

Tartan 31

The newest version of the 31 has been “Piperized,” and is a well-equipped mid-range cruiser.

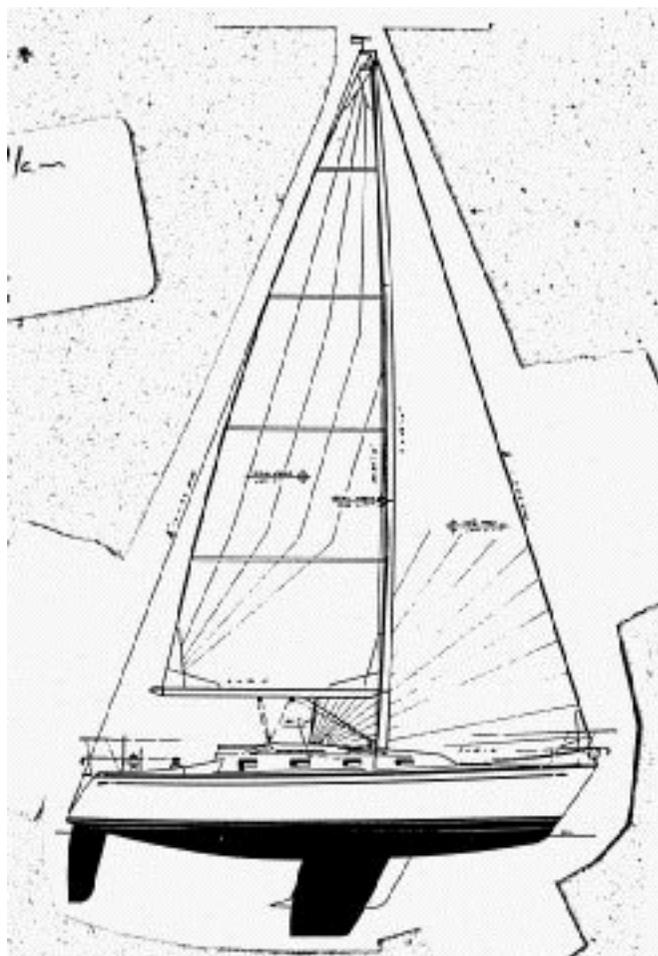
The Tartan 31 is one of the new line of performance cruising yachts from the venerable—and durable—Grand River, Ohio boatbuilder. In the last few years, Tartan Marine has come out with a range of new models, including the T-28, the 3500 and the 4600. A 41-footer is in the works. Both the 28 and the latest version of the 31 are part of the new Piper series, which are marketed in sailaway condition.

The Boat and the Builder

Tartan, now a division of NavStar, has come along way since its early days as one of the pioneer manufacturers of fiberglass auxiliary sailboats. In 1980, Tartan was Douglass and McLeod Plastics, formed by Charlie Britton, among others, to build the now-classic Tartan 27 centerboarder from Sparkman & Stephens. The first hull was produced in 1961, the last in 1980 for a total of 712—approximately 700 more than Britton’s initial expectation.

During that run, Tartan took its place as one of the major auxiliary builders in America, competing almost on a model-by-model basis with Cal, Pearson and, later, Catalina in producing mid-range cruisable sailing yachts. Tartan also has seen its share of troubles, from a serious plant fire in 1971, through ownership upheavals in the 1980s, and even a brush with voluntary bankruptcy in 1990 when the company shut down for three months. Under NavStar, which also markets the Thomas line of sailboats, Tartan has bounced back and retains unusually strong loyalty among its customers.

By 1991, company sales were outstripping production once again, an enviable position in these down-market times (so bad that even the National Marine Manufacturers Association has stopped tracking sailboat sales). Tartan has been looking for new



Specifications

LOA	31' 4"
LWL	26' 0"
Beam	10' 11"
Draft (deep/shoal)	6' 6" ¹ / ₄ ' 4"
Displacement	9,030 lbs.
Ballast	3,600 lbs.
Sail area	506 sq. ft.

markets abroad, following up with dealerships in Holland, Great Britain and Japan. In 1992, 25 percent of its business was exports.

