbor, perhaps a minute later, we were under full sail, heeling into a fresh breeze and heading up the harbor. As we tacked back and forth across the harbor, I was struck once again at the totally relaxed atmosphere...at the absence of activity involved in tacking. There was no shouted command of “Stand By to Come About,” no releasing of a jib sheet (there IS no jib), no wrapping of the new leeward sheet around a winch in preparation for trimming on the new tack...no ANYTHING! The skipper merely puts over the helm and we come about, the big lateen sail shaking itself out in the eye of the wind and trimming itself as we fill in on the new tack. A “casualness” I’ve never experienced before on ANY sailboat.

We rounded the corner at the top of the bay, came around the beautiful Dana Point Yacht Club, eased off and began the broad reach down the other side toward the harbor entrance. The wind picks up here as it swings around the high bluffs at the north end of Dana Cove. We leaned away from this new wind and literally “flew” down the lee side of the breakwater.

I was invited to take the helm at this point and did so with, I admit, a slight bit of trepidation never having sailed a lateen rig before. My first impression, particularly in lieu of a VERY fresh wind coming across the starboard quarter, was the complete lack of any weather helm...finger tip control on the tiller! This is due, I now understand, to the big lateen sail swiveling as you ease off, with the after part of the sail going to leeward but the forward part of the sail going to weather. It keeps the center of effort...the center of the force of the wind on the sail...right down the centerline of the boat...or at least more so than on a conventional boat where all sails go out to leeward and cause the weather-vaning effect that creates weather helm and

in extreme situations, broaching.

What a marvelous, exhilarating and liberating feeling it is to be flying off the wind in a big breeze, totally comfortable, totally in control, conversing easily with pleasant friends who are equally relaxed.

We hardened up as we came around the end of the breakwater, meaning simply that we cranked in on the mainsheet...the ONLY sheet! Tweaking the sail on this boat is no different, for the most part, from any other. There is a downhaul, an outhaul and the boom swivel, around which the entire rig pivots, can be raised and lowered to adjust tension on the leech. It acts somewhat like a vang in this respect.

We put her through her paces...tacked, jibed, hardened up, eased off, even put the helm over and did two complete 360's with no one moving a muscle. (How envious would a racing skipper and crew be when sparring for position at the start of a match race?)

Back in the harbor, we tacked up the lee side of the breakwater, rounded the corner and began the run toward the entrance to our little canal. I assumed with

a quartering and still fresh wind that we would round up and strike the sail. Not even a consideration! We came round the end of the docks into the canal, began furling as we rounded and half way down the channel, were totally furled and glided the rest of the way in as pretty as you please.

By the time we parallel parked at the dock, the sail was furled, the sheet was coiled and hanging neatly from the boom, we tied up and that was it. We were done! Amazing! No flaking any sails, no jib sheets to coil and stow, no sail covers to install...we simply got off the boat and walked away.

It was SO easy and SO pleasant! There was none of the almost frantic activity...none of the hassle...that seems to be inherent in prepping, sailing and securing a sailboat...particularly when the wind is up. Sailing the Flying Lateen leaves one at the end of the day with the cleansed feeling of pure pleasure that, to some of us, only such sailing can bring. It's the way it should be. What a delight!

I Won't Be Sailing Alone Anymore

An unsolicited article by an anonymous author

The Flying Lateen is a new sailboat rig that resurrects the ancient lateen sail. It sports one large triangular sail which, unfurled from a luff spar supported near its center up top at the "hounds", pivots down below around the middle of the boom. Its steeply raked spar evokes visions of the past but it is modern in every other respect and is touted as being the world's easiest boat to sail. The author of the fictitious story below is a structural engineer and a life long sailor so his knowledge of both Engineering and Sailing were an interesting mix when he wrote about his experience aboard the Flying Lateen.

I'VE BEEN SAILING for 70 years and, although my health is good, I am not as agile as I used to be. I love to sail, particularly in small to medium sized boats, because one can "feel" the nuances of the wind in a smaller boat somewhat better just as you can with a tiller vs. a wheel. And I love to sail alone! The depths of my emotions, of my appreciation for the aesthetics that are involved in sailing, are best experienced alone for me.

