



At last we have had the opportunity to visit some yards in the Far East, one of them the LaFitte facility leased from the Chung Hwa yard in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan, Republic of China (R.O.C.). Before going into a detailed description of the LaFitte 44 it seems appropriate to set down some of our opinions and observations concerning the quality of Taiwanese boat building, since an earlier article on Taiwan in *Nautical Quarterly* 10 is now

somewhat dated. The LaFitte 44 is an excellent vehicle for these remarks, since it represents the exact opposite of what many yachtsmen associate with Far East construction.

During the Vietnamese war, Taiwan was a major U.S. logistics base and R and R area. Before the 1960s, while there were numerous boat builders on the island, they were building only fishing vessels and small craft in wood and steel. Seeing the opportunity to acquire a cheap yacht, many servicemen

commissioned these yards to build boats for them that were then shipped, and sometimes sailed, back to the States. Local government subsequently commissioned some of these yards to build small patrol craft and harbor launches in fiberglass. This initial yacht-building activity attracted the attention of opportunists, mostly Americans with an eye for the fast buck and an almost universal ignorance of good yacht construction and design techniques. Their idea of a product was to make it big and give it lots of ginger-

bread. The designs submitted for construction were short on vital detail, and the men themselves were too unsophisticated to supply the judgment and skill necessary to the creation of so complex an object as a yacht. Communication with the Chinese, both linguistic and cultural, was difficult. The result was a generation of "floating outhouses" which couldn't sail out of their own way and were often full of green wood and low-grade ply that rapidly turned them into seagoing shower baths. The Chinese should bear little

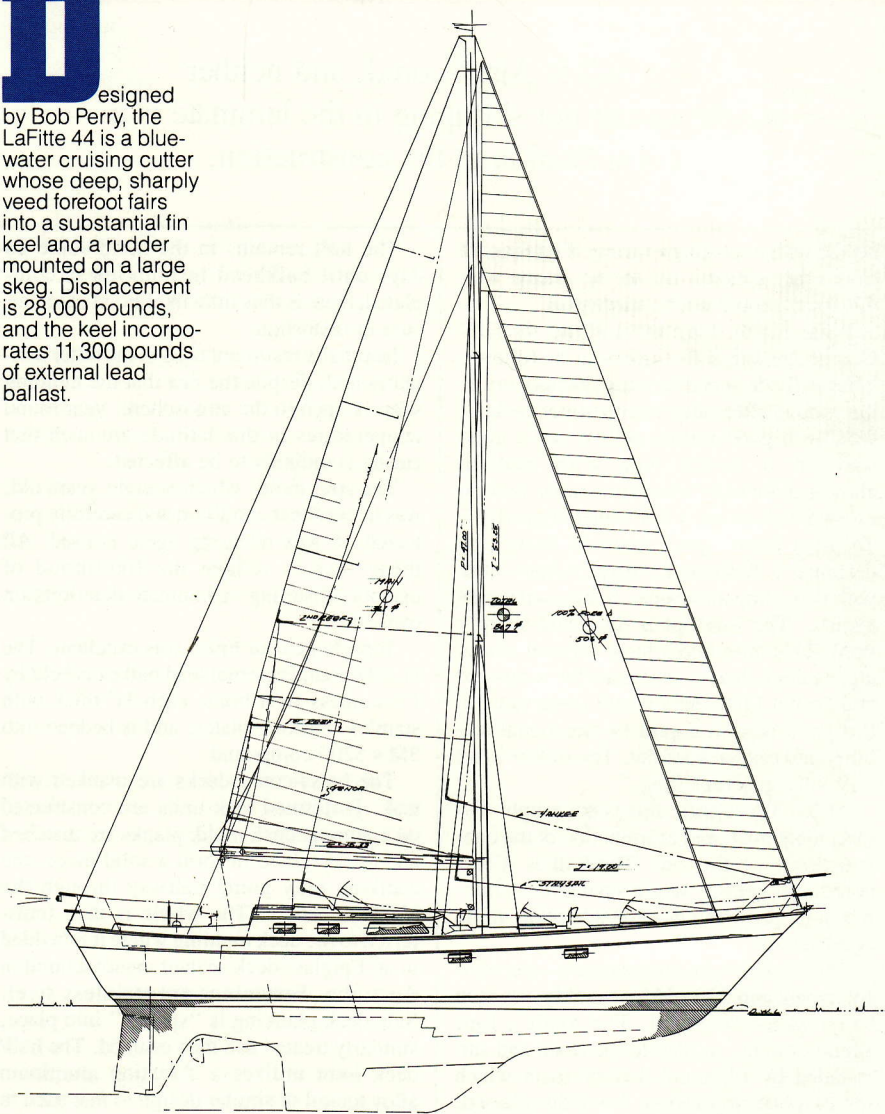
blame for this situation. Firstly, as a result of the animosity and, indeed, declared state of war between the R.O.C. and mainland Red China, yachting was not and is not permitted around the shores of Taiwan. Therefore, little understanding of the requirements for a sound seagoing yacht exists. The Taiwanese could not have been expected to have assimilated, almost overnight, technical skills which the early entrepreneur did not himself know well enough to teach his workforce.

