

Good News for Sailors

Designed for old-style seaworthiness and grace, the Cape Dory 27 is a sloop that's popular with singlehanders and cruising couples.

by Joe Myerson



Tom Croke Photos

With sails slack in the light breeze, owner Ted Rose, left, brings Good News IV, his Cape Dory 27 sloop, onto Buzzards Bay under power. The author sits in the cockpit. Like most Cape Dory sailboats, the 27 has the unmistakable lines of a Carl Alberg design.

It's not surprising that Ted Rose settled on a Cape Dory 27 sloop as *Good News IV*, the boat for his retirement. A lifelong sailor, Rose spent more than two decades as a yacht broker, helping others find the boats they wanted. With his children grown and his wife opting out of cruising, he needed a smaller boat than *Good News II*, his beloved 36-foot Allied Seabreeze yawl. Rose wanted to sail in comfort, often by himself, on windy, choppy Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, but he also wanted a boat that he could be proud of. He briefly owned a 23-foot Seasprite, a graceful daysailer designed by Carl Alberg that had the full keel and classic lines he wanted. But *Good News III* proved too small, with no standing headroom and a narrow, sometimes wet, cockpit.

When he found a Cape Dory 27 on the market, it was good news indeed. Ten years later, Rose still feels the same way: "I wanted a boat that could handle

Buzzards Bay, which meant a full keel with attached rudder. It's an Alberg design. What more can I say?"

Design and Construction

In 1963 Andrew Vavolotis started building 10-foot fiberglass sailing and rowing dinghies (the original Cape Dory 10) in a garage in East Taunton, Massachusetts, not far from Buzzards Bay. Between then and 1990, when the company fell victim to a general recession in the boatbuilding industry, Cape Dory Yachts manufactured more than 8,500 boats (37 different models). Most of these were sailboats ranging in size from 10 to 45 feet, although the company also produced two fishing boats and a line of power trawlers. The majority of Cape Dory's sailboats were designed by Alberg, a Swedish-born New Englander whose conservative, full-keeled boats are still revered for their head-turning lines and rugged seaworthiness.

In 1967 Vavolotis purchased the molds for the Alberg-designed Typhoon, a 19-footer that became one of the most popular sailboats of its time (Cape Dory built more than 2,000 of them). Five years later, buoyed by the Typhoon's success, Vavolotis had Alberg design a 28-foot cruising sloop for his company. During the next decade Alberg designed 10 sailboats for Cape Dory. He never deviated far from the traditional concept that a yacht's beam should never exceed one-third of its overall length—even when Vavolotis asked for something different. In a frequently quoted interview, Vavolotis recounted how he would repeatedly ask for beamier, shallower designs, but Alberg always gave him plans for full-keel, classically narrow boats. Dave Perry, who was national sales manager for Cape Dory Yachts for 10 years and is now the yacht broker at Vavolotis's current business, Robinhood Marine Center in

at a glance

CAPE DORY 27

Builder: Cape Dory Yachts

East Taunton, MA
(no longer in business)

Designer: Carl Alberg

Details

Production.....	1976–1984
LOA.....	27' 1"
LWL.....	20'
Beam.....	8' 6"
Draft.....	4'
Displ.....	7,500 lbs.
Ballast.....	3,000 lbs.
Sail area.....	365 sq. ft.
Mast height.....	38' 6"
Fuel.....	12 gals.
Water.....	12 gals.
Waste.....	15 gals.
Price range.....	\$14,000–\$25,000



When looking aft in the main cabin, the galley sink is to the left and the cooking space is to the right. Access to the diesel engine is gained by removing the wooden panel and companionway steps in the center of this photograph.

Georgetown, Maine, verifies the story. In fact, he recalls, when the company wanted to build the shallow-draft Cape Dory 270, the boat that eventually replaced the 27, “Andy [Vavolotis] went to Carl [Alberg] to see about a keel-centerboard design, and Carl sent him to Dieter Empacher [another Marblehead-based designer]. He just wouldn’t do it.”

Good News IV was built in 1982, hull number 218 out of 277 Cape Dory 27s produced between 1976 and 1984. She carries the hallmarks of an Alberg boat: Her eight-foot, six-inch beam is less than one-third of her 27-foot length, and she has graceful bow and stern overhangs, a full keel with attached rudder and a wineglass-shaped cross section. The Cape Dory 27 was a favorite, even among those who built them. “The 27 was the best-looking sailboat we ever built,” commented Hunter Scott, a former production manager for Cape Dory Yachts who now builds semicustom powerboats. Scott owned a 27, as did Perry, who said, “It gave me everything I wanted or needed in a sailboat, and it was small enough that I could afford it.”

Cape Dory Yachts built its sailboats with solid layers of hand-laid fiberglass

below the waterline and end-grain balsa core in the decks, cabin tops and other horizontal surfaces above the waterline. In the case of the 27-footer, 3,000 pounds of lead ballast were encapsulated in the full-length keel. Built from one-piece molds, the deck was chemically bonded to an internal flange at the top of the hull. Chainplates, deck stanchions and genoa tracks were all through-bolted, and teak toe rails were screwed into the hull-to-deck joint with self-tapping fasteners. Deck cleats, chocks and other hardware were cast from solid bronze, and the cabin was built with six cast-bronze opening ports. (These bronze components are still available from Spartan Marine, a company owned by Vavolotis at Robinhood Marine, where the Robinhood 36 and 40 are custom-built from Cape Dory molds.)