My lack of agility was beginning to become a bit of a factor in this regard and sadly I found myself sailing

less. That has changed now and is the reason I was moved to write this article. I had seen the Flying Lateen several times before and even sailed aboard her once but last week, was given the opportunity to sail her by myself and I accepted with great anticipation. It's winter here and happily, the day I sailed her was one of those crystal clear and windy winter days that makes California so pleasant for us sailors.

This particular Flying Lateen rigged boat is a pretty little 20' keelboat with three open, unencumbered cockpits...emphasis on the open and emphasis on un-

encumbered...simple and clean. Not the usual clutter of lines, canvas, blocks, winches, fairleads and little labels depicting what each controls. The single, and BIG, lateen sail is furled within the luff spar, the furling mechanism powered by a tiny little 12 volt DC motor. The flip of a switch and it begins to deploy itself requiring simply taking up the slack on the outhaul as it feeds it to you. That's it! A minute later and you are ready for sea. Habit dictates that there must be something more to do but there just isn't! You cast off and are sailing! Just like that! Wonderful!

I sailed down the little channel from our dock to the harbor, hardened up a bit and began tacking up the Bay. I like to STAND at the helm for some reason when I'm hard on the wind, perhaps an ancestral feeling of being better prepared for the maneuvers involved in coming about. I wasn't prepared, I must tell you, for the complete lack of any physical requirement, on my part, in tacking. Absolutely nothing is required other than putting the helm over. The boat respectfully stands up as the wind passes in front and graciously bows as she fills in on the new tack. (You see what I mean about the emotions stirred within me when sailing). Anyway, we tacked up the Bay, rounded the corner near Richard Henry Dana's Pilgrim, eased off and flew down the other side towards the Harbor entrance.

Off the wind, the back part of the big lateen sail falls off to leeward as would the main on a conventional boat but the forward part swivels to weather keeping the center of effort right down the centerline of the boat. The result of this is a remarkable lack of any weather helm. She "tracks" off the wind just as though she were...ummm...on tracks! Being an engineer, I was interested in the different method by which this lateen rig handles the stresses involved. Basically, they (the stresses) put the leeward struts in compression whereas traditionally, the windward shrouds are in tension. The big struts on the Flying Lateen function so effortlessly that, particularly in a big wind, just seem RIGHT after a while. Perhaps it's the comfort index they imbue. Everything about this rig is easy...even the manner in which it handles what can be BIG stresses.

I was so thoroughly enjoying myself, totally lost in my euphoria, that I didn't see the signs. It was windy, as I said, to begin with, but swooping down the coast

was what turned out to be a waterspout. These things are mini-tornadoes and pack what pilots fear most ...wind shear that can gust powerfully and very dangerously. This is a different ball game than a good healthy breeze. It can put you out of business awfully fast if you look the other way or aren't alert, as I wasn't, at that moment

When I finally came out of my reverie and looked up the coast, there it was! It was coming straight at us...and fast! Without a crew aboard to assist in not just reefing but striking altogether, my experience shouted that I just didn't have time to prepare for this. Your tendency is to run but you have to get your head to wind so against the flight instinct, I headed straight at it, released the outhaul and pushed the furler switch to FURL. The wind had kicked the water into a frenzy so I had my hands full keeping the little ship on a proper heading and could pay little attention to the reefing operation.

As it bore down on us, my mind raced through the possibilities of a shredded sail, a knock down, swamping, sinking, all in no particular order...a panicked jumble of thoughts. At the height of it all, I looked up just in time to see perhaps the last three feet of the sail trying to escape into the luff spar and switched the little motor to off. It had done its job!

We were pummeled and bounced around for sure but with most of the sail tucked safely away leaving just enough deployed to give us steerage way, we rode it out without the slightest bit of damage. It was over as fast as it came and all of a sudden, we were back in the bosom of a bright blue sea, washed flat and clean from the blast, and ready to go home. I hit the little unfurl switch and out jumped the rest of the sail, eager to have at it again.

We cruised home and even sailed back up the little channel to our dock as the sail was busy furling itself and slowing us down. She eased alongside like a well trained and obedient servant. At that moment, I felt to be the servant...felt a very humble and grateful bond with this little ship. I had been the skipper, yes, and single handed, but I hadn't been alone. SHE had done the work! SHE brought us home! I know I'll be sailing more again now and you know?...I won't be sailing alone anymore!