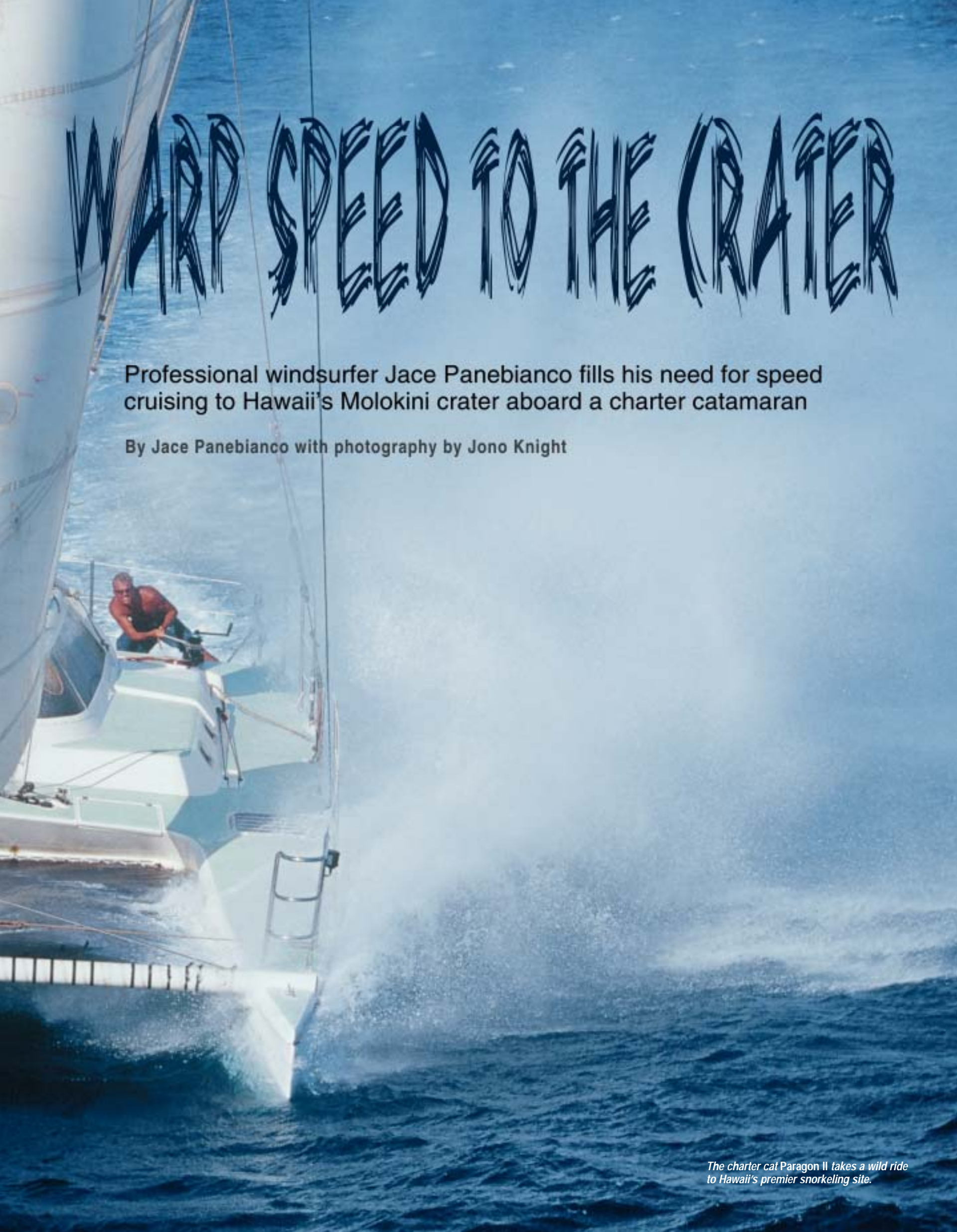




WARD SPEED TO THE CRATER

Professional windsurfer Jace Panebianco fills his need for speed cruising to Hawaii's Molokini crater aboard a charter catamaran

By Jace Panebianco with photography by Jono Knight



The charter cat Paragon II takes a wild ride to Hawaii's premier snorkeling site.



