

FACTS

Tested by **PIP HARE**

- ▶ **Where we tested:** Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Canary Islands
- ▶ **Wind:** 4-16 knots
- ▶ **Model:** Hull No 3, *Nica*, 5-berth, 3-cabin fitted out to owner's specification



Photos by James Mitchell

TESTED:

FINOT-CONQ FC3 53

A BLUEWATER CRUISER BY A VENDÉE RACE BOAT DESIGNER IS BOUND TO DELIVER ON PERFORMANCE, BUT DOES SHE HAVE COMFORT TO MATCH?

If the electric green hull and striking looks of *Nica* don't grab your attention, then its on-paper description certainly will. This Finot-Conq FC3 53 is a carbon-hulled, water-ballasted, swing keel offshore cruising yacht. Read that last sentence again. These are words you don't often see together and this boat definitively smashes the common perception of what a bluewater cruising boat should be.

Nica is the third FC3 53 to be launched and its owners are about to embark on a world cruise. On delivery to the Canaries *Nica* clocked a top speed of 24 knots and looking at the muscly lines, 5m beam and powerful rig it's easy to understand why she's challenging the norms.

But far from being an untamed beast, the FC3 53 has been carefully designed for stress-free double-handed sailing. There is no need to pay a penalty for your speed

– the performance is matched by comfort, style and luxurious features.

Finot-Conq has long been known for blending offshore racing hulls with cruising interiors through the range of boats it designs for Pogo Structures. The FC3 53 takes this concept to a different level. Though some may frown at the suitability of such a performance-orientated design for a proper liveaboard experience, there is nothing gung-ho about *Nica*. This is the culmination of an owner's informed and rigorous specification, the carbon building expertise of a German yard renowned for state-of-the-art raceboats and some very clever and beautiful design.

The owners of *Nica* are a couple who have previously owned and raced light displacement racing yachts. The husband of the team is very experienced, ➤

- 1 The Code 0 furling line is led through the bowsprit under deck all the way to the cockpit.
- 2 *Nica* uses a Solent jib up to 22 knots upwind, before switching to the staysail. Both are sheeted through 3D clew rings, so the deck is not interrupted by genoa tracks.
- 3 *Nica's* boom runs full length and is serviced by a traveller on the very edge of the transom – this maximises sail area and keeps the cockpit safe and clear during gybes.
- 4 Twin transom doors allow access to a tender garage on one side and dedicated liferaft stowage on the other. The liferaft can be launched by tugging hard on a single rope, which opens the door and releases the raft in one action.



and, while his wife has sailed as part of the racing crew, she is looking forward to cruising double-handed and the opportunity to learn more. They first looked at Class 40s, but as the mission changed to cruising, their next step was to consider the Pogo 50, which led them to the FC3 53.

I was invited to join the owners together with designers Pierre Forgia and Pascal Conq in the Canaries for two days of cruising, and the prospect of experiencing this boat first-hand was genuinely exciting. This would also be the first time the designers had sailed aboard *Nica* and, as we were gently gliding from our marina berth using bow and stern thrusters, there could not have been a crew of five more desperate to find some wind to play in.

About the sailing

Within minutes we were streaking away from the harbour of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. The fully battened main filled with a crack, the Code 0 flew out, water ballast was pumped in and *Nica* was up

The FC3 53 hull has been designed with inspiration from the latest generation of IMOCA and Class 40 yachts. There is a hard, full length chine, the foredeck is gently cambered and the bow full volume

to 12 knots of boat speed with the water gushing past and warm Canaries wind in our faces.

It didn't seem to matter which way we pointed the bow, or how much we loaded the sails, the helm remained light and at times the boat steered itself. Upwind, we picked our way nimbly around oncoming waves; reaching we powered straight over them. As soon as there was sea room our eager crew rushed to the bow and wrestled an A2 spinnaker from the deep sail locker so the real fun could begin.

With the spinnaker up, *Nica* carries 360m² of sail and handles like a Class 40, effortlessly able to catch and surf the smallest of wavelets. In what seemed no time we had lost sight of Gran Canaria in the hazy, sand-filled air.

Downwind VMG sailing in the FC3 53 is a joy. The fully-loaded hull is just 12 tonnes and agile enough for an engaged helmsman to make the most of every puff of breeze. In a wind range of 12-16 knots we kept consistent speeds of 10-12 knots downwind.

