

J/99 - The winning compromise!

100 miles in a J/99, a dream mission for coming out of lockdown!

Above all, it's an opportunity to get a better understanding of this Johnston design that is as gifted at racing as it is cruising.



Under asymmetric spinnaker, the J/99 handles wonderfully to the great delight of the crew.

“THREE, TWO, ONE, go guys, it’s time for the photo shoot!” crackles the on-board VHF, whilst above the boat the deafening sound of a low-flying helicopter gives us the starting signal. Positioned to windward of the south-east coast of Ile d'Yeu, we swiftly hoist the genoa and power away on our first beam reach at over 8 knots. The disturbance created by the helicopter blades creates some impressive accelerations in the wind, to the extent that we ask the pilot to give us more room... A sequence of manoeuvres ensues without a hitch: hoisting, gybing and dumping of the asymmetric spinnaker before calmly launching onto a beat with a series of tacks. Even in double-handed configuration, the manoeuvres are blissfully smooth, despite gusts bordering on 20 knots, made easy by the modern deck layout, which is well optimised for shorthanded sailing. With the exception of lowering the chute in the breeze, which requires a little experience and the right technique, namely the use of a ‘retrieval line’, which is a line attached to the tack to bring it under the boom from the cockpit, everything is always easy aboard. The high-quality deck hardware is well-proportioned (Harken for the winches and tracks, Antal for the jammers and a Z spars mast foot block system) which means that the efforts required are always reasonable. Designed by Alan Johnston, the iconic American architect behind the success of the J Boat yard, the J/99 is the result of the brand’s desire to re-centre its sports range by making the most of a gap in the market between the J/88 and the J/111. This is not a pure one-design then, rather it is a boat that the Vendee-based yard offers with various options to suit the client’s aspirations.

Its credo: versatility, its ambition: efficiency when racing, whatever the class measurement selected (IRC, ORC, Osiris, etc.) and comfort in cruising mode. Indeed, when placing an order, prospective clients will be able to choose the option with ballast, a conventional fin keel (more geared around crewed racing) or a bulbed fin keel, a twin or single rudder, and even select the sail plan that best suits the upcoming sailing programme: the asymmetric with the sprit, or the good old symmetric spinnaker with a pole, the genoa on a furler... Other fit-outs geared around cruising will then be offered by the brand's network of dealers, such as a lazy-bag for the mainsail or additional stowage space and even a full-blown shower and wash basin area in the forepeak.

NOT LIMITING ONESELF TO THE TRANSQUADRA



The yard's ethos is to target a global market and not restrict itself to the Transquadra (sic). The hull, nipped in at the boat's aft sections, is slightly narrower at the bow to slip through the water, the main beam being shifted aft. These architectural choices make her beamier and more voluminous at the waterline than the range's average models. This is notably the case if we compare her to the J/97, which is closest to the J/99 in terms of size and programme. The use of the volume was intended to be moderate compared to its main rivals like the JPK 10.30 and the Sun Fast 3300 released in 2019. These are through-and-through racers, which display a great deal of power and whose performance appears to be unbeatable on a reach, especially in breezy conditions. Though the J/99 is more reasonable in her design, this is to ensure she can perform well upwind, in both light airs and a good breeze, whilst retaining an excellent VMG on single downwind tacks.



Tensioning up the mainsail halyard makes the manoeuvre more fluid, especially in choppy conditions.



A short 100-mile sprint for this post-lockdown sea trial along a triangular course between Les Sables d'Olonne and Port-Joinville, with a big circumnavigation of Ile d'Yeu to boot.



“Under gennaker, we skim past the Pointe des Corbeaux headland.”

Broadly speaking, it's about trying to find sufficiently low angles of descent whilst maintaining speed. It's also about maximising stability on every point of sail to obtain a fast sailboat, that is always seaworthy and safe, both when cruising and racing.

In fact, stability is just what we're going to need, since for these 100 post-lockdown miles, all the planets are perfectly aligned with a good fifteen knots or so of north-easterly breeze accompanied by a summer sun. The perfect conditions for putting pedal to the metal over a triangular sailing course between Les Sables d'Olonne and the Ile d'Yeu. We set sail on Space Jockey, a brand new J/99 belonging to a Russian sailor and unconditional J boat fan. When the valiant team from Voile Magazine set foot aboard, the provisions, already organised by J Composites' marketing manager, Frederic Bouvier, were easy to fit into the deep galley fridge (90 litres), behind the saloon's bench seats and in the fabric pockets installed along the internal hull side.

A FANTASTIC SAIL WARDROBE!