Although much has changed in the last 20 years, it is only during the '70s and '80s that serious effort has been made by a dedicated few to help the Chinese modernize and upgrade their production. In this exercise, given the right guidance, they are proving highly successful. That there is still no yachting as such on the island continues to inhibit the growth of an indigenous design group, and while technical engineering training in modern marine plastics construction is missing from naval engineering and architectural courses at the universities in Taiwan, there is no doubt that considerable aptitude exists for the technical skills involved. Within the labor force there is ample evidence of natural bent for the construction work involved, particularly in the woodworking trades, at which Chinese workers excel.

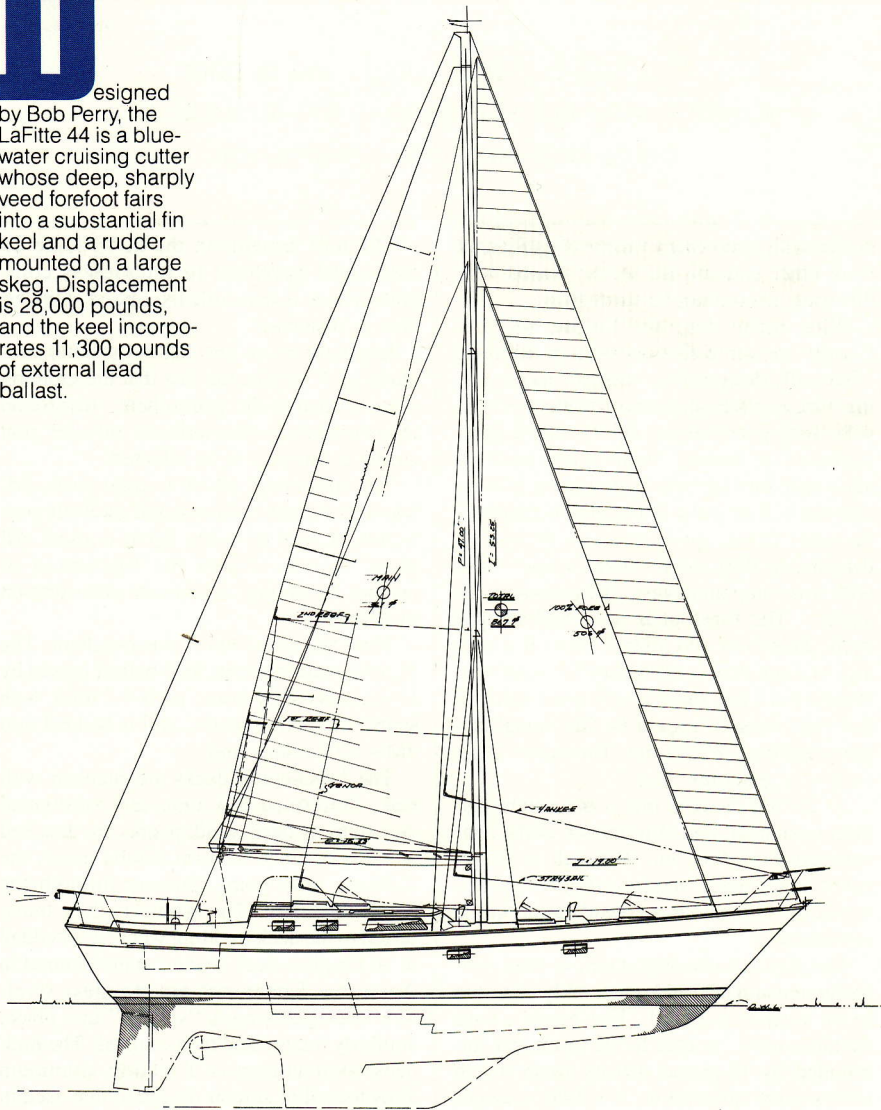
Fortunately the new generation of Western owners and managers has come to recognize the truth of the old adage that "you only get out what you put in." These men, of whom George Olivit of LaFitte is one, and others whom we shall introduce in subsequent surveys, are the very antithesis of the early opportunists; they are experienced seamen and skilled fiberglass construction engineers, and they possess an equal drive to impart their knowledge to others and the ability to supervise a workforce.

