Malbec 18

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The Affordable, Fast, Fun Pocket Cruiser



VenturaSportBoats.com







"We love the way the Malbec 18's chines, springy sheer and carefully modeled cabin trunk all work together...[it would make] a nifty little club racer"—SAIL "Charming...fun and responsive" —

Cruising World Magazine 2018 Best Boats Winners Circle

Safe and beachable Ballasted swing-centerboard. Simple to trailer & launch. Roomy cockpit seats six. Spacious, airy cabin sleeps four. Easy to sail & single hand with modern ergonomic controls.

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Boat Review: Malbec 18

Plenty modern, but also a throwback to the classic trailersailers of the 70s and 80s

From 2010 until 2016, Ken Lange owned and operated International Marine, the Southern-California company famous for building the West Wight Potter line of sailboats. Ken's ownership tenure saw many changes, perhaps most significantly the addition of the Sanibel 18 and Voyager 20 designs to the International Marine line.

But after five challenging years in the production boat business, when a foreign investment group came knocking, Ken was content to sell the business and move on to other pursuits. As it turns out, those "other things" didn't hold his interest long. It was during his brief semi-retirement that Ken stumbled upon an intriguing 18-foot sailboat being built down in Argentina.

"It caught my eye," Ken says, "because in addition to being nice-looking, it had some definite similarities to the Potters—most notably the hard-chine."

The Argentinian-built Ruesch 5.5, as it was called then, with its hard chine, sloop rig and centerboard beach-ability, did seem Potter-ish, only sleeker, with some of the boxiness rounded off. The nascent South American builder had only produced about 14 boats, but Ken could imagine the design catching on in the United States market. Before long he was on his way to Argentina for a test sail.

"She sailed great," he says. "Plenty stable, and faster than the Potters. And the bigger cockpit will handle four or five aboard comfortably."

With the foreign investors failing to do anything with the Potter line (apparently no boats have been built since the sale), Ken formed a new company named Ventura Sport Boats, and made arrangements to begin U.S. production of the Ruesch 5.5.

"All of the sudden I was back in the business," he says.

As much as he liked the new design, there were plenty of things he wanted to change, not the least of which was the name. Recalling the pleasant flavors of the Argentinian wine variety, Ken decided to call new boat the "Malbec 18."

Drawing on his decade of experience building similar boats, Ken decided to both upgrade the interior, and to change the cockpit so it would accommodate gas-tank stowage aft along with a series of new hatches. But maybe his biggest changes were to rig and centerboard.



Where the original Ruesch 5.5 had a heavily weighted centerboard requiring a winch, Ken and his crew—remembering the configuration of their Sanibel 18—opted for an easily-hoisted lightweight board, and 325 pounds of fixed internal ballast down below the mast compression post. The resultant setup is more user-friendly and reportedly offers similar overall stability.

The rig also saw changes.

"Argentina is a tougher place to build a boat," Ken says. "In the U.S. we have access to the best of the best." As part of the design upgrade, Ken went with the higher-aspect, more substantial, and very familiar, Potter 19 rig on the Malbec, adding a little sail area in process. "It ended up being a perfect fit," Ken says.

Fortunately for us, one of the first Malbec 18s sold went to sailor Sue Bamford, who lives in the San Juan Islands. Since the San Juans are practically our front yard, we decided to buzz up to the islands to meet both Ken and Sue during the week her boat was delivered.

PERFORMANCE:

"I have only sailed on one of these once and slept one night on it, but I was impressed with its quality and sailing characteristics; So impressed that I purchased one I hope will be ready in early October." Dana Cole

"Have had it out in all conditions now and it points very well." Sue Bamford, 2018 *Blubird*.

When we arrived in Friday Harbor, Ken was working with Sue on the last few rigging details, but the Malbec looked well-outfitted and ready for adventure. A short time later we motored from the slip and were headed out toward busy San Juan Channel.

Our first impression—beyond noting the boat's better-than-expected looks—was that the Malbec felt quite stable initially. With three of us aboard in the light air there was no concern about where to sit to balance or trim the boat.

After hoisting the main and unfurling the jib we were off on something like a triangle course, trying to get a feel for the Malbec on all points. With the light and fluky winds—not to mention the strong currents swirling between the islands—it was a tricky day to draw many performance conclusions, but a few things were readily apparent. First, the Malbec had a perfect helm, with just a touch of weather,

ABOVE—The Malbec charging along on the Pacific Ocean. *Courtesy Ventura Sport Boats*

RIGHT—Sue Bamford's new 18 in Friday Harbor.


