

Laser **BAHIA**



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

First came the Pico, then the Vago, and now along comes the Bahia. **Jeremy Evans** goes for a 'family sail' on Laser's newest and biggest budget-priced rotomoulded dinghy.

Bahia means 'beach' if you live in South America (it is a coastal state of Brazil) and is pronounced 'ba hee ya'. Since Laser now has a ready made market for its range in North America, thanks to the acquisition of Vanguard Sailboats, a Latin American name should prove popular for its newest family boat.

Laser put the Bahia into production last year and

have sold more than 400 boats in the first 12 months. With markets on both sides of the Atlantic, they hope to sell Bahias by the thousand over the coming years. The magic ingredient is rotomoulded polyethylene plastic, which allows large scale manufacturers to invest heavily in order to produce dinghy hulls at the lowest possible cost. The Laser price list says it all: would you prefer a ready to sail glassfibre Stratos at £8,290, or a ready to sail

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Right The Bahia is an ideal stable platform for learning to trapeze.



polyethylene Bahia (albeit with a slightly smaller hull) at £5,350? That's a 35 per cent markdown for a boat which hits pretty much all the same family sailing buttons.

Family market

For this test, we travelled down to Laser's dedicated sailing school based at the Weymouth & Portland National Sailing Academy. Bryce (9), Tudor (11) and their mum Paula – three of Sail Laser's Easter holiday clients – volunteered to try the Bahia in pure family mode, with instructor Ben standing in as their 'dad' for the day. Portland Harbour provided a magnificent sailing area, which even extended to landing the Bahia on a deserted beach.

There's a distinct family likeness between the 4.2m Vago and 4.6m Bahia. Both are built with Laser's rotomoulded sandwich hull and deck construction, both have distinct hips at the wide point and both were designed by Jo Richards. But while the Vago is promoted as a multi role dinghy, with double and singlehanded options and two distinct choices of rig, the Bahia appears more clearly aimed as a single role family boat and in my view is the better for it.

So what does 'family' mean? First and foremost that the boat feels comfortable, safe and secure with two adults plus two or three kids. EU regs allow a maximum load of five adults on board the Bahia, which is no doubt possible but in real life

you would never want to sail any dinghy with five big blokes on board!

The second role of a 'family' dinghy is to provide safe, fun sailing for individual family members. In the case of the Bahia, that could be mum and dad escaping the family to sail as a couple; either parent sailing with one or more children who may take the tiller; or children taking the boat out on their own, which in the Bahia's case would be no problem for a couple or even a gaggle of reasonably competent teenagers.

Aside from that, a family boat must be able to provide the right level of on water fun, accompanied by minimum expense and hassle. Sailing performance should be good enough to bring a smile to your face and possibly enjoy some light hearted racing, though if you're halfway interested in competition we would recommend that you start looking at more dedicated racing designs. At the same time, the perfect family dinghy should satisfy any lust for a *Swallows & Amazons* lifestyle, transporting the family to far flung beaches and hidden coves, with sail power enhanced by oar power, or even an outboard motor gently pushing at the stern.

Rigging and launching

So how does the Bahia measure up to its 'family' label? The Bahia is a straightforward boat to transport with its combination trolley and road trailer. Laser provides a clear rigging and sailing manual which should overcome most problems. The first potentially scary bit for nervous parents might be putting up (or taking down) the mast, but that is made as easy as possible by using a tabernacle. Lay the mast on top of the hull, attach the mast base to the aluminium beam which spreads the load, connect the shrouds on either side, and then use the forestay to pull the mast up hand over hand. In a light or moderate breeze, there should be no difficulties managing this singlehanded.

The Bahia offers a simple rig choice between Dacron or Mylar mainsail, both of which are the same shape and size. I don't see much point in going for the Mylar option. One perceived

Below The Bahia is easy to rig and launch, but not light to drag up a steep slipway or beach.

Below right Designed for Swallows and Amazons-style adventures, the Bahia is kitted out with oars, although the boom doesn't make for an ideal rowing position.



advantage is that laminate mainsails look a lot more stylish than boring white Dacron, but that evaporates when Hyde produce Dacron mainsails for the Bahia in a distinctly smart shade of grey, enhanced by red trimmings (those distinctive dark grey circles near the luff are reinforcement patches to protect the sail from rubbing against the spreaders in full size and reefed mode). The Mylar mainsail should have the advantage of stretching less than Dacron and may last longer if you treat it with extra special care. But the Bahia is a family dinghy, not a race machine, and apart from being a fraction cheaper Dacron has the massive advantage of being reefable for the simple reason that it's bad news to put creases in a laminate sail. A single line slab reefing system allows you to reduce the size of the Dacron mainsail and keep power low down, where it's easiest to control. This is a major plus for family sailing, particularly when the Bahia showed it can sail quite nicely with the jib furled, under mainsail alone.

Back on land, once rigged it's time to launch. Rotomoulded hulls have one thing in common none of them can claim to be 'light'. The Bahia certainly felt quite heavy on the slip at WPNSA. Not outrageously heavy and easy enough to handle on a smooth slipway with a shallow angle, but likely to become a burden if you're pulling up a steep, rough or slippery surface, or worst of all dragging the boat across sinking sand. It's just a matter of ensuring you launch and land in the right location and at the right state of the tide.

