

FIRST TEST

X4⁶

Can a boat with a racing pedigree really make a comfortable cruiser? David Harding sails the X4⁶ to find out

Words & pictures David Harding



Everyone has a different view of what constitutes a cruising yacht. Some, for example, might take one look at the X4⁶ (pronounced 'Four Six') and think 'too racy'. After all, here's a powerful-looking performance boat with a broad stern, a T-bulb keel and a tall, triple-spreader fractional rig. Yet this latest addition to X-Yachts' line-up was never conceived as a race boat. She didn't need to be, because X builds the Xp range for those who want performance with minimal compromise. The Xc models cater for the long-distance cruising sailor, so both ends of the spectrum are covered. That leaves the ground in between for the X4⁶ and her 'Pure X' siblings – family cruisers aimed at those who want boats that are fast, fun and easy to manage for a short-handed crew.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

We're all used to seeing cruising yachts following the fashion set by race boats: pronounced chines, vertical (or even reverse-raked) stems and twin rudders are now almost the norm. The X4⁶, on the other hand, does things her own way while still looking every inch the modern yacht. She has the merest hint of a chine at the stern and, as on every boat from X-Yachts with the exception of the X6⁵, she's steered by a single rudder. Twin blades are often essential given the width of today's sterns, but a single blade is still widely considered simpler and more reliable in the long term, to provide a better feel to the helm and to be less prone to damage. The position of the 4⁶ in the X-Yachts range, between her sporty and cruisy cousins, is interesting. Few builders now offer two full model ranges in the way Beneteau once did with the Oceanises and Firsts, or Jeanneau with the Sun Odysseys and Sun Fasts. The market for the cruiser/racer, for owners who would race with their friends at the weekend and then put the curtains back aboard and go cruising with the family, started to shrink some time ago.

While that was happening, developments in yacht design meant that roomy, comfortable cruisers were



SPECIFICATIONS

MAKE / MODEL
X4⁶

PRICE FROM
£491,020 inc VAT

DESIGNER
X-Yachts

BUILDER
X-Yachts

Easily handled, she covers the ground at an impressive rate



ABOVE: Composite wheels are an upgrade from the standard stainless steel. Note the recessed mainsheet track

RIGHT: The X4⁶ felt responsive and sailed at close to the wind speed

becoming quicker and more capable than many of their predecessors thanks to factors such as longer waterlines, lower centre-of-gravity keels and more efficient rigs. They grew sportier without sacrificing their cruising credentials, so there was no longer a need, in some builders' eyes, to maintain a separate performance range for a diminishing market. Those who want more fizz now can now start with a standard cruising model and, in many cases, add a taller rig and a deeper keel from the options list. In some ways it's the reverse of the trend in the 1970s and 1980s, when builders of IOR racers would produce de-tuned production versions with shorter masts, shallower keels and plusher interiors.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Many design aspects are common to all three model ranges from X-Yachts. Central to the X approach is that features contributing to a boat's sailing performance often enhance safety and comfort too, even if they do increase costs. For example, weight in the X4⁶ is concentrated centrally to minimise pitching: less structural stress and more speed as well as a more comfortable ride.



A lead bulb on the bottom of an iron keel shaft provides a powerful righting moment and allows her to carry a generous spread of sail for performance in light airs. Light-airs performance is further helped by the modest wetted area, because the low-slung ballast means she has no need to rely on form stability and neither is the hull designed to provide the greatest possible volume. If you believe it's better to

sacrifice a little space, make faster, smoother passages and spend more time being comfortable in port than it is to have a roomier, slower boat bouncing around for longer at sea, you're in tune with the X philosophy.

Good rig tension is also fundamental to performance, so the hull needs to be stiff: hence the steel 'grillage', as X-Yachts calls it, along the centreline. This substantial framework distributes the loads from the keel and adds to the hull's fore-and-aft stiffness, as does the foam-cored laminate that's vacuum-infused with epoxy (rather than polyester or vinylester resins) before being baked for post-curing. It's all about maximising stiffness and eliminating weight where it's not needed so it can be concentrated where it is. It says something about the structure and weight distribution that every boat in the X range can be lifted from a single point. Single-point lifts are widely seen on small keelboats but rarely on anything larger.