WN 2722 SR







OPPOSITE—A look at the interior, fore and aft view. ABOVE—The Malbec feeling plenty frisky in a good breeze.

and she came through her tacks smartly.

The second thing that stood out was her tendency to slice easily through the confused seas stirred up by opposing currents and powerboat-traffic wakes. Twice we instinctively braced for the boat to pound or hobby-horse only to have her sail through unperturbed.

Speed and pointing ability were harder to gauge, given the conditions, so we look forward to trying her again in better sailing weather, but we left feeling confident she's at least as good as boats her type in both respects. Her 157 square feet of sail (sail-area-displacement-ratio of around 19) puts her squarely in that medium cruiser range—not powered up but not super conservative either. The hull shape suggests she will get-up-and-go in the right conditions.

The running rigging seemed well-engineered and of high quality, with a 4-to-1 aft-boom mainsheet setup leading to a swivel cam cleat mounted on the cockpit sole. The roller-furling jib's sheets are led to swivel cams on the cabintop. There was also a 3-to-1 vang—most hardware was Ronstan.

The fractional rig has an adjustable split backstay and a pair of shrouds on each side—one upper and one lower. While early models had spreaders, the latest model, conveniently, does not.

TRAILERING AND LAUNCHING: *"Rigging is easy since everything remains attached except roller-furler."* Sue Bamford, 2018 *Blubird*.

Designed from the outset with trailerability in mind, the Malbec is just small and simple enough that we could see rigging, launching, sailing, and then pulling her out, in the same day. Of course we'd rather not do it that way, but she's manageable enough that it might be worth it. Trailering her 1500 pounds to a destination for a weekend or week-long cruise seems perfectly reasonable.

Rigging isn't especially complicated, and with a board-up draft of 12 inches, neither is launching or retrieval.

SEAWORTHINESS: *"My experience with the boat involved a test sail out of Oxnard. Conditions were NW 12-14 with seas running approximately 4 feet. I found the Malbec to be very seakindly, dry, pointed well, tacked easily and in my estimation rode like a considerably larger boat. Very impressed."* Bob Taugner

"After sailing it three times I can say that it has met my expectations and desires. The sail area is relatively small and the boat does not feel overpowered in brisk wind. On one trip a guest was an experienced sailor who heeled it over so that the rail was almost in the water, and was impressed at the stability and stiffness. My chief fear in getting a centerboard boat was that it would give a rough and noisy ride in Chesapeake Bay's washing-machine chop. So far, that has not proved to be the case. The boat knifes through waves to a surprising degree, just like a big boat." David Brown.

"Boat is forgiving and very stable. For example, riding a 3-foot wake in heavy wind, barely got any spray to cockpit." Sue Bamford, 2018 *Blubird*.

Although she's not designed as an off-







ABOVE—Another color scheme, David Brown's boat *Windlass*.
RIGHT TOP—The handy lazarette with beefy backing plate for outboard.
RIGHT BOTTOM—The Malbec logo.

shore boat, we thought the Malbec felt plenty safe for her intended purpose of sailing lakes, bays and near-shore coastal cruising. Maybe most important was the 450-pounds of fixed ballast, but there were other more subtle features that inspired confidence as well. A fairly deep cockpit with stout stainless side rails, 7-inch wide non-skid side decks with 2-inch toe-rails, stainless cabintop grabrails, and a stainless bow pulpit, will help keep crew aboard.

The boom is fairly short and sets quite high, meaning it doesn't interfere with crew at all, and sail controls are easily accessed and operated—all things that will be appreciated during challenging conditions.

The cockpit is self-draining and features a 17.5-inch-high companionway sill to shield the cabin from potential flooding. And as a last line of defense, the Malbec includes enough foam to keep her afloat even if the worst should happen.

