



Julien Gazeau

Taking the lead: best 30ft French yachts

Few would dispute that the French production yacht builders have left British builders floundering in their wake, writes Peter Poland

Sailors who look around 21st century boat shows won't come across a single big volume British yacht builder. The occasional Oyster, Rustler, Swallow Baycruiser or Cornish Crabber is about all you will find.

And the cost of setting up a modern production unit is so high that I can't see any UK sailing boatbuilder now achieving the market dominance still enjoyed by

British motor yacht builders such as Princess and Sunseeker.

But it was not always that way. As the GRP revolution accelerated into the 1970s and beyond, Britannia ruled the waves. Westerly, Thames Marine, Moody, Macwester, Nicholson, Rogers, Russell Marine, Parker, Hunter Boats and many others dominated the aisles at British Boat Shows. The late lamented Earls Court boat show used to bulge at the seams.

Even before the massive new Hall 2 was tacked onto the back of the original building, 320,000 visitors flooded through the gates when the boat show moved from Olympia to Earls Court in 1960. And in those distant decades, Sundays were still days off!

Dufour Sylphe

One of the first French production boatbuilders to make its way into Earls

New Oce
now the
boat in th
Ocea

TOP BE

Court w
across
a dark
Hall and
revoluti
Design
and was
product

Dufour
name of
laminati
his own
was a s
running
compar

As he
doors, v
sections
same m
yachts.

dream
technic
that the
march a
early 19

So he

'Dufour rented a grain storage barn, shooed out the chickens, and built his first GRP boat'

Arpège cruiser-racer


Introduced in 1966, the 30ft Arpège went on to sell at a prodigious rate, reaching around 1,500 units before production finally ceased in 1976. It became one of the very best embodiments of the term 'cruiser-racer'.

While narrowish beam and longish keels were still the norm, Dufour developed his broad beam plus fin keel format. The 30ft Arpège has a 9ft 11in beam and a generous freeboard added further to its interior volume, so Dufour had the space to fit in a groundbreaking interior.

Rather than going for a conventional V-berth forecabin, Dufour allocated the bow of the boat to a huge storage area and a forward heads. Aft of this, the saloon uses the full beam of the boat and fits in two settee berths plus two practical and secure pilot berths outboard. Anyone who has sailed at night will know just how invaluable these are. Off-watch crew can sleep soundly and without interruption.

Then Dufour gave the chef and navigator facilities that would not look out of place on a boat a couple of metres longer. The galley (to port) and forward facing chart table (to starboard) are adjacent to the companionway so easy to use in a seaway. And aft of these a brace of snug quarter berths stretch back under the cockpit.

Little wonder, then, that both cruising and racing sailors rubbed their eyes in disbelief and reached for their cheque books. Annual production figures leapt from 58 in 1966-67 to 158 in 1967-68. Then things really took off when France announced an upcoming introduction of VAT on boats. "Between the announcement in summer '68 and implementation in January 1969 we were selling a dozen boats a week," recalled a former employee.

But that was not all. Many old-school sailors reckoned that a 30-footer as wide as this would never be able to perform well at sea. Some said it would bounce around and sag off to leeward. But they were wrong. Dufour's own Arpège (by the name of *Safari*) walked off with the 1967 Half Ton Cup, beating the most vaunted designs of the day. It was an extraordinary achievement. Rarely has a standard GRP production boat so comprehensively combined racing performance with cruising comfort. And to further enhance its reputation, renowned long distance sailor Jean-Yves Terlain entered *Blue Arpège* in the 1969 Transpacific Race, arriving in Tokyo just 10 days after Eric 

Mike Jones

SailingScenes.com



New Oceanis 30.1, now the smallest boat in the current Oceanis range

TOP Beneteau First 31.7 ABOVE Dufour Arpège

Court was Dufour. I still remember coming across a pretty little yacht tucked away in a dark corner at the back of the Pembroke Hall and being captivated by its revolutionary lines and spacious interior. Designed in 1964, it was called a Sylphe and was Michel Dufour's first ever production yacht.