There are two versions of the Tartan 31, both the work of Tim Jackett, Tartan’s in-house designer since the 1980s. The first 31s were built in 1987, and 118 were made before Jackett “Piperized” the model for 1992. Aside from adding a sailaway package, which includes North sails, Harken furling gear and lazy jacks, and Autohelm ST 50 instruments, the Piper offers a revised interior layout and a new shoal draft keel. The Piper also carries slightly less ballast with the same hull and rig; otherwise, the two versions are the same.

The 31 is classic Tartan—a medium-displacement cruiser with lots of power for performance and

Owners' Comments

"On her first trip from Plymouth to Westport (Massachusetts), she held course for 20 minutes without me touching the wheel. I can't imagine a better boat."

—1988 model in Massachusetts

"This is the best boat I've ever seen—the way it's put together, and the sail plan. The only negative thing is a (persistent) leak at the bottom of the mast."

—1991 model in New York

"I race mine avidly. I am in my 80s, the youngest guy in the crew is 55. It's very easy to move about on."

—1988 model in Vermont

"I love this boat and am pleased with my choice after looking at about 40 new and used boats. I have full racing and cruising sails and have enjoyed the racing as much as the weekend cruising."

—1988 model in New York

as many amenities as can be worked into 26 feet of waterline. The double-spreader masthead rig carries 507 square feet of sail, 266 in the foretriangle, 241 in the fully-battened main, for a sail area/displacement ratio of 18—enough to provide good speed without being overpowering. Tartan elected to use swept-back spreaders on the Piper, eliminating the babystay, which also clears the way for a (no-cost) optional self-tacking jib. (The standard jib is 135 percent.)

The original 31 displaces 9,030 pounds and carries 3,900 pounds of lead in its external keel, for a 43 percent ballast-to-displacement ratio; ballast in the Piper is reduced to 3,600 pounds for a still-respectable ratio of almost 40 percent. Both versions come with a six-foot deep fin, which most owners eschew for the shoal-draft version. The first 31s carry a Scheel keel, which draws 4' 4". For the Piper, Jakkett designed (and named) the Beaver Tail, which draws the same but differs in shape, with NACA foil sections for greater lift and a somewhat flattened bulb intended to create an endplate effect and reduce drag. By concentrating the weight lower, the Beaver Tail provides the same righting moment with 300 pounds less ballast. "We feel it's more performance oriented, that it gives more lift," said Doug Zurn, a Tartan design engineer.

The hull itself, with an 11-foot beam (one foot more than the old Tartan 30), is full, with a distinct turn at the bilge for less wetted surface in light air, and stability, when the wind rises and the boat digs in. All in all, the 31 offers a stable platform and a blend of good looks and blue-water function. Since Tartans are semi-custom, you have the option of a traditional counter transom or a sportier scoop-style stern, with a somewhat wider swim ladder. Most customers choose the scoop.

Construction

Tartan has a reputation for solid construction and

good workmanship and that's what the 31 is: solid and well put together. The hull is hand-laminated with alternating layers of chopped strand mat and unidirectional E glass. Behind the NPG/ISO gelcoat there's a layer of vinylester resin, which so far appears to provide the best osmotic blister protection available. Tartan, also a pioneer in cored hulls, has limited its balsa end-grain coring to the deck, because of the 31's small size.

At a time when such reputable builders as Tillotson-Pearson (now TPI) are moving toward glued-together hull and deck joints, with bolts only at the cleats and stanchions, Tartan is still through-bolting the length of the hull, with stainless steel bolts driven every six or seven inches through the solid teak toerail into a molded-in 1/4" aluminum backing strip. The connection is further solidified by 3M's 5200 adhesive. Down below, a partial liner to support the flooring is bonded to the hull. The keel is secured to the hull by seven 3/4" stainless steel bolts and a thick bedding. Gear throughout is quality—Harken roller furling, Harken winches and a white Awlgrip-finished mast from Offshore Spars, which rises 48' 6" above the water. Deck hatches and opening ports are Lewmar. The engine is an 18-hp. Yanmar diesel.