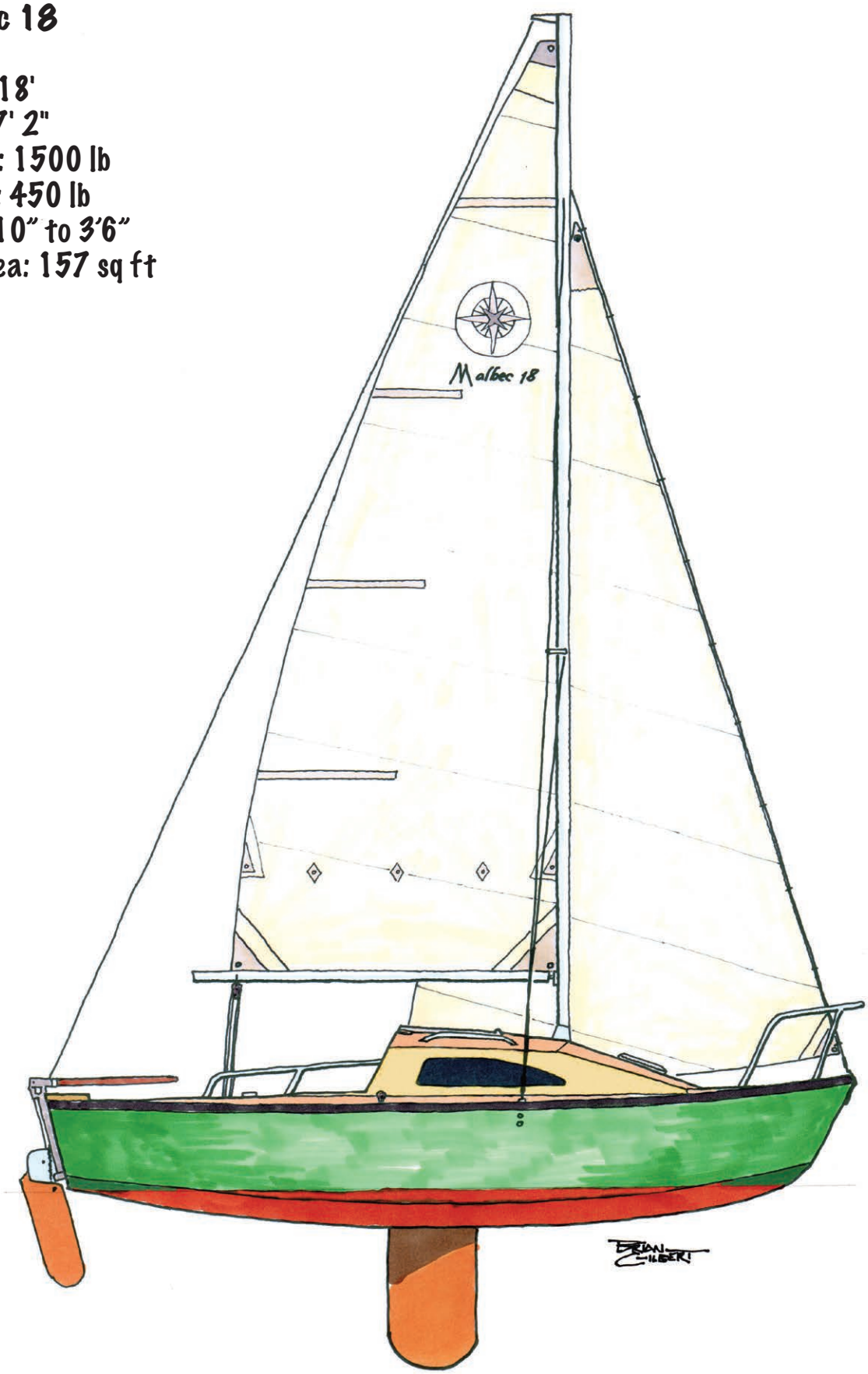
The Malbec does well on our SCA Seaworthiness Test, scoring 174.

ACCOMMODATIONS:
"While there may literally be room for four below deck, I can't imagine more than two sleeping there with even a modicum of comfort. Similarly, the cockpit would be very crowded with its advertised room for six. Four people, however, were comfortable. There end up being a lot of lines underfoot on the cockpit, which could use a couple more cleats." David Brown

We thought the Malbec cockpit was comfortable and well

Malbec 18

Lenth: 18'
Beam: 7' 2"
Weight: 1500 lb
Ballast: 450 lb
Draft: 10" to 3'6"
Sail Area: 157 sq ft





thought out, though we agree with owners that six people would too many unless the boat was at the dock. Cockpit stowage is limited to a reasonably generous (13" x 23") lazarette locker aft.

To its credit the design manages to mostly hide the centerboard, but the trunk does make an appearance in the center of the cockpit sole and in the after part of the cabin sole. In both cases Ken and Ventura Sport Boats did their best to make lemonade by using the surfaces effectively—in the cockpit as a platform for centerboard hardware and the mainsheet assembly, and in the cabin as a place to step—but it's a compromise, like everything else in boat design.