I've been obsessed with speed as long as I can remember. I live to hear the chatter of my windsurf board, the hiss of wind past my ears and the high-pitched whistle of my fin cutting through the water.

I used to go to the Breakwater Yacht Club in Sag Harbor, New York, to race dinghies with my first girlfriend. I was always slow and she would get frustrated because I never took the time to learn that J-Ys don't sail like windsurfers. A decade later, and after four years traveling the world on the Professional Windsurfing Association World Tour, I still sometimes close my eyes just to better hear the sounds my board makes as it shoots across the water.

Even with the prejudice of living on Maui as a pro windsurfer I love big boat sailing—the sensation of speed is amplified on a craft larger than my windsurfer. I've made island crossings in the Caribbean and raced monohulls where getting into double-digit speeds was an accomplishment. When I heard about a catamaran on Maui that regularly cruises faster than 20 knots, and occasionally breaks 30 knots, all with a full load of tourists drinking mai tais and scoffing down sandwiches, I was intrigued.

Contrary to what many people believe, the Hawaiian Islands are not a popular sailing area. The channels between the islands are some of the most treacherous in the world and good harbors can be counted on one hand. On Maui, the snorkeling capital of the world, charter boats cruise out of Ma'alaea Harbor taking their guests to the half-moon crater called Molokini. There is a hodgepodge of sailboats working out of Ma'alaea, mostly catamarans, but typically their sails are just for show.

A captain friend of mine has said that most mornings he is lucky to put up the mainsail and the only time he was totally under sail power was when both engines quit. But these boats, which he calls "cattlemarans" are perfect for their job. They get the tourists out to the crater comfortably, let them swim around and then bring them home in time for the next activity. But if I'm going to go on a sailboat I want to really sail, so my friend directed me to *Paragon II*, a custom built 47-foot catamaran.

The captain

When someone calls himself a sailor you usually get an old salt, a person who has enough stories to spice up a dinner conversation or captivate you on a long plane flight. They can tell tales about how everything that could have gone wrong did and how they fixed it with a piece of gum, some fishing line and a pen.

I met Eric Barto, captain and owner of *Paragon Sailing Charters* in one of my haunts, Charley's Restaurant in Paia, Hawaii. You enter the bar through a pair of old west-style swinging doors and make eye contact with a painting of Willie Nelson. Next to him are pictures of pro surfers and windsurfers sailing North Shore breaks Ho'okipa and Jaws. You are as likely to sit next to a Paniolo cowboy from Makawao as you are a hotshot windsurfer and Eric came swaggering through the doors with the wind still in his hair.

We exchanged introductions and polite courtesies and I started right in on him about his vessel. Eric talked about the *Paragon* and her identical sister *Paragon II* the same way someone swoons about a car they've built from the wheels up. He's a proud father and goes right into the story of the boat's first real voyage and his attempt at the California-Hawaii crossing record in the untested *Paragon*.

"We were trying to break the record from Los Angeles to Diamond Head. I had tried to find some wind in Newport for four months;



A crewmember helps raise *Paragon's* chute, top. The Molokini crater offers spectacular diving and a chance to meet the underwater locals, above.

I sailed all the way out to St. Nicholas Island trying to find wind. The most I ever got her in was 20 knots," Eric said like a man who knows he has a good story and wants to let it sit for a moment, just for the effect.

He went on about how he and his crew set out from Los Angeles Harbor to break Rudy Troy's *Akani X-5's* record of six days and 11 hours. *Paragon's* designer and builder John Conser was on *Akani X-5* during that record setting trip and felt that the *Paragon* could beat that time.

Eric told the story like he was still there, in the moment. "We were on record pace. The beginning was a little slow, then faster, and then right on pace. About 1,000 miles from Hawaii the wind started picking up even better," he said with an animated, slightly devious smile.

"The weather was looking perfect. It looked like we were going to be able to do it, that's about the time when one of the rudders snapped off, so we throttled back a little bit. Ten hours later the other rudder snaps. So now we are a thousand miles out with no rudders, which slows you down a little bit.