The 31 has a comfortably deep T-shaped cockpit, a roomy foredeck and sufficiently wide sidedecks to facilitate moving around. Teak handrails and molded nonskid (plus the inboard shrouds) make the fore and aft trip safer. Even so, Tartan has made things easier by leading all sail control lines aft to housetop-mounted winches. Traveler controls also are mounted on the cabin top, although some serious racers have moved the traveler aft of the helm. The helm consists of a large Destroyer-type wheel by Edson "or equivalent" and the helm seat is raised slightly for a better view; owners have commented favorably on its comfort, even after long hours at the wheel. Tartan

supplies an emergency backup tiller.

Several 31 owners complain about mast leaks. One found the solution in liberal application of silicone sealer. Another has been frustrated by a persistent leak, possibly from the head of the mast, which requires constant pumping out of the bilge. One owner spoke of her tie rod not being secured, but attributed the oversight to her dealer. Other Piper owners bemoaned the absence of handy stern chocks.

Performance

Although its design teams have changed, Tartan over the years has shown a knack for getting performance out of its cruising boats. That's because Tartan emphasizes performance first in its cruisers, Zurn said. "You get a nice teak interior, but they do go fast," he said. Racers we've talked to seem as happy with the 31's performance as the weekend cruisers are with its accommodations. The 31, like other Tartans present and past, avoids the extremes of some other manufacturers.

One reason for Tartan's successful blending of elements would appear to be careful attention to rig and sail plan. The double-spreader masthead rig permits extra sail area, resulting in a nicely balanced boat that's "very forgiving," in the words of several owners. With 241 square feet in the main, there's enough sail area for good offwind speed; the big 135-percent jib, with 359 square feet, provides plenty of power to windward, the 31's best point of sail. Upwind sail trim angles are further enhanced by the inboard shrouds. The boat moves nicely to windward, especially in a breeze, and also handles well dead downwind. Like other Tartans, it is least effective on a broad reach, especially when seas build up, but the good-sized "subtly" elliptical rudder provides adequate control. However, the 31 we sailed last spring on Long Island Sound managed a respectable 5-plus knots on a beam reach in about 10 knots

of wind.

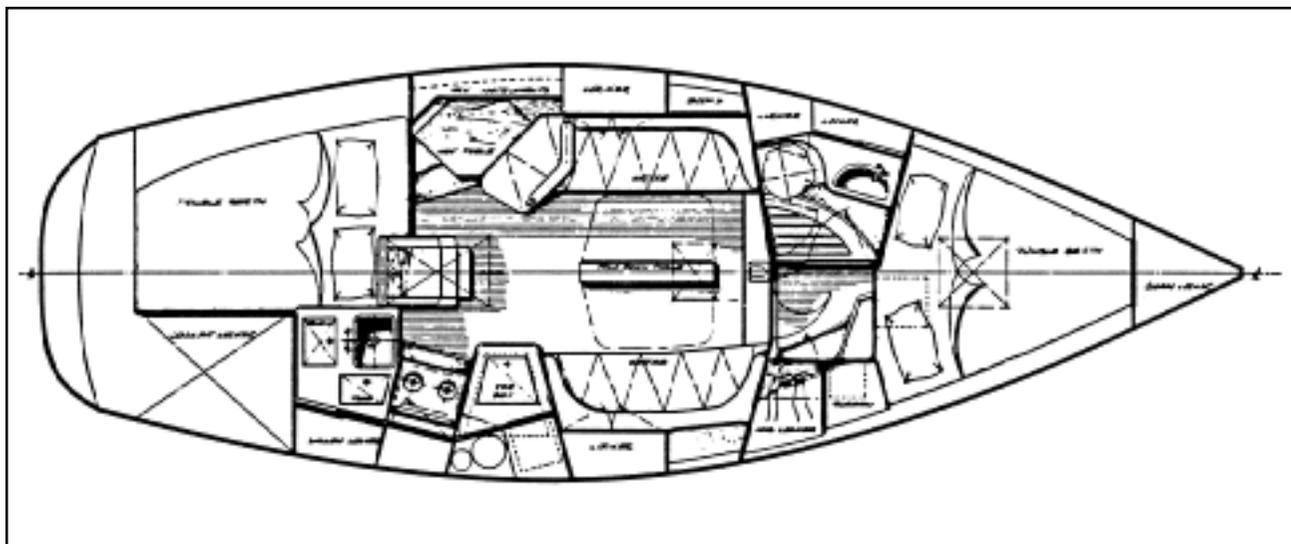
The 31 can carry sufficient sail partly because of its keel, particularly the deep fin version preferred by racers (and apparently Tartan's overseas customers in Holland and Japan). With the shoal keel, the boat naturally loses some windward performance, but does not appear noticeably more tender. According to Zurn, the boat heels 10-12 degrees then "holds its own." There's no talk of reefing on this boat until the winds are well over 20 knots; owners report comfortable sailing in 35-40 knots, with a double reef. Adjusting the bendy mast and experimenting with sail trim may be necessary to increase performance in lighter airs. Those to whom performance is a priority should consider installing an optional hydraulic or mechanical backstay adjuster.