The Malbec doesn't break new ground in terms cabin layout, opting instead for the tried-and-true V-berth and pair of quarterberths. The V-berth is about 6 feet long, but the full cushioned-length from forward of V-berth to the aft end of the 19-inch-wide quarterberths is 14-feet long, so sleeping can be accomplished in various places. As owners suggest, four people overnighting would be snug unless some of them were kids or small adults, but that's true of most any 18-foot boat.

Overall headroom is a roomy 52-inches, giving a spacious feeling to the interior, however sitting headroom (berth cushion to cabin overhead) is only 32-inches—a little tight for taller crew trying to sit fully upright.

The center-aft portion of the V-berth is a filler board that, like on some other classic trailersailers, serves as a galley or chart table when slid up the compression post. It's a nice solution that makes good use of the post. There is plenty of stowage in lockers under berths and excellent ventilation options with the opening cabintop hatch forward.

There was no built-in cooking area on our review boat, but Ventura does offer an optional slide-out galley. There is space for a portable head just under the companionway on either side.

QUALITY:
"I'd say great construction for what Ventura wanted to achieve." Sue Bamford, 2018 *Blubird*.

Given Ken's experience building various production sailboats, it makes sense his new Malbec would be well-built—especially since he was able to use some of his favorite familiar components.

The hull itself is built from solid hand-laminate, but they also add a few nice touches as needed, like using Coosa Board, a very stiff, high-density structural foam core, to reinforce the transom.

The Malbec's hull-to-deck joint is especially secure as the raised toe-rail portion of the deck mold receives the hull side—something like a giant Tupperware container. The joint is chemically bonded with 3M 5200 and then thru-bolted for a mechanical bond as well. Finally the joint is fitted with a durable, flexible vinyl rubrail.

As mentioned, high-quality Ronstan hardware is used in most places. Through-bolts are finished with locknuts or rounded cap nuts and hardware is backed up with fender washers. The sails come from longtime small-boat special-



OPPOSITE—The Malbec is Potter-like, but also a little sleeker.
ABOVE—Ken Lange, left, and Sue Bamford giving the new boat her shakedown.

ists Elliott/Pattison Sailmakers.

COMPROMISES:
Other than the usual tradeoffs common to smaller boats—less cabin space, slower cruising speeds, etc.—Malbec owners and sailors had little to complain about. One owner pointed out the $23K advertised price is really for a stripped-down model, and that a well-outfitted version will be quite a bit more expensive.

One other compromise, at this point, is the fact that the Malbec is essentially a new design, so less is known about its strengths and weaknesses than long-established designs. But they appear to be off to a good start.

MODIFICIATIONS:
Because the boats are just hitting the market, we didn't hear about a lot of modifications yet. However, Sue Bamford mentioned adding a 50-watt solar panel with controller and additional battery. She also said she'd like to add winches for a larger headsail and one for the mast halyard.

Owner David Brown opted for virtually every factory option, including colored hull, deck, and sails; jib furler; custom trailer; 6 hp outboard motor; anchor and rode; teak table and shelves; electrical system with rechargeable battery and auto-tiller.

VALUE:
"The boat, especially with colored hull and wood trim topside, is unusually handsome. It has already drawn many compliments and turned many heads." David Brown

"I bought a West Wight Potter 14...but I've been looking for a little larger pocketcruiser which would also afford a minimal draft with the keel up, plus more room and speed. The Malbec 18 will fit the bill perfectly." Bob Taugner

New boats aren't cheap—regardless of the manufacturer—especially when you compare them to the mass of "plastic classics" on the market, but as the few remaining production small-boat builders will tell you, it costs a lot to build a new boat these days. But there's nothing quite like buying and outfitting a new boat—doing it your own way and knowing the boat's full and complete history. In the case of the Malbec it will cost you $25,000 to $35,000 or more depending on how many things you add.

Although the Malbec is new and plenty modern, in some ways her design is a throwback to the classic trailersailers of the 70s and 80s—a good all-round boat focused on family fun. For whatever reason, maybe the aforementioned used-boat saturation, of the few small-boat manufacturers who remain, most have focused on niche boats with very specific virtues or character. The Malbec 18 aims more for the center, where a good-sailing and stable boat with nice accommodations, shallow-draft beachability, and a fair price tag, ought to be extremely well-received. •*SCA*•