Helping maintain rig tension is the use of rod rigging, and it's not even of a smaller diameter than if it were conventional stranded wire.

HANDLING AND PERFORMANCE

To see how the design concept translates into practice, I headed across the North Sea with Stuart Abernethy from X-Yachts GB to sail X4⁶ No.1. She's owned by Clemens van Erp, who joined us on the sail with Nanno from X-Yachts Holland.

Winds were light and the water of the IJsselmeer was flat, which might not sound ideal for a test sail. On the other hand it gave us the opportunity to see what the X4⁶ could do in conditions that, on some boats, would hardly have made it worth setting sail.

In a shifty breeze that only exceeded 8 knots once or twice, the X felt nicely powered up and thoroughly responsive, clocking upwind speeds in the mid-5 knots in just over 6 knots of wind and into the 6s

during the odd fresher spell. Once cracked off a few degrees we exceeded wind-speed at times and peaked at 8 knots with the gennaker.

While it would have been nice to have a good thrash in open water and 25 knots, our light-weather sail revealed a good deal about the X4⁶. Having a boat that's capable of sailing at or near wind-speed in light conditions can make an enormous difference to your enjoyment and passage times, especially if it saves using the engine. In livelier conditions Clemens, who races an International Dragon for his competitive sailing, has clocked over 14 knots downwind under plain sail in the Baltic.

In fact Clemens is an excellent example of an experienced sailor who wants a cruising yacht that combines good performance with stability and easy handling for a couple. The 4⁶ comes with a self-tacking jib as standard or you can choose inboard tracks for a 106% headsail, which should increase performance appreciably while still being very easy to tack. It's a big mainsail, however, so Clemens opted for a FurlerBoom system and an electric halyard winch to make hoisting, lowering and reefing a push-button operation from the cockpit with minimal compromise to sail shape.

Two pairs of Harken 46 self-tailers are fitted – one on the coachroof for the halyards and lines led aft from the mast beneath the deck, and one for the mainsheet each side just forward of the twin helm stations. The mainsheet traveller is recessed into the

cockpit sole and the jib's track into the coachroof. Combined with the under-deck lines and flush hatches, this makes for a very clear, uncluttered deck and cockpit, especially since the FurlerBoom means no reeling lines or outhaul.

Security on deck is provided by stainless steel handholds along the outboard sides of the coachroof and the moulded capping over the hull-to-deck joint that creates low bulwarks. Pad eyes can be fitted along the gunwale to which you can attach blocks for spinnaker sheets or for barber-hauling the jib. There are no through-deck scuppers: water on deck runs aft and down the transom.

If you want to maximise the performance and comfort of the X4⁶ you can upgrade to a carbon mast, though most owners have preferred to spend the money on other things and to stick with the aluminium section from John Mast in Denmark. Hardware principally comes from Harken, Seldén and Spinlock.

At the helm, the composite wheels by Carbonautica (upgrades from the standard stainless wheels) give good feedback from the rudder and there's no slop in the cable linkage, which is easy to reach via the full-width lazarette with its two large hatches. It was

| POINT OF SAIL | AWA* | AWS** | SPEED |
|---------------|--------|---------------|---------------|
| Close hauled | 33-35° | 8.5-10 knots | 5.3-5.8 knots |
| Fetch | 60° | 9-10.5 knots | 6.2-6.7 knots |
| Beam reach | 90° | 5.8-7.3 knots | 5.5-6.4 knots |
| Broad reach | 120° | 4.3-4.8 knots | 5.2-5.7 knots |
| Run | 180° | 3.7-5 knots | 4.7-5.1 knots |

*APPARENT WING ANGLE **APPARENT WIND SPEED





The glass splashback is a sleek touch

Scandinavian light oak is the popular joinery choice. The finish is neat and substantial