"The rudder was still in the boat and part of the shaft was in there banging back and forth and threatening to rip a big hole in the bottom of the boat. We were scrambling really fast, saying we got to get this thing out of there before the boat sinks. John was elected to go in the water."

"How's that?" I asked him. "Did you tell him, 'You designed the boat, you fix it?'"

"Yeah," he replied. "You're the one that built it, this is you, buddy. Get in there."

I wondered aloud whether they didn't draw straws for the job and Eric answered that they all knew who was going in. "I've actually been through this before," Eric said. "We took a spinnaker pole and made a sweep that goes off the transom, like a big steering oar. I had actually brought a piece of plywood onboard for that reason, and when you do a crossing like that you want to have tools and parts to fix just about anything you can."

There was a short silence as we both imagine the possibilities, then he looked up and said.

"We did the first 1,200 miles in three and a half days. The last 1,000 took seven and a half days. But because we wanted the boat light I only had food on board for eight days because I thought were going to do it in seven. But we did have a fishing pole. For seven days we basically had mahi-mahi for breakfast lunch and dinner, the first two days were great but after the third or fourth day we were pretty sick of mahi-mahi."

Then I looked at his plate and asked, "What did you order today?"

"Ahh, but that was a long time ago. I'll still eat mahi-mahi."



The sleek catamaran cuts through the deep blue waters off Maui, typically topping 20 knots.

The boat

Paragon II left Ma'alaea Harbor at 7:30 a.m., a full half-hour after the host of other snorkel boats. I could see their masts sheltered in the half-moon harbor of the extinct Molokini crater as we motored downwind out of Ma'alaea. There were 29 people aboard including three crewmembers and everyone was milling around eating fruit and bagels. Eric headed us into the wind as mates Scott Balogh and Oriana Kalama hoisted the mainsail. The chute flew next and the last thing Eric said was, "Hold onto your hats—the only ones we go back for have heads in them!"

I watched the speedometer as it steadily increased: 8 knots, 12 knots, 15 knots and finally 18 knots straight downwind. Except for the occasional ruffling of the spinnaker, it was nearly silent with the wind at our backs. The ride was so smooth and mellow that I didn't think the other passengers understood that they could sail their entire lives and never go half this fast.

Paragon II has an elegant look; the hulls were made longer but not wider than her sister to accommodate the extra weight of passengers. She is rigged to be sailed by two people and the most difficult part is raising the mainsail, which weighs 250 pounds. Getting sailmakers to build sails tough enough for Maui weather has always been a problem. The *Paragon II* sails 340 days a year in winds regularly above 30 knots. More abuse than most boats see in a lifetime.

"At first we only got six months out of a sail, but we learned how to construct them to now get two years," Eric said, noting that the fastest he has gotten the cat is 30.8 knots, but he tries to keep her around 20 to keep things from breaking.

We reached the crater in an hour and moored alongside the other boats. I looked over to see my captain friend who told me about the *Paragon* waving from the upper deck of what he calls the "space-toaster." There were two other sailing boats nearby, the *Ali Nui* and *Trilogy V*, a 54-foot sloop rigged catamaran. Everyone jumped in the water and snorkeled for a while. Sheltered inside the Molokini crater the water is a vibrant blue, and since the area is a marine sanctuary the fish are thick.

I dove to the bottom to inspect a sea denizen and when I came up for air fellow passenger Robin Miles from San Francisco asked, "Did you see it?"

"See what?" I said.

"The S-H-A-R-K!" she said, spelling out the word and pointing down beneath us. Robin, who was swimming with her two sons, Michael and Garrett, was talking about "10 o'clock Charlie," the 5-foot white tip reef shark that the crew was telling us about earlier.

"No, I missed I-T!" I answered, spelling the word as I peered warily beneath my flippers.

If you had told me prior to my trip aboard *Paragon II* that heading to weather would be the most popular part of the trip, I would have laughed. What happened next was a scene



Capt. Eric Barto grabs a line, top. Dousing the sails gives the crew time to nosh, above.



The author on his windsurfer skips along in front of the 47-foot cat.

straight out of an amusement park. As soon as we hit the wind line a few hearty souls moved to the trampolines and held on. Torrents of water flew over the deck and through the mesh, the bow reared up, bouncing bodies to and fro. The boat was alive with wild laughter.