A second point involved in the turnaround of Taiwanese yachtbuilding practice is the recognition of the importance that "face" plays in Eastern social arrangements. In one respect we are all subject to this, and should appreciate that a Chinese in his own land quite naturally prefers to be directed by another Chinese. Genuine workforce loyalty and dedication is an extremely important factor in the equation. While it would be foolish to suggest that a worker in a Taiwan yachtbuilding yard is any less interested in financial reward than his Western brother, his pride in workmanship and sensitivity to praise and/or criticism is undoubtedly higher. To overcome the administrative problem, therefore, it is necessary that a very close personal relationship be developed between the owner or representative of the primary exporting company and the Chinese factory manager and product inspector who must work closely with the exporter to

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insure that work is performed in accordance with design specifications and high quality-control standards. To understand the Chinese, to make an effort with the language, and to learn to live comfortably among them are essential attributes for good management of a Taiwanese venture. George Olivit has made it part of his business to succeed in all three.

In 1976 he was contacted by a group of young men who had the dream of building a really superior high-performance cruising yacht in Taiwan. He accepted this exciting challenge, and went north to sit down with Bob Perry and work out the design specifications. In his own words Perry comments, "Each time I design a new yacht, I go through a number of phases in my acclimation to the new design. I like it, then I don't like it. Then I like it again, then I don't. I am happy to say that, in the end, I usually end up liking the design. In the case of design No. 100 I have liked it from the start." Perry's design No. 100 was the LaFitte 44.

Armed with these designs, George and his associates went to Taiwan and researched suitable builders. The decision was reached to contract with the Chung Hwa yard in Kaohsiung. Almost at the beginning they met and made friends with a young Chinese, Chuck Chen, who spoke excellent English, was well educated and ambitious, and before long had become George's Chinese mentor. Since then, Chuck has been continuously employed by LaFitte in Taiwan and is responsible for quality control.

He and George are good business partners and firm friends. In the past year, the building of the 44s has been shifted from the Chung Hwa yard to a separate facility. This new yard, which lies within a government-controlled export processing zone, is run by Lin Kao Suey, who has been involved with LaFitte since production began.

On the subject of personnel, we were delighted to discover that the Office Manager in the LaFitte Yachts office in Costa Mesa, California, from whence George manages the affairs of the company when not in Taiwan, is Pat Sachs, a daughter-in-law of Uffa Fox. She lived for some time with "The Old Man" while her husband, his stepson, was working with him in the design office. Pat, who has been associated with the yachting world for many years, is thus a valuable asset.

One curiosity in the history of this admirable yacht involves its name. Why LaFitte? It seems that, during the early days of the company, the directors were sitting around a table celebrating the birth of a son to one of their number. On the table were several bottles of Château LaFite, and in recognition of the quality of this fine wine its name was unanimously voted suitable for a vessel that would aspire to equal excellence. The trou-



ble was that the amount of wine imbibed must have been responsible for double vision; when the name appeared in print it had been endowed with two "t's!"

Before getting down to serious analysis of the LaFitte 44, a thumbnail sketch of the company history is in order. Since its launching in 1976 as a product of a company named Pacific Far East Industries, the LaFitte 44 has changed little from the original Perry design. It has been the only boat built (the first LaFitte 66 is nearing completion), being gradually modified and upgraded over the years. And it has been rather a success; hull No. 51 is now in the mold. Michael Lewis, the original President, now builds airplanes. In 1980 the company was sold to Fleming Industries, a lumber consortium. The name was changed to LaFitte Yachts, Inc. As is so often the case in the yachting industry, owners fall in love with their products and, Mr. Fleming, no exception, decided to take off round the world in one of his 44s. Coincidentally, cruising sailor and old Dragon skipper from the Great Lakes, Bernie Wahl, along with his wife Glenn, were negotiating for the first LaFitte 66, which was then on the drawing boards. They had sailed in and much admired the 44. In February of 1983 they bought the company. They are an enthusiastic yachting couple of long experience, both involved personally and determined to prove that a really first-class yacht can be built in Taiwan. Unlike some of their predecessors, their objective is not to build a yacht that is cheaper than its American or European counterpart, but to build one of equivalent price which is better. Their approach is to put into the vessel, from savings in labor costs, the best equipment to be found.