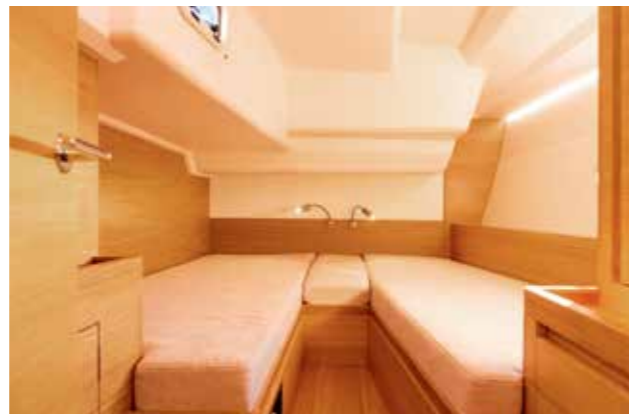
In the galley are twin sinks, a three-ring cooker and even an espresso machine



The fixed fiddled table is the centrepiece in the saloon. Joinery detail is noteworthy throughout, and the styling avoids bland expanses of veneer



The owner's suite is in the bow, abaft the large sail locker on the other side of the watertight bulkhead. Hull-side lockers are on the options list



Two single berths with an infill for conversion to a double is an almost universally chosen option in the port aft cabin



A triple-spreader rig is unusual for cruisers, but the sailplan remains easily handled



The optional carbon bowsprit covers the anchor arm and projects the tack of an asymmetric

noticeable how, even in the light conditions, a degree of weather helm quickly became apparent. It meant the boat would head up if the wheel was let go, but the weight remained minimal and I'm told it barely increases in fresher conditions. Later boats have a re-designed rudder that apparently gives more warning when it's approaching the limits of its grip.

All told, the X4⁶ was a delight to sail: taut, positive, highly responsive and impressively quick for an easily-managed cruiser with a self-tacking jib.

In these conditions, minimising drag through the standard folding prop and flush seacocks makes an appreciable difference. In more breeze, having 40% of the boat's weight in that lead bulb and maintaining forestay tension through the hull's stiffness and the rod rigging should make her equally potent.

As for the ergonomics of the deck and cockpit when you're at 20° of heel in a seaway, it's hard to tell without having tried it. Although the cockpit is shallower and more open than you might want on a blue-water cruiser (which the X4⁶ isn't), the coamings are a decent height and set sufficiently far inboard to allow the wide side decks to run all the way to the transom. At each wheel, fold-up foot braces will help stop you sliding across.

Given the boat's sailing performance, you're unlikely to need to motor a great deal but the sound



insulation makes it quiet when you have to fire up the Yanmar sail drive (57hp or, as on this boat, the 80hp upgrade).

ACCOMMODATION

Before we explore below decks, several points are worthy of note about the companionway. One is that the washboard drops straight down into a

recess: no problems deciding where to stow it or finding it afterwards. Another is that the sliding hatch is moulded rather than acrylic. And a third is that the companionway steps – in dished, untreated teak for security in a seaway – are at just the right angle for

ABOVE: Extras on our test boat included the FurlerBoom system and hinge-down stern platform

LEFT: Sound insulation is good in the Yanmar 57hp saildrive, which can be upgraded to 80hp

simple and speedy ascent and descent.

Once down below, you find yourself in a most welcoming interior which, on our test boat, was finished in Nordic oak. Teak is the alternative. The quality of finish and attention to detail is evident throughout. As you would expect on a performance yacht, the finish is less chunky than on some Scandi alternatives, but it's neat and substantial.

X-Yachts uses a partial interior moulding along the centre of the boat incorporating extensive cut-away areas to give access to the outer hull. The moulding extends only to the base of the bunks, the rest of the interior being formed by the joinery. Bulkheads are bonded directly to the hull and deckhead.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Functionally as well as aesthetically, it seems to work. Handholds are built into the fiddles edging most horizontal surfaces, and grabrails can be fitted in the saloon along the cabin sides. The saloon settees are sufficiently far inboard not to leave a dancefloor between and to allow space for stowage outboard. Both would work as sea-berths.