Under PHRF, the Tartan rates between 141 and 153, with 150 as an average, and compares favorably to most cruisers of its size and vintage, many of which were trumpeted as "performance" cruisers when introduced. The British-made Moody 31, for example, which displaces about 100 pounds less, carries slightly less ballast and has almost identical sail area, rates between 174-180; the Freedom 32, considerably lighter at 7,610 pounds (with ballast of 3,100) carries 50 square feet less total sail area and rates about 15 seconds slower per mile; the Pearson 31, marginally heavier with about 10 square feet less sail area, has an average PHRF in the 170s.

Interior

Down below, the most obvious differences between the original 31 and the Piper are apparent. Both have

The Piper interior shows many interesting angles, especially in the bulkheads forward, the nav station and the galley. Note the position of the icebox, which is not buried near a bulkhead.



a definite seaworthy look—angled bulkheads, a businesslike nav station and a U-shaped galley for cooking in offshore conditions. Bulkheads, furniture and cabinets are all teak, offset by an off-white partial liner. The sole is varnished teak and holly. Settee cushions are a plush six inches thick.

In an effort to increase stowage space on the Piper, Tartan removed the port pilot berth and added cabinets and shelves. Settee berths were shifted outboard slightly and the bulkhead-mounted table moved to the centerline. Switching the table permitted the designers to add a second door from the main cabin into the head, through the port bulkhead. This increases access, although some observers feel it decreased privacy.

Also changed was the navigation station, to port as you come down the companionway. The original has a fold-down station (with instruments optional), separated from the main cabin by a full bulkhead. The new, permanent station faces aft behind a partial bulkhead and offers more room for instruments. The change “opened up the cabin tremendously,” Zurn said. Also under the old arrangement, access to the port quarterberth was partially blocked when the chart table was in use; that’s no longer the case.

Interestingly, owners of the original version prefer the old layout, although for different reasons. One was glad to see the “coffin” pilot berth go, but disliked the nav area changes; another preferred the new nav station, but felt the centerline table intruded on cabin space. Yet another preferred the old CNG stove to the new propane burners.