With the continuity and quality of production already established by George Olivit, Chuck Chen and Lin Kao Suey, (and the advantages of operating out of an Export Control Zone, which reduces administrative costs as well as simplifying the red tape con-

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nected with importing a variety of equipment from other nations) we see no reason why this route should not be successful.

What niche does the LaFitte 44 fill? George answered this question as follows: "Basically designed for long-distance cruising with an after cabin but no center cockpit; stiff, with good sailing ability, and a good seaboat; a strong boat with built-in allowance for high bottom pressures, bolt-on external ballast and a low center of gravity." To meet these specifications Perry has designed a flush-deck, after-cockpit cutter with two companionways. In his own words again, "The forefoot is deep and sharply veed. This fair into a large fin keel whose area is more than is necessary for windward ability; but I feel there is still some value in this extra area in regard to directional stability and ease of haul-out. The rudder is set on a very generous skeg."

At 28,000 pounds, this is not a light-displacement boat, and examination of the construction bore this out. The hull is Airex-cored, and neither weight saving nor skimping in the laminate is a consideration in the construction.

The skeg has a healthy stainless-steel reinforcement and the rudder assembly was seen to be well-conceived. The blade's four stainless webs, welded to the stock and surrounded by 12-pound density foam which resists water absorption, is solidly glassed. The 2" Aquamat stock has a heavy heel bearing. The skeg height, well above keel base to obviate danger from grounding, carries a heavy bronze heel fitting.

The hull remains in the mold some 28 days until bulkhead installation is completed; there is thus little likelihood of undercure or distortion.

Isophthalic resins are used in the outer laminates and, despite the fact that the molding shop is open to the atmosphere, year-round temperatures in this latitude are such that curing is unlikely to be affected.

The split mold, which is eight years old, was in excellent condition and carefully protected. A wax releasing agent is used. All these factors reduce the likelihood of osmotic blistering or laminate deterioration over time.

Topside gelcoat finish was excellent. The 11,300-pound external lead ballast is held by 13 stainless-steel bolts, each 3/4" thick with stainless backing plates, and is bedded into 3M's 5200 compound.

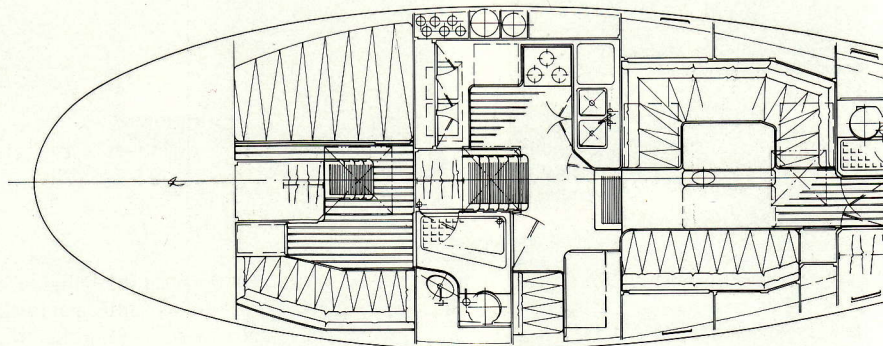
The balsa-cored decks are planked with teak. Preformed teak units are constructed on a dummy deck mold; planks are matched and epoxy glued to form a solid piece, the caulking only going halfway through the plank thickness. The whole is then transferred to the deck molding where it is bedded in an Epi-glass deck sealant manufactured in Australia. Fastenings are stainless steel. Side deck planking is "sprung" into place, similarly treated and then caulked. The hull/deck joint utilizes a T-section aluminum alloy toerail of similar design to that used in the C & C custom shop, and is bedded in 3M 5200 with 5/16" stainless bolts at 2 1/2" centers.