The solid construction and encapsulated keel help explain why so many Cape Dory sailboats are still on the water: The boats can withstand hard groundings and even some collisions with submerged objects. However, several Cape Dory 27 owners, contacted via the Cape Dory Sailboat Owners’ Association’s very active website (www.capedory.org), cautioned that the heavy use of gelcoat, especially on deck, make the boats susceptible to surface cracking. Water penetration can soften the deck’s balsa core, particularly around inadequately bedded hardware. Other owners reported finding soft spots on the foredeck, around the rudder post and sometimes in the cockpit sole. The Cape Dory 27’s mast is stepped on the cabin top, with the force carried to the keel via a compression post, and at least one owner cautions to check for compression cracks and possible distortion of underlying structure.

Belowdecks
Though narrow by modern standards, the main cabin of the Cape Dory 27 offers plenty of comfort for a boat of its age and size, with standing headroom, ventilation provided by six opening ports plus a forward hatch and readily accessible grab rails. An off-white fiberglass headliner conceals wiring and other internal features, while trim—except on the earliest models—is of teak veneer. A door separates the forward V-berth (just abaft the chain locker) from the enclosed head to port and wet and dry hanging lockers to starboard. Far-

ther aft, the dinette settee to port converts to a full-length berth, as does the starboard settee. There's a small galley counter abaft the dinette, to port of the companionway steps, with a built-in ice box (with insufficient built-in insulation, owners say) and space for a stove. The sink is to port of the companionway. Original equipment included a Kenyon two-burner pressurized-alcohol stove, which many owners have replaced, either with nonpressurized alcohol or propane. *Good News IV* is equipped with a two-burner camping stove that uses small propane bottles readily available at most hardware stores.

The boat does not have a dedicated nav station, although many owners use the galley area or the cabin table for that purpose. The plywood cabin sole is covered with a thin teak-and-holly veneer which, though attractive, tends to delaminate over time. Some owners have protected it with various finishes, but others find it necessary to replace the sole.

Removing the wooden panel and companionway steps allows access to the diesel engine, which is mounted underneath the cockpit sole. This arrangement makes anything other than routine servicing difficult but was not unusual for sailboats built at this time. Cape Dory put several small diesel engines into the 27, most commonly the eight-horsepower, raw-water-cooled one-cylinder Yanmar YSM8.

"While a little loud and slightly underpowered," writes Duncan Maio, the owner of a 1977 Cape Dory 27, "[the YSM8] has about six moving parts and is as simple as an anvil—and as reliable as an anvil."

The previous owner of *Good News IV* replaced the original "one-lunger" with a 16-horsepower, two-cylinder, freshwater-cooled Yanmar that gives Rose all the power he needs. Like all full-keeled boats with attached rudders, backing a Cape Dory 27 under power can be difficult enough that one owner called it "a crap shoot."



Pedestal steering makes Good News IV unusual among Cape Dory 27s, creating additional room for passengers in a cockpit considered spacious in its day.

Like many boats built in the 1970s and '80s, Cape Dory 27s came with two 12-volt batteries and a wiring system that was adequate for little more than navigational and interior lighting. A number of owners have rewired their boats to accommodate additional appliances and electronics.

On Deck

If they don't shift their weight with every tack (and they don't have to under most conditions), four adults can ride comfortably in the cockpit of a Cape Dory 27, especially if it's one of the small number of boats, like *Good News IV*, with pedestal steering. An aft lazaret and lockers under the port and starboard benches provide plenty of storage in the cockpit. The boat has ample exterior teak trim, which adds to the traditional look but also requires additional maintenance.

The deck hardware and rigging are rugged, but the foredeck would seem narrow by modern standards. Several owners, including Rose, have added anchor rollers to the bow. Original equipment included high-quality

bronze winches to handle the foresail, but many owners have upgraded to larger, self-tailing models.

Under Sail

With its heavy keel, solid construction and only 365 square feet of sail area carried in a high-aspect-ratio rig typical of the decades when it was built, the Cape Dory 27 is not a fast boat, especially in light air. Alberg designed his boats for heavy weather, and once the wind picks up and the boat heels at between 10 and 15 degrees, the Cape Dory 27 is in its element. "If the wind is really honking," comments Mark Yashinsky of White Plains, New York, "I can catch larger, more modern boats because they start reefing earlier and deeper than me."

Last October, on the day of my test sail and the photo shoot for this article, the wind was abnormally light on Buzzards Bay, but I've sailed on *Good News IV* under more typical conditions and found her easy to balance and quick to respond; she's also a boat that one person can handle. Like any full-keeled boat, she performs best upwind.

Price and Availability

For boats of their age, Cape Dory 27s hold their value well, and they've attracted an enthusiastic following. A quick Web search turned up seven boats recently for sale on the East and Gulf Coasts, ranging in price from \$14,000 to \$25,000, depending on age, engine and upgrades. As owner Ray Garcia puts it, "Our CD27 was hand-assembled with pride and quality as evidenced by the condition she is in after 25 years. If Cape Dory 27s were still being made today, the purchase price would turn away buyers." ■

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be pointed out that the author, Offshore senior editor Joe Myerson, sails his own 25-year-old Cape Dory sloop, a smaller 25D, out of Squeteague Harbor, Massachusetts, on Buzzards Bay.