Our skipper knows the boat like the back of his hand and his experience as a racer is a real bonus when responding to all our technical questions. However, it's already time to cast off for Ile d'Yeu, an island some 30 miles away. In the long channel out from Les Sables, we prepare the sails with a view to a long stretch of flat-out downwind sailing. The set of sails manufactured by Technique Voile with Fred Duthil, an emeritus Figaro sailor, is fantastic: the mainsail and genoa are made from a translucent black membrane to great effect! Between Les Nouch, which frame the entrance to the Vendee port, we hoist the sails and then immediately set the large asymmetric spinnaker. The acceleration is dazzling and the miles are devoured at an average of nearly 10 knots without ever having the impression of forcing the machine: it's magical! Nevertheless, at the tiller, you really have to focus to avoid broaching in this little force 5 punctuated by warm puffs of air as we slip along at pace with between 100 and 110° of apparent wind.

For all that, she is disconcertingly gentle and thrilling to helm. It has to be said that the bulb keel (2m water draught, a cast iron fin and a lead wedge bulb) and the single rudder with its deep blade are a real guarantee of stability! In the end, with the north-easterly gradually heading us as we approach our destination – the building thermal breeze causing the synoptic wind to back -, we decide to round off this first passage by hoisting the gennaker on its furler. There are no major difficulties here either, provided that you check the furler cable properly. With this flatter headsail, we can come up to the wind whilst remaining in complete control at the helm. The mainsheet, the fine-tune, the backstay line and the sail track fine-tune system all lead back to the helmsman, without causing any kind of bottleneck of lines on the cockpit sole. A sure sign of great deck ergonomics. Between 60 and 80° to the wind, bound for the east coast of the Ile d'Yeu, we take it in turns at the helm, beaming from ear to ear. The boat sails fast and well, what more could you ask for? A bit of shade maybe, so scorching is the sun in this late afternoon on our seriously 'lockdowned' skin... It's beneath the incensed gaze of some seagulls, surprised to see Homo sapiens taking back ownership of their waters, that we come alongside in Port-Joinville. Manoeuvring the boat between the floating pontoons is pretty effortless: long live the single rudder! However, you will have to take care with the folding propeller, which can play up if you shift from forward motion to reverse too quickly...



Once you're aware of this, the J/99 handles like a dream. Even though the boat is equipped with a pressurised water system and a flexible 100-litre freshwater tank, you have to shower on the pontoon or in the toilet block. However, there's nothing to stop you installing a hot-water tank – removable for racers – in the forepeak, in association with a cockpit shower for added comfort. The wide T-shaped cockpit on the J/99, makes for a refined and open stern, which is as well suited to manoeuvring in race format as it is lounging. At sea, the moulded foot chocks in the deck enable the helmsman and crew in charge of the mainsail to remain firmly wedged into position, even upwind in breezy conditions. This experience held true during our return delivery trip in a meaty north-easterly wind combined with an unpleasant chop picked up by what is a rather shallow navigation zone between Ile d'Yeu and mainland France.

A PROPER STOWAGE AREA

For now though, let's get down to the matter of mealtimes. Yes, it's a hard life on this dreamy 100-miles... The L-shaped stowage area, which is fairly ubiquitous for wedging yourself into on a heel, is worthy of a cruiser with various stowage options, a three-shelf fridge, a sink and a gimballed, two-burner gas cooker. One slight flaw is that the latter is sited too low down, which is back-breaking when cooking... 15 minutes later we're settled around the saloon table savouring a delicious carbonara washed down with a good bottle of burgundy. The aluminium keel-stepped mast – preferable to the more expensive and sometimes overly stiff carbon mast for a boat of this size – takes up a fair amount of room, but for all that the atmosphere remains cosy and bright thanks to the two large side lights and the presence of two rows of LED ceiling lights. There's plenty of room for the three of us and an abundance of conversation. We learn direct from Fred that the yard has put a great deal of thought into the interior fit-out to come up with as low a weight estimate as possible, without encroaching on the quality of life down below.



It's a compromise that's hard to achieve, but they've found a way around it by reducing the use of solid wood as much as possible (with the exception of the moabi toe rails),

systematically replacing it with machined plywood. Ultimately, the joinery is no heavier than moulded plastic but visually it is much more aesthetically pleasing. With our bellies full, we move over to the chart table to prepare the next day's anchorages. Situated to starboard, the latter boasts what are still honest dimensions in the age of electronic cartography. The seat is comfortable with good stowage, which is useful for small items. As for the distribution board, it's part of the current climate as it is both modern and functional, with the added benefit of a twin USB port to recharge electric gadgets. With regards to batteries, two come as standard: one 100Ah for house and a 70Ah for engine start (one Volvo 20hp saildrive). They'll certainly see you coming.

AN EFFICIENT GENNAKER

Worn out by this very hot day, we're eager to climb into our bunks. In an act of self-sacrifice, I sleep in the saloon, whilst my two associates enjoy the two spacious aft cabins, each with their own sizeable wardrobe. There's room for my things in a large locker located under the bunk. Up forward, there's no room for berths as the forepeak contains a heads compartment as well as a large sail locker with access to the deck via an opening hatch.