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he LaFitte 44's arrangement plan shows overnight cabins fore and aft, the after cabin with its own companionway, and generous day space amidships, with galley and navigator's desk adjacent to the main-cabin companionway, and with ample seating around a table with two dropleaves.

LOA: 44'4-1/2"
LWL: 35'5-3/4"
Beam: 12'8"
Draft: 6'4"
Shoal Draft: 5'4"
Sail area: 927 sq.ft.
Ballast: 11,300 pounds of external lead
Displacement: 28,000 pounds
Fuel: 130 gallons
Water: 160 gallons
Power: 62-hp Perkins 4-154 diesel
Spars: Aluminum
Hull: Hand layup fiberglass with 3/4" Airex core
Designer: Robert Perry
Builder: LaFitte Yachts Inc., Route 1, Box 536-AA, Grasonville, MD 21638 and 878 W 18th St, Costa Mesa, CA 92627.



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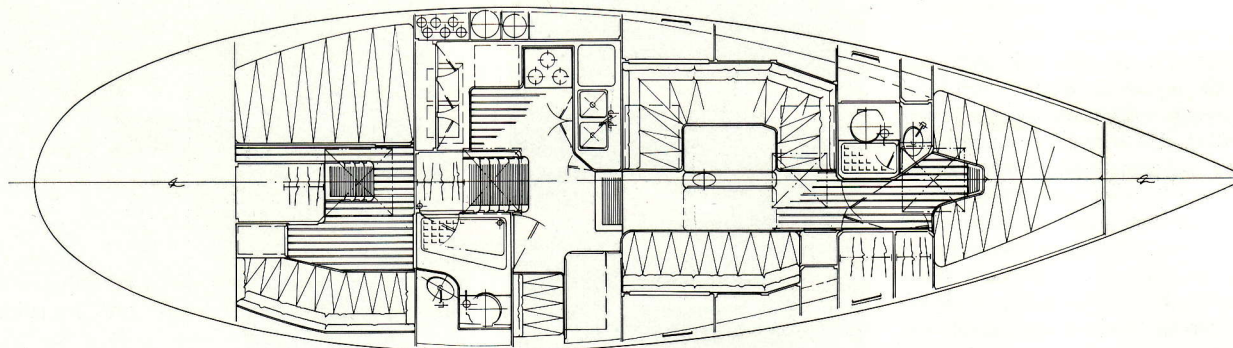
stituting for holly in cabin soles. The wood used is kiln dried, and Rovane H₂ moisture meter tests showed it to be considerably drier than the naturally seasoned timber found in other factories. As the humidity tends to be high anyway in these areas, this was not surprising.

The finish of the interior joinery was unusual; varnish is not used. A two-part epoxy sealer is applied and the wood is then sanded to about 600-grit; a Rattan two-part sealer is then painted on and a finish of high gloss is finally achieved by waxing and sanding. A German herbal oil is chosen for polishing. The effect is very pleasing. A mix of solid timber and laminates is found in the joinery, which is executed by Mr. Fu Chen, master carpenter. He performs with a magnificent set of traditional tools such as might be found in the Williamsburg craft museum. His is the most consummate workmanship we have seen anywhere. Teak gratings were solid, and mortise joints virtually invisible. A helper armed with a feather duster kept the shop clean!

Our next pleasant surprise was to find the electrical circuitry, usually a weakness in Far East construction, amongst the best we have seen. It is run in PVC conduits the length of the vessel at deck level, with a color-coded and numbered junction box of magnificent proportion together with a circuit diagram on the back panel identifying every circuit.

George is a practical sailor and engineer. His approach to the problems which beset an owner-maintainer are therefore very sound. This is borne out by the service manual which accompanies every LaFitte 44. Detail on all installed systems, general maintenance, rigging instruction, etc., are all invaluable to an owner or a service yard.

Still on electrics and electronics, a heavy SSB grounding system is built into the hull laminate. All electronics including refrigeration are owner's choice, but decisions must be made in time to include arrangements and wiring in primary construction.





The cold box insulation was, again, amongst the best we have seen, and the top opening boasted a double layer seal for its 5"-thick insulation.