Dufour's company started life under the name of Le Stratifié Industriel (industrial lamination). It was only later that he gave his own name to his company. Dufour was a skilled engineer and had been running the GRP section of a large company based near La Rochelle that made things for the railway industry.

As he supervised the moulding of GRP doors, ventilation systems and front sections of trains, Dufour realised that this same material would be ideal for building yachts. He drew possible designs and dreamed of new production methods and technical innovations. He was well aware that the British boatbuilders had stolen a march and were ahead of the game in the early 1960s.

So he knew that he'd have to be efficient

and imaginative if he were to mount a meaningful challenge. He would have to use GRP to give extra benefits and strengths to his designs; rather than just copy old-fashioned shapes that could be pulled out of a mould instead of being built in wood. Some French sailors still refer to him as 'le père de l'industrialisation' in the yachting industry.

To fund his new venture, Dufour sold his car and his boat and raised a 60,000 Franc loan. With this he rented part of a grain storage barn, shooed out the chickens, hired four workers and, along with his close friend James Léger, set about making the plugs and tooling for his first GRP boat – the Sylphe.

When Dufour's 21ft 4in Sylphe cruiser-racer hit the sailing scene in 1964/5, it set new trends. In a market still dominated by long keeled designs with narrow beam, the Sylphe's bolt-on bulbed fin keel, skeg-hung rudder and wide beam dish of a hull made it unlike any other GRP production yacht around.

But if Dufour's first effort was a success, his second was little short of a sensation.

BELOW 1973 Dufour 31 RIGHT The new Dufour 32 is now the smallest boat in the range



SailingScenes.com

Tabarty on his aluminium hulled 10.7m skimming dish called *Pen Duick V*. Anyone buying an Arpège today will be getting a lot of boat for the money. Of course you'll need a survey and should pay special attention to the sandwich decks. These have been known to give problems. But, all things considered, this yacht is one of the classics of its era and Michel Dufour's masterpiece.

Ample space

The Dufour 31 – introduced in 1973 - was another popular Michel Dufour-designed fin keel 30-footer with a skeg-hung rudder and it cruised far and wide. With its 10ft 6in beam, displacement of 9,600lb, draught of 5ft 8in, ballast ratio of 38.5% and DLR of 352 it proved to be tough and seaworthy; while its flattish sheer and unusual hint of a clipper bow it gave it a distinctive look.

Its spacious accommodation featured a two-berth forecabin, amidships heads, saloon with settee berths, aft galley and navigator's station and quarter berth. This was typical of the 1970s, and an impressive total of around 900 Dufour 31s were built.

Browsing the internet, I came across a remarkable story of how Romaric Le Montagne, aged 33, and his friend Mélanie Gratien, aged 31 – assisted on various legs by sundry crew and friends picked up en route – sailed around the world in 2,453 days between October 2014 and June 2021. Le Montagne wrote "*Reder Bro* is a proud and valiant Dufour 31 built in 1976. Years may pass, but good yachts continue to cruise. Bought in 2012, this yacht is solid and robust and – above all – has the advantage of ample living and storage space that permits travelling far, over a long period of time; and all in a boat that is a pleasure to sail."



If you understand a bit of French, you can read all about this robust yacht's epic voyage and see countless excellent photos on rederbro.tumblr.com and rederbro.travelmap.net.

Since then the Dufour range has been through several major changes. And, in common with most big production builders, models have got ever bigger. The 1998 J&J-designed Dufour Classic 30 was the last 30-footer to hit the scene. And now the Felci-designed Dufour 32 is the smallest new model on offer.

Inaugural First

In 1976, another French builder followed the Arpège's example and turned a winning half tonner into a top selling cruiser-racer. But Beneteau's inaugural First – the First 30 – was not the product of

intense original thought and development. It almost happened by chance.

Beneteau had begun to believe the future might lie in a 'people's' cruiser-racer'. So when the moulds of the Andre Mauric-designed development of his 1973 world championship winning prototype Half Tonner *Impensable* came up for sale, Beneteau took a gamble.

André Beneteau then worked on new deck and interior designs and the First 30 hit the market in 1977.

When you consider that previous (and successful) Beneteau production yachts had all been on the slow side, this was indeed a massive leap into the dark. But it worked a treat!