Helmings was all-absorbing and it drew

me in so all other distractions faded to the background. Even in as little as 4 knots of breeze I was able to keep *Nica* sailing at the same speed, heading up to build apparent and then soaking until the sail started to collapse. I could feel every part of the boat react. *Nica* felt alive.

Despite hanging around the wind acceleration zones of Gran Canaria for the best part of two days, wind strengths during our test remained below 16 knots, so I never experienced *Nica* in full flight. However, a fully loaded 53-footer with five crew in the cockpit that is still powerful and light enough to keep moving in 4 knots of wind is telling you pretty much everything you need to know about performance. The polars suggest *Nica* will make 15-17 knots of boat speed in 25 knots of wind and, judging by what I have experienced, I believe them. This boat will gobble up the oceans.

The only performance giveaway to the cruising aspect of the FC3 53 was a trailing stern wake downwind which never managed to break from our transom in light airs of up to 12 knots. It's inevitable

'THE SAIL PLAN IS BOLD, MATCHING THE POWER POTENTIAL OF THE HULL'

that a heavy stern caused by a fully laden tender garage will affect performance like this in lighter airs. But in no way was *Nica's* speed disappointing – this telltale stern wake simply informs us the FC3 53 could have even more to give.

Sailing life 'hacks'

In every aspect, the FC3 53 has delivered on its mission to provide performance and comfort to the highest degree. The sail plan is bold, matching the power potential of the hull, but has been designed for two people to manage while hardly breaking a sweat. This is so much more than just electrifying the winches – it's thoughtful layout, top quality hardware and some ingenious hacks to just make life easier.

All sail handling, except the spinnaker tack line, is done from trimming areas just in front of the two carbon wheels.

There are five electric winches, all are two speeds. The dedicated mainsheet winch is set on a central pedestal at the very back of the cockpit. This also hosts the controls for a full width traveller running across the top of the transom. Bringing the traveller jammers up onto the pedestal allows them to be controlled from a waist height position, well forward of the track, using the mainsheet winch if necessary. This arrangement is not only practical but safe on a boat this size.

The Solent furler is hydraulic, while the staysail furler is manual. As the Solent must be partially furled during a tack, having the furler on a hydraulic system allows control of the sail from either side of the cockpit during a tack, eliminating the need to handle two ropes at once. The vang is also hydraulic, which again makes sense, as maintaining leech tension on a square-headed main requires a lot of



The bobstay and 2:1 tackline are integral, working through the bowsprit rather than dead-ending to either side. This allows the bobstay to be pulled back during anchoring

Left: tester Pip Hare was in her element on the FC3 53



power off the wind. The vang can also be dumped at the flick of a switch.

The twin spreader rig has PBO standing rigging. To avoid the hassles for a double-handed crew dealing with split backstays, the rig and supporting structure have been designed with no backstay. The owners of *Nica* have chosen to install running backstays for a bit of extra security on breezier downwind passages, but most of the time these are stowed forward next to the shrouds.

The 104m² fully battened mainsail runs on a dual mast track stowage system. This neat piece of engineering sees the mast track split into two about 1m above the gooseneck – rather like railway points. When the sail drops, alternate cars are diverted onto each separate track, building up two stacks of batten cars side by side. This allows the sail to be stowed in a neater form, and with half the height of a normal system the head can be reached from the deck.

Despite all the clever systems and the absolute ease with which our crew of five managed to boss *Nica* around, don't be fooled into thinking this boat is a lamb. Sails of 360m² mean a monster, no matter how good your winches are. The sail area to displacement ratio is off the



Above: designer Pascal Conq helms while Pip watches the main. Note the central pedestal for easy mainsheet and traveller control. Far left: bowsprit, furler and anchor stowage. Left: lines led back under cockpit coamings

cruising boat scale. To sail this boat, you must actively take control, define clear limits for shortening sail and stick to them – otherwise there's no question this boat will bite.

Nica's tack line runs inside the bowsprit and is made off on a cleat inside the anchor locker on the underside of the deck. Working in the locker was the only bit of sailing the FC353 that I found fiddly. But the solution to handling is simple: just pull on the tack line hard before the hoist, make it off in the locker, then close the lid and forget about it.