Given the nocturnal snoring, the berths seem to be fit for purpose! At 07:30hrs, the alarm goes off and outside the sun is already shining. We just have time to snatch breakfast and we're back out there exploring the anchorages along the south coast of Ile d'Yeu. We decide to hoist the gennaker again. This time, the sail proves to be highly propulsive, despite the flat calm settling in the closer we get to the Pointe des Corbeaux.



"Les Soux cove gave us a chance to sample the delights of anchoring"

It's Les Soux cove that finally grabs our attention - a pretty little sandy bay surrounded by loose stones forming a natural breakwater. With the sprit option, dropping anchor does require a bit of preparation however. In fact, it is necessary to have a preventer line off the end of the bowsprit to stop the chain chafing against the bow during the evasive action. With its light FOB anchor and its 5 metres of chain with a ballasted line, we won't be moving for

the rest of the day, a fact that enables us to calmly take in the delights of the anchorage. A removable cockpit table would have provided even greater comfort. As such, when cruising, it would be good to remember to put one aboard. The icing on the cake: paddleboarders powered by some of the island's youngsters take it in turns to give us a very warm welcome... Getting up at the crack of dawn the following day, we make the most of the beautiful morning colours and the end of the night's thermal breeze to make for Les Sables. All it takes is two tacks at an average speed in excess of 8 knots to round off this charmed sea trial in style, on a sailboat that looks set to have a bright future.

For anyone who still has some doubts: fast cruising is great!



IN FIGURES...

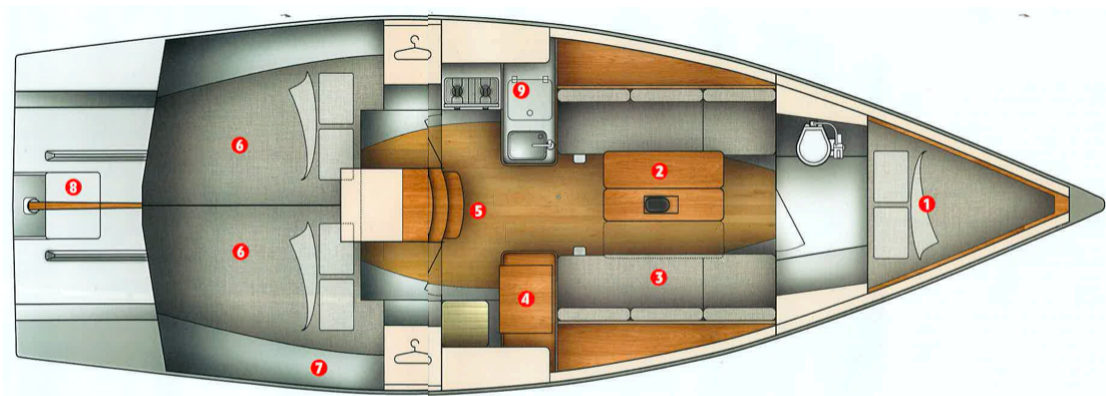
HULL LENGTH	9.94m
WATERLINE LENGTH	8.80m
BEAM	3.40m
WATER DRAUGHT	2m (bulb keel), 2.10m (flat bulb)
DISPLACEMENT	3,850kg
BALLAST	1,580kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA	65m ²
MAINSAIL	35m ²
GENOA	30m ²
ASYMMETRIC SPINNAKER	105m ²
SYMMETRIC SPINNAKER	90m ²
MATERIAL	glass foam-balsa/ vinylester resin sandwich

CONSTRUCTION	infusion
MOTORISATION	20hp Volvo D120
FUEL TANK	50l
WATER TANK	100l
ARCHITECT	Alan Johnston
CONSTRUCTOR	J Composites
CE CATEGORY	A for 6 persons
BENCHMARK PRICE	€137,000
TEST BOAT PRICE	€205,000

Main options

Conventional fin keel: €4,830, twin rudder system: €3,400, jib furler: €2,630, flip-up pilot berths in the saloon: €2,010, foldaway cleats: €1,060...

The J/99 in 9 points



“There’s nothing to choose between these aft cabins and those on an out-and-out cruising boat.”

1. The forepeak measures 1.70m wide at the shoulders by 1.90m long.
2. The saloon’s drop-leaf table measures 0.92 x 0.80m.
3. The saloon bench seats measure 1.93m long and 0.60m wide,
4. Chart table: 0.76m wide by 0.45m long.
5. The headroom at the bottom of the companionway equates to 1.78m.
6. In the aft cabins, the twin berths measure: 1.10m wide by 1.93m long.
7. The maximum width of the gangways is 0.68m.
8. The cockpit at the mainsail traveller measures 1.95m wide.
9. The L-shaped galley features a 0.70m worktop and a sink measuring 0.30 by 0.25m.