Overhead is a moulded headliner, partially covered with vinyl panels. Deck fittings are tapped into aluminium plates rather than being through-bolted. Access to the systems is good. Electrical wiring is run through conduits that are easy to reach, and X-Yachts makes a point of designing systems access into each boat at an early stage. Day-to-day practicalities aren't ignored either: all doors have magnetic catches to hold them open, the plentiful drawers are solid wood (not just wood-fronted) and everything fits precisely to avoid rattling when the engine's running.

My only surprise was to see that the foam-cored hull wasn't ramped down to a single skin around the seacocks. Apparently the use of high-density foam in these areas combined with the epoxy infusion makes the foam effectively non-absorbent.

In terms of layout, the only choice is whether you have a double berth in the port aft cabin or two singles with a double infill. Every owner to date has chosen the latter. In the forecabin is a semi-island berth and an en-suite heads. This is the owner's domain: guests can fight over the cabins in the stern and share the aft heads. Headroom is 1.88m (6ft 2in) or more throughout.



X4⁶

THE TEST VERDICT

The X4⁶ was conceived as a fast, fun, easy-to-handle cruising yacht – and that's exactly what she is. Her speed-to-effort ratio is probably among the best you will find in a monohull because she's small enough to be easily handled by a couple while her race-bred design makes sure she covers the ground at an impressive rate.

She's not an inexpensive boat and it's easy to see why. Epoxy-infused, post-cured, cored laminates cost money. So do lead bulbs, flush seacocks, internal steel grids, high-quality joinery and accessible systems. As the saying goes, 'you pays your money...'

It's reassuring to know that the entire design and construction process is completed by X-Yachts in-house. And British owners will be pleased to know that the design office, headed by X-Yachts' co-founder Niels Jeppesen, is based on the Hamble.

It's also good to hear an owner's thoughts about the boat he or she chose and why. Clemens once owned a sporty version of a 36ft cruiser that proved too powerful for him and his wife to handle. With the FurlerBoom and self-tacking jib he says the X4⁶ is 'very relaxing to sail but still with good speed and performance'.

WOULD SHE SUIT YOU AND YOUR CREW?

If you're after a sedate, chunky cruiser, this isn't your boat. But I suspect many people who might consider a sedate, chunky cruiser to be their natural home would be pleasantly surprised by the comfort and ease of handling of the X4⁶. She will run rings around mainstream cruising yachts and make life more comfortable for her crew, too.

Sailing any boat of this size short-handed with a conventional mainsail would inevitably call for more effort than with in-boom furling (in-mast being out of the question), though an electric halyard winch on its own would make a big difference. Similarly, given the size of many marinas, a bow-thruster would be another useful extra. As with any boat, you need to choose the spec according to your crew and your style of sailing.

PROS

- Excellent light-air performance
- Reassuring construction
- Appealing interior finish

CONS

- No cockpit storage for small items
- No pillar handholds below decks
- Midships water tankage limits saloon stowage

FACTS AND FIGURES

PRICE AS TESTED
£693,666 inc VAT

LOA 14.08m
(46ft 2in)

HULL LENGTH
13.50m (44ft 3in)

LWL 12.30m (40ft 5in)

BEAM 4.27m (14ft 0in)

DRAUGHT
Standard: 2.30m
(7ft 7in)

Deep: 2.50m
(8ft 2in)

DISPLACEMENT
10,900kg (24,030lb)

BALLAST
4,500kg (9,921lb)

BALLAST RATIO 41.3%

DISP/LENGTH 163

SAIL AREA
109m² (1,173sq ft)

SA/D RATIO 22.5

DIESEL
280 litres (62 gal)

WATER
350 litres (77 gal)

ENGINE
57 hp (80hp option)

TRANSMISSION
Saildrive

RCD CATEGORY A

DESIGNER X-Yachts

BUILDER X-Yachts

UK AGENT
X-Yachts (GB) Ltd

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In a shifty breeze, she felt powered up and responsive