Thoughtful layout and top quality gear contribute to ease of handling

Another ingenious 'sailing life hack' is the integrated bobstay and tack line. With this system the bobstay is not dead-ended on the end of the bowsprit but instead goes through it and attaches back to back with the 2:1 tack line. When you pull the tack line on, you pull the bobstay tight and the harder the pressure in the spinnaker, the tighter the bobstay becomes. When anchoring, ease the tack line completely and the bobstay can be pulled aft, towards the hull so it will not clash with the chain.

A funky feel

Descend the matt black carbon companionway steps and *Nica's* interior matches the cutting edge looks on deck. Working with designer Pierre



The swing keel

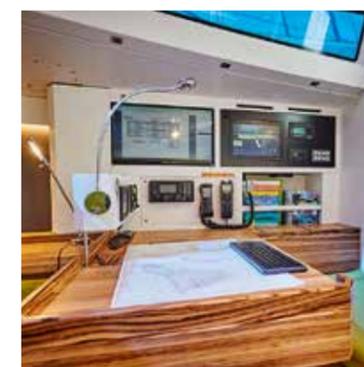
Finot-Conq started designing swing keels during the early 1990s for 8m/26ft daysailers and is now using them on boats up to 31m/100ft long. When down, the keel on *Nica* is 3.75m, giving optimum righting moment and performance. The lifted keel has a 1.65m draught, which should allow access to most harbours.

The keel pivots around an axis on the back of the keel head, with a ram that pushes the top of the keel head forward to swing the keel down, and pulls it back to lift. There is a fail-safe system when the keel is down, which means if the ram is put under a sudden significant load, it will immediately let go and the keel will swing up. This should eliminate the risk of damage to the keel box and surrounding structure from grounding.

The fit of the keel head into the keel box is extremely precise to avoid vibration while sailing. The space is so tight the head of the keel cannot be antifouled, as the extra millimetres of paint mean it would no longer fit back in its slot.



'DON'T BE FOOLED INTO THINKING THIS BOAT IS A LAMB - IT WILL BITE'



Smart glazing creates a light, very modern feel

Forgia, the owners have created a contemporary style by matching unusual striped Zebrano wood with lime green upholstery and white panelling.

Fitting out required a balancing act between equipping for self-sufficient bluewater sailing yet keeping additional weight to a minimum. Far from resulting in a sparse interior, *Nica* has a funky, modern feel down below and just about everything you could possibly need.

There has clearly been considerable skill in both design and build to deliver such a full interior without compromising performance. All furniture is structural, while doors and tabletops are Nomex forms covered with carbon panels and veneer. Both heads are equipped with full carbon electric toilets.

The saloon is split-level with a high dining area on the port side and a low sofa to starboard. The top of the keel box acts as a bench seat to the dining table. Building the FC3 53 in carbon has allowed Finot-Conq to reduce the height of the keel box compared to boats like the Pogo 50. This means the keel box

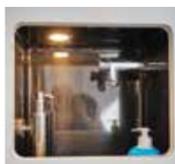
integrates into the furniture of the saloon rather than separating the space.

Panoramic windows fitted with smart glass wrap the coachroof – each panel of glass can be individually dimmed or blacked out at the turn of a switch. Windows can be ‘trimmed’ to different shades depending on the position of the sun and provide total privacy when blacked out, eliminating the need for blinds. Lighting options are varied, with recessed deckhead lights, under-cupboard downlighting and well-placed reading lamps. All lights can be individually switched from white to red. Playing with the black-out windows and different lighting creates distinct ambiances to suit just about every mood, from cosy cottage to exclusive restaurant.

The owner’s cabin is forward of the saloon with ensuite heads and shower in front of that. This area is separated from the sail locker by a watertight bulkhead. There is a double VIP guest cabin on the starboard side of the companionway. Walk through the guest heads on the port side to a smaller cabin with pilot berth,

Lime green upholstery, striped Zebrano joinery and white panels give a funky feel

Below: heads sink unit cleverly recessed into bulkhead



which gives access to the generator and 240V systems. All aft accommodation is separated from the stern garage by a watertight bulkhead.

The galley is well-equipped with storage and work space. There is no gas on the boat – both hob and oven use 240V. There’s even a washing machine in the guest shower. Looking at the facilities on board, I was gobsmacked to think this boat only weighs 12 tonnes fully laden.