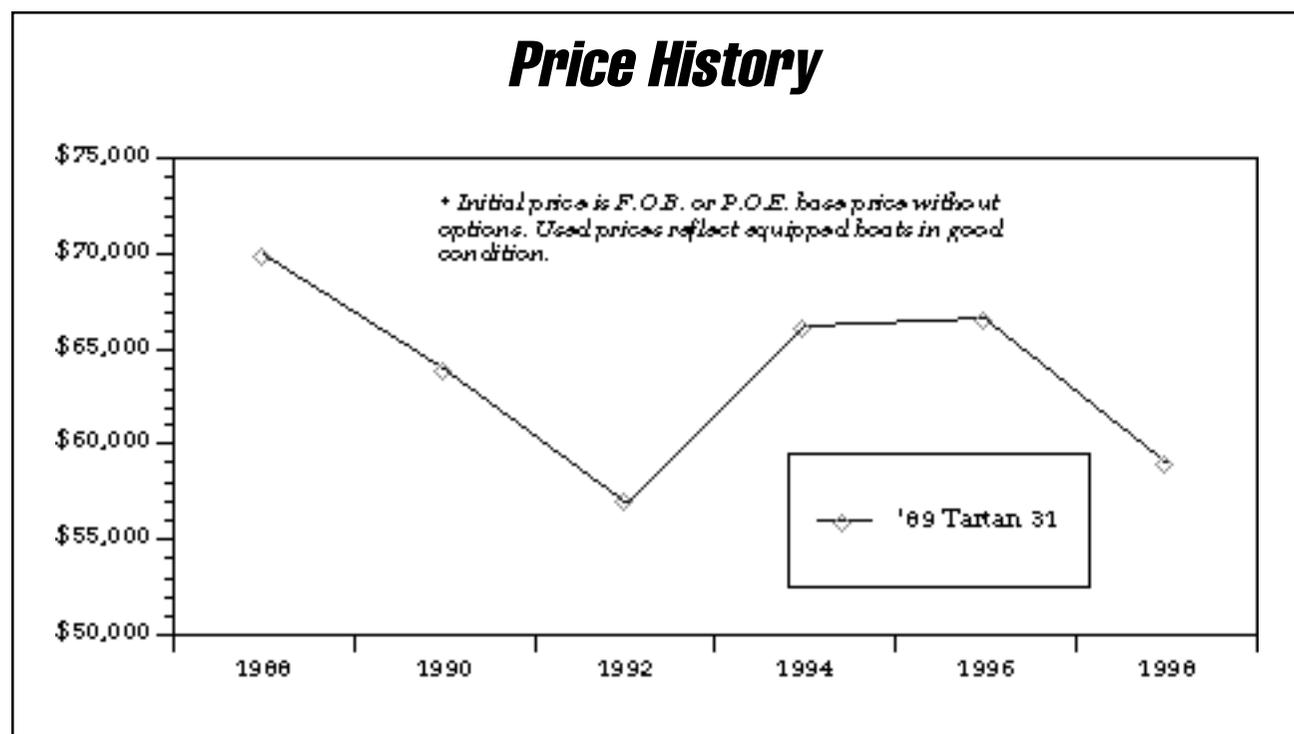
The forward cabin has the usual double V-berth, with bureau and hanging locker to starboard. Several owners we talked to find the forward berths (about 6' 9" long, 6' 6" wide at the head, but narrowing considerably) somewhat cramped and stifling and prefer to sleep elsewhere, in the double quarterberth to port or amidships. The quarter berth, 7' x 5', is the most comfortable sleeping spot on the boat. The main settees are bunk-sized; the port berth, 6' 6" x 2', will fit an adult, but the starboard bunk, 5' 6" x 2', is more suitable for a child. Overall, Tartan has done a decent job of packing reasonable accommodations into a 31-footer, while retaining some sense of space in a pleasantly nautical environment. Standing headroom is 6' 2" in the main cabin, an even 6' in the forecabin.

Just about everyone praises the easy access to the engine, which is gained by swinging aside the companionway stairs. This allows access to all sides of the engine, including the rear; even the stuffing box is readily accessible.

Light and ventilation are provided by a total of eight opening ports on the house sides, mid-cabin and foredeck hatches, and an extra opening port to the cockpit. Storage below, especially on the Piper, is adequate, if not expansive; topsides, there’s a cockpit locker opening to the starboard quarter, and lockers port and starboard of the helm.

Conclusions

The Tartan 31 strikes a nice balance between performance and cruising comfort. There’s enough power



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to keep the casual racer feeling competitive, and enough stability to keep the relative newcomer out of trouble. The Piper, fully equipped, retailed in 1993 for \$88,580. Tartans traditionally retain their value, and the manufacturer and many of its dealers receive excellent notices for their post-sale service. The *BUC Used Boat Price Guide* is listing the 1988 pre-Piper 31 at between \$61,200-\$67,200, but current asking prices from dealers and individuals in classified ads

are higher. (BUC, which, in our opinion, used to have slightly inflated values for used boats, seems to have reacted to the soft market by significantly underestimating true value, in the opinion of many dealers we've talked to recently.)

There may not be anything earth-shatteringly innovative about the Tartan 31, but it can lay solid claim to being an All-American mid-range cruiser, suitable for inland lake or coastal sailing. • **PS**