The valley between Maui's two volcanoes amplifies the wind and as we neared McGregor's lighthouse Eric put us onto a beam reach, *Paragon II*'s fastest point of sail. The perspective at 20 knots is odd, houses and hotels scroll off in the distance, becoming miniature versions of themselves.

On the third reach Scott hurried astern to confer with Eric, he pointed to the leech cord on the jib, which had wrapped itself around the spreader. We headed to weather and tried to bring down the jib, but the line wouldn't come undone and soon there was the sickening sound of tearing cloth. Eric arched his neck to assess the situation and decided to go up the mast himself.

It's hard to say if Eric was showboating when he free-climbed the mast, hoisting himself hand over hand nearly 40 feet on the halyard alone. I imagine that it is a mixture of confidence and ego. He is very sure of himself, but no one wants to fall from that distance. The problem was solved in about the time it would have taken to rig the bo'sun's chair, and the storm jib was raised.

Even with approximately two tons of passengers, 35 percent below normal sail area and a dying wind we hit our top speed of the day; 25.3 knots. Eric didn't seem satisfied and told me to come again tomorrow to see what they can do.

The next day three girlfriends and I met Eric for an afternoon cruise without the normal charter. It seemed like he might have something up his sleeve when two other captains arrived with two other senior crewmembers in tow. It was the day after Mother's Day, whale season had ended and there were nine people aboard when we left the harbor.

As they hoisted the mainsail I noticed it was stained with red Maui dirt from the sugarcane fields—this is a working boat. The boat accelerated with every pull of the halyard and we were cruising directly to weather at 10 knots before we even flew the jib. Moving this fast was odd aboard such a large boat, walking around easily on the deck at planning speed. My friends were laughing and shouting off the speed from the knot meter.

One tack later and we were in the wind line and accelerating. It was a true Star Trek moment, with Captain Kirk calling for more speed and Scotty shouting he's doing his best. Eric was pushing the boat and the windward hull was loose in the water. We broke 25 knots easily and the boat began a low-frequency hum. I could feel each gust of wind through a burst of speed.

After a few runs downwind toward McGregor's point we headed into the wind and it was my turn to sail. We dislodged my windsurfing rig from the trampoline and threw it overboard. I dove off the stern and suddenly I'm back in my element. *Paragon II* headed off toward Haleakala, Maui's



11,000-foot volcano, and I started trying to reclaim some distance between us. This ground didn't come easily. It took me nearly half the bay to get abeam and if they changed course at all I would start falling back into the lee of the boat.

I've always wondered just how fast my windsurfer was. Now I know that it is just barely fast enough to stay in front of this frothing beast of a boat. For almost an hour I sailed alongside *Paragon II*, crisscrossing paths and jumping the wake. I watched her from behind to see the similarities of our wakes and how she carves into a tack. She was like a hulking windsurfer.

We took hot-laps back and forth across the bay trying for more speed. From just astern I watched as a gust of wind spread its fingers across the water. *Paragon II* accelerated and I could hear wild hoots trailing in their wake. The windward hull was then hit by a wave sending spray careening over the bow. Then the hull lifted: one foot, two, five, then 10 feet in the air! In that eternity I saw *Paragon*'s half-cleaned underbelly, the daggerboard and the Maui coastline in the distance. They drop the mainsheet and she settled with a splash. I came alongside and everyone was celebrating.



More fun than an amusement park, a trampoline rider does his best Superman impersonation, top. On the trampoline, riders take a shower as they hang on for dear life, middle. *Paragon II* lifts a hull as it reaches close on the wind, above.

Eric seemed a mixture of relief and elation. He cupped his hands and shouted, "31.4 knots! A new boat record!" My friend Dustin, who had never even been on a sailboat before, was wild eyed and screamed, "Lets do it again!"

For information on *Paragon Sailing Charters* visit www.sailmaui.com, or contact the company at 5229 Lower Kula Road, Kula, Maui, HI 96790; phone (800) 441-2087; e-mail info@sailmaui.com. Additional information is available through the Maui Visitors Bureau, www.visitmaui.com.