The fabric pockets, which run the length of the bunks, mean that there is plenty of room for additional stowage.



These spacious twin cabins have good headroom and a fair-sized wardrobe at the entrance to the berths. The quality of the foam is rather good.



The galley features various stowage space (shelving up high, cupboard under the sink and an oddments cupboard), a gas cooker with two burners (optional oven) and a 90-litre fridge.

In the forepeak is the heads with more stowage area for sails, tender, lines, etc.



Comfort surrounds this fine chart table. Practical ceiling-mounted red light.

THE J/99 COMPARED WITH HER RIVALS

Model	J/99	JPk 1030	Sun Fast 3300	Grand Soleil 34
HULL LENGTH	9.94m	10.34m	9.99m	10.70m
BEAM	3.40m	3.24m	3.40m	3.60m
WATER DRAUGHT	2m	1.98m	1.95m	2.18m
DISPLACEMENT	3,850kg	3,600kg	3,500kg	4,900kg
UPWIND SAIL AREA	65m ²	60m ²	60m ²	71m ²
IRC COEFFICIENT	1.013	1.022	1.026	1.020
ARCHITECT(S)	Alan Johnston	Julien Valer	Andrieu/Verdier	Skyron
MATERIAL	Balsa-foam sand.	Glass/Airax sand.	Glass/foam sand.	Glass/PVC sand.
CONSTRUCTOR	J Composites	JPk Composites	Jeanneau	Del Pardo
BENCHMARK PRICE	€ 137,000	€ 135,900	€ 132,000	€ 170,000

Voile Magazine's opinion. The first release in the family of new IRCs, the J/99 is highly versatile. Less extreme than her two direct rivals on the IRC circuit, the Sun Fast 3300 and the JPK 10.30, the J/99 remains in the same price range and comes with a number of options.

The J/99 in build



It took barely a week to complete a brand new J/99 prior to the start of the health crisis. J Composites has long been an infusion expert and the organisation of the work is a reference in the marine industry. No fewer than 50 craft have already come onto the market since the launch of this new model in 2019. Twenty more J/99s have already been added to the yard's order book. It has to be said that the build process – precision infusion to retain the excellent strength/weight ratio – and the quality of the Js' finish is well established. Indeed, it combines

a glass fibre, foam-balsa, vinylester resin sandwich for the hull and a glass fibre, foam, polyester resin sandwich for the deck. Both sections, along with the bulkheads, all of which are structural, are covered in a very hardwearing methacrylate bonding. She's sturdily built making her suitable for all conditions and selling on at a later date.

Thumbs up... and elements up for review!

Practical

- The aluminium mast is a custom extrusion for the J/99 featuring a versatile track:
- A groove for a mainsail with a bolt rope or captive slide according to the owner's wishes.
- The genoa fine-tuning system is designed with a multidirectional attachment point.
- The saloon is packed with small stowage areas, beneath the berths and behind the seat backs.
- To avoid cluttering up the cockpit with rope, you pass it through the porthole of the aft cabins.
- The large open cockpit on the J/99 fits the bill: the foot chocks provide stability for the crew and the mainsheet fine-tune systems lead back to the helmsman.
- The foldaway cleats are a real bonus: in port you raise them and at sea you lower them to avoid hooking up sheets and other running rigging.
- The soft-loops to bang on the halyards are great: a simple soft shackle with Velcro and a composite sheave sold by Equiplite.
- Despite limited room to access the anchor locker, it has a good stowage capacity for ground tackle, warps and small fenders.
- Everything is designed to last on the J/99, like the XXL struts on each stanchion.
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Not practical

- It lacks a grab rail on the forward section of the saloon to access the forepeak.
 - To cook, you have to double over; the gas cooker is too low.
 - The edge of the companionway door is a little aggressive on the legs when going up on deck
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A Volvo with real punch!

Our boat was equipped with a 20hp Volvo D120 saildrive engine equipped with a folding Ufle twin blade propeller. It seemed to us to be sufficiently powerful during our trial (4.5 knots at low speed, 1,700 rpm, 6.5 knots at cruising speed, 2,200 rpm). Access to the engine is easy via a tilting hatch in the companionway. We didn't notice any residue in the bilge or any bad odours in the cabins during our trial. However, water mixed with rust from the exchanger had a tendency to be spat out again by the engine cooling system upon ignition. A point to watch out for!

Console

CAPACITY OF FUEL TANK 50 litres

RANGE IN CRUISING SPEED 20 hours

Speed

CRUISING SPEED 1,700rpm 4.5 knots

MAX. SPEED 2,200rpm 6.5 knots

Noise levels (in dB)

COCKPIT

AFT CABIN

SALOON

FOREPEAK