Designed for hard knocks

You don’t need to sail a tank to roll with the punches of the ocean and *Nica* has been designed to take some hard knocks and still function to a high specification. For the build, the German yard Knierim yachtbau was chosen for its great track record for building in carbon from one-off race boats to the German America’s Cup entry back in the early 2000s. Largely due to the meticulous specification, most working parts of this yacht are strong, sensible and have practical back-ups in the event of failure.

The keel ram has a manual override for

the electrics and a hand pump should that fail too. The water ballast pump can be diverted to work as a second bilge pump and vice versa. The electrical system is 24V served by 720Ah of lithium batteries, with charging via a diesel generator or Watt & Sea towing generator.

An EmpirBus system takes the place of a conventional electrical panel and allows all items to be switched and controlled from one touch screen. Systems can be monitored and operated remotely from a smartphone, allowing you to check bilge alarms or turn on the deck lights to identify your boat in a crowded anchorage. Should the bus system fail, there’s a location map for all electrical node centres on the boat, which are identified by number and can be operated manually. There are also two solid-state computers and communications are via satellite and SSB.

The twin rudders each have their own quadrants with doubled-up steering cables and autopilot rams on both. There is even a spare rudder stored behind a side panel in the owner’s suite. ➤

Right: cabins are spacious, with plenty of built-in stowage as befits a liveaboard cruiser





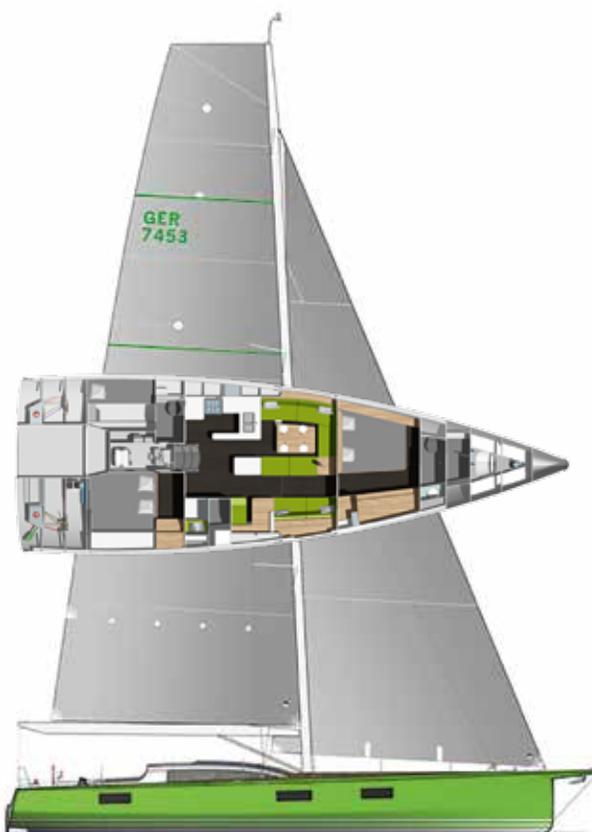
Our verdict

From the moment I first read about the FC3 53 I believed it could be my dream cruising boat. After sailing it, I'm sure it is. This is not just a case of having your cake and eating it: it's the having the whole patisserie and the baker on retainer too.

Sailing across oceans is a means to an end for some people, the chance to travel, experience out of the way places in the world but from the comfort of your own home.

For others, the excitement of sailing is more important than the destination – to sail slowly is not to sail at all. The FC3 53 magnificently delivers the best of both worlds to each of these communities. It is staggering to understand how such a full specification could have been delivered on a 53-footer while still retaining genuine performance. I challenge any sailor to experience this boat and not be blown away. ■

DATA FINOT-CONQ FC3 53



SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	17.58m	57ft 8in
LWL	16.16m	53ft 0in
Beam (Max)	5.26m	17ft 3in
Draught (swing keel)	1.75m/3.75m	5ft 9in/12ft 4in
Disp (lightship)	10,500kg	23,148lb
Ballast	2,800kg/6173lb in keel plus 1,000kg/2,205lb water ballast each side	
Sail Area (100% foretriangle)	153.8m ²	2,1,655ft ²
Berths	5	
Engine	75hp	
Water	400lt	88gal
Fuel	400lt	88gal
Sail Area/displacement ratio	32.6	
Displacement/length of waterline ratio	69	
Guide price (ex VAT)	€1.7-2m for full carbon infusion build	
Design:	Pierre Forgia, Finot-Conq	
	www.finot-conq.com	

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