Engineering was entirely satisfactory with the exception that, in our opinion, mounting a generator athwartships in the lazarette is a mistake. Machinery and sails, cordage, etc., are not good bedfellows. Operation is limited to 15° of heel owing to oil level, and we feel that an engine-driven generator is preferable in a vessel of this size if 110 power is regarded by an owner as a "must" at sea. We freely admit that we are old-fashioned enough to consider that those who cannot do without the comforts of a condominium should stay ashore!

Notwithstanding this comment, it was our observation that the construction and fitting-out of this yacht was indeed well above average. The Perkins 4-154, a 62-hp diesel, has recently been substituted for the Peugeot originally used in the 44s, not necessarily because it is considered a better engine, but mainly due to something Mr. Fleming discovered during his circumnavigation: mechanics worldwide know this engine, and spares are available almost everywhere. Bearing in mind the distance-cruising role for which this boat is designed and furnished, we concur with this reasoning.

As concerns the variety of installed equip-

ment, since the company puts out a very detailed specification list, we will not waste valuable space on it except to comment that every item is chosen primarily for its exceptional quality.

Before going on to the sea trial, which took place out of Newport Beach, California (enroute to Taiwan), a word or two on the interior. While we agree with the builders that it is indeed a good layout for ocean cruising, we feel it reflects traditional ideals of the agile who have not yet had to consider the limitations of stiffening "moving parts." The features of double entry and flush deck result in two steep and deep ladders which are not easily negotiated. This is especially true forward, where the ladder brings you up onto the coachroof under the boom. The deck handrails here are low, so that one steps out in an off-balance crouch which is not good posture in a seaway. We recommend raising these rails to about 27" height.

Privacy in the after cabin is limited, and its space is broken up by the ladder. For our taste we would also like to find a portlight incorporated over the bunk for a greater feel of "lebensraum." Forward, the V-berth is too high for ease of access, and we found both forward and after heads "tight," particularly for showering.

The after engine access through the base of the hanging locker is also a bit dicey since

shoes and dresses, etc., must first be removed, possibly with oily fingers! In short, one senses in this otherwise excellent vessel a tendency to put a quart into a pint pot. We must emphasize, however, that this is very much a personal opinion, and there is ample opportunity for owners to adjust these matters to individual preference.

We do not seem to have much luck with contriving exacting weather conditions so as to put boats through their paces. After a magnificent achievement by the Costa Mesa staff in re-rigging the trial boat, which had just been trucked in from its final boat show, we motored out into a mild and wonderfully sunny Pacific afternoon—in December, yet. Seals basked on the bell buoy and the wind was out of the west at about 8 to 10 knots, conditions that made it difficult to find fault with any yacht that one was fortunate enough to be aboard. We will try to be objective. Under power the boat moves very well, quick on the helm, tracks well and literally spins in her own length. With control astern effective, turns can be made and direction maintained. Engine vibration was excessive, but she was found to have a shaft alignment problem as a result of transcontinental trucking previously mentioned. A very effective, and award-winning, Baryfol acoustic shielding material is used. We liked the pedestal-mounted single lever Morse control. Vis-



Perfect joinerwork in teak, Philippine mahogany and inoke is in evidence in galley cabinets and other joinerwork and paneling aboard

the LaFitte 44. The stove is a four-burner Mariner with oven/broiler, and refrigeration is Grunert equipment, both good examples of quality Western systems and machinery incorporated into a Far Eastern yacht.

ibility was excellent from the helmsman's position. The "T" cockpit was of sound sea-going design. Under Yankee, staysail and main, well-cut cruising sails by Thurston of Warren, R.I., sail handling was simple and efficient. We would like to see stowage arrangements for the inevitable spaghetti of sheets that end up in the cockpit. Under the conditions experienced, she handled like a dinghy, light as a feather on the wheel, plenty of feel and good directional stability. Set her up, lock the wheel and relish it. While we did not have the experience of heavy weather we did have that urgent tug to head westward and just go. Unfortunately, time dictated that our passage to Taiwan would be by air.

LaFitte has facilities on the East Coast and West Coast of the United States. Either one of them would be pleased to demonstrate the characteristics that make the 44 a vessel in which the reader would find for himself the aspects of high quality and performance that we found. She represents a fine example of what good personnel relationships, experience, skill and patient training can evoke from Chinese workmanship. This, joined to first-class design by Bob Perry, and an equipment list filled by ranking international equipment suppliers, puts the LaFitte 44 among the best distance-cruising machines on the market.