There was a time when polyethylene boats looked like plastic bathtubs. Rapid development has ensured that the latest generation of rotomoulded hulls appear sleek, shiny and stylish. Our brand new Bahia certainly looked attractive, with off white hull and cockpit complemented by a scarlet moulding in the forepeak which provides a spinnaker chute and Bahia graphics on the bows. Going afloat in full family mode, our Bahia also had a splash of scarlet at the stern, thanks to the neat storage box.

The box is a separate polyethylene moulding which can be lifted from the boot of your car and dropped into the stern of your Bahia, where it locks into place. Inside, there's enough space to stow a load of stuff which might include oars and a small outboard motor, held securely in place. At the end of the day, you lift out the box and drop it into the boot of your car, where it may provide the ideal container for a load of wet clothing. It's potentially a very useful extra, at the expense of piling extra weight onto the stern which is most noticeable with the boat on its trolley.

Other neat details include a spring loaded painter which pulls straight out of the bows perfect for quickly lashing the bow to the trolley handles or securing the boat to a dock. The Bahia also has a gnav (upside down vang), which inverts the kicking strap on top of the boom. This frees up the front of the cockpit and allows a lower boom with the advantage of lower centre of effort in the sail, as well as much reduced potential for garrotting children. An enormous hoop in the middle of the cockpit is used to hold the falls of the mainsheet out of harm's way.

Under sail...

Our family crew had their fun, taking turns to



helm the boat, hanging on the wire to prove it's easy for youngsters to trapeze off the Bahia's stable hull and even landing on a deserted beach at Castle Cove.

Mainly light winds for the test session gave plenty of opportunity to fly the asymmetric scarlet kite which looks surprisingly big for this 'family' boat and could be a handful in fresh winds. Any rotomoulded boat is bound to be a bit ponderous in stronger winds due to its weight and flex, which will not translate into effortless acceleration with every gust. If conditions get challenging, my guess is that many Bahia families will opt to stay upright by keeping that big spinnaker in its chute, enjoying enough performance from a reefed main and jib instead of loading up the rig to the max.

One criticism of rotomoulded boats is that they can feel a bit 'dead'. This will certainly be true compared to a super light, super stiff epoxy laminate flyer, for which you will pay a price premium. But in light winds the Bahia felt very nice to sail. It was well balanced and responsive with good ergonomics and loads of room for two adult crew. It's easy for the helm to tack the boat cleanly with lots of space to flip the tiller extension behind the hoop. The Bahia felt pleasantly precise when driving upwind, while offwind the big scarlet kite provided a welcome boost. I know the wind was light, but it did feel particularly well mannered to gybe - stable and predictable with the advantage of that nice, high boom. I noticed while standing up to gybe that that the sole flexed under my feet. I'm no heavyweight, but Laser assure me it's normal for the material and no cause for concern - so just regard the Bahia as your flexible friend.

Upside down...

If you do capsize, there should be no great problems. We flipped the Bahia with its kite hoisted, then left Tudor and Bryce to sort things out unaided. Having dragged the kite back into its chute, Tudor swam round and pulled himself up on the centreboard to flip the Bahia upright fairly effortlessly with his own light weight. For sure, it



PHOTO: JEREMY EWANS

Above top The transom box is a great design extra, and has room for an outboard.

Above left The masthead float is an excellent optional extra.

Above Grab handles and righting lines make capsize recovery easy.

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would be more difficult in a stronger wind, but several things impressed. First, the Bahia has a superbly neat masthead float which prevents the boat inverting; my only criticism is that the float should be included as part of the standard package. Second, a discreet handhold is moulded in the front of each rubbing strake underneath the hull, which makes it so much easier to pull yourself up onto the centreboard without slipping and sliding. Thirdly, the Bahia has ready to use righting lines under the gunwales which means you can get weight right back on the centreboard, without trying to hang onto a sheet. Fourth, it's easy to clamber in over the transom, or even over the side which is fairly low and stable when there is someone on board to counteract your weight.

Last word...

If you're happy to accept the advantages of rotomoulding (very low cost and great durability) and don't mind the disadvantages (extra weight and flex) the Bahia is great value and fits the bill perfectly as a family boat. ■

Above The spacious cockpit and gnav create plenty of room for family sailing with two adults and two children.

ANSWER BACK

from Adrian Hart

'Bahia fits the bill perfectly,' says Jeremy Evans. LaserPerformance realise that designing a family dayboat isn't easy. It requires a multiple range of things for today's modern, active family, and on top of this it has to do all of it brilliantly!

The Bahia roadshow has been met with a great response from families, organisations and also people looking to sail or race at club level.

For all the reasons Jeremy has highlighted, the Bahia makes for a perfect trainer/beginners' boat and is widely used across training centres around the world.

It is a great stable platform, easy to rig, easy to tow, yet allows progression from the sailing school to the club racer.

Sales to date across the globe are growing fast, not only in the UK, but France, Italy, Holland and the US.

With its variety of functions, rowing, motoring or sailing, it provides fun for all, in all modes and conditions. The Bahia owner can chose between club racing or cruising to a secluded bay for a family barbeque.

Created for leisure and ease of use, but not at the expense of performance, the Bahia is a fantastic choice.

In summary, a Bahia makes every weekend a family holiday!