The First 30 walked off with the 'Boat Of The Year' award at its first Paris boat show and kick-started Beneteau's range of fast First cruisers that grew over the years – and still flourishes today.

The First 30 also showed how Beneteau was always looking to develop its production methods. Weight per se (apart from in the keel) is not beneficial in a

performa
to build i
weight in
all the cr
cruising
finished.
composi
methods
Benete
were now
steam. B
1,000 Fir
about fou
of amaze
British co
Some r
were on
to our m
have sto
And are
still repre
performa
capabilit
magazin
– a myth
began its

'The First 30 walked off with the Boat Of The Year award at its first Paris boat show'



SailingScenes.com



SailingScenes.com

Jean-Marie Lot

performance yacht. So Beneteau started to build interiors that did not add surplus weight in the wrong places, while ensuring all the creature comforts demanded by cruising sailors were still there and neatly finished. Way back in 1976, without exotic composite materials and construction methods, this was no mean feat.

Beneteau's series production methods were now really getting up a head of steam. Between 1976 and 1981, around 1,000 First 30s were built, equating to about four a week, and this was a matter of amazement and anxiety to Beneteau's British competitors. How did they do it?

Some muttered that these Beneteaus were on the light side – when compared to our more heavily built cruisers. But they have stood the test of time well.

And around 45 years later, the First 30 still represents a stylish package of performance combined with cruising capability. As one leading French magazine put it, 'it was with this first First – a mythical boat – that Beneteau really began its conquest of the sailing world.'

OK, they might be slightly biased, but they have a point.

The 1985 First 305, designed by Jean Beret, became another popular performance cruiser that traces its roots to a successful Half Ton-evolved racer. The 305 was developed from the Beret's 1981 First 30E and is 30ft 6in overall, but the waterline changed to 26ft 9in and the beam to 10ft 6in. Overall weight increased to 8,242lb with 2,976lb in the keel. All in all, the First 305 is a heavier and more substantial yacht than its forbear; but there are still clear pointers to Half Ton origins in its hull shape and deep fin keel option.

In addition to a 5ft 9in deep fin or 4ft 5in shallow fin, the First 305 was also offered with twin rudders and a stub keel that housed a pivoting keel.

But whichever model you go for, it has a fully fitted cruising interior. As a definite 'plus', Beneteau made use of its wide stern to accommodate an aft cabin and aft heads compartment. The 305 is also a very attractive yacht from any angle. In some ways it's a small sister to Beret's

ABOVE Kelt 8.50 LEFT Original 1977 Mauric-designed Beneteau First 30

equally successful 1984 First 345, and every bit as desirable.

An exceptional hull

Moving on a bit, the 1990 First 310 and slightly stretched 1998 First 31.7 – both designed by Finot-Conq – are two other First 'classics.' Developed from Finot's hull design for the high performance single-handed Figaro I racer (1989), this modern cruiser-racer, complete with a nicely finished aft heads and stern cabin accommodation plan, will be near the top of any sailor's shopping list if he's looking for a speedy 30-footer.

A rock dodging coastal race along the North Brittany coast a few years back taught me just how good the 31.7 is. It's balanced, quick, close winded, is nicely finished with a comfortable interior, and is very enjoyable to sail.

However if you fancy the sleek lines and futuristic looking near-upright stem of these Finot First 30-footers, but want more luxury below and less horsepower in the rig, Beneteau came up with an answer. Just take a look at the 32ft 1991 Oceanis 300 and later Clipper 311 models. Both share the same Figaro 1 hull lines. The fin 311's ballast ratio of 31.4% is higher than the deep, bulbed keel First 31.7's 27.34%. The 311 was also offered with a lifting keel that pivots into a short winged stub keel and twin rudders.

Selecting the right vintage and model out of so many descendants from one set of hull lines can be confusing, so it's sensible to consult a specialist Beneteau broker. Whether you prefer the sportier First derivatives or more cruising oriented Oceanis sisters, the enormous gene pool that came down from the Finot's Figaro I shows how skilled Beneteau had become at extracting maximum market mileage out of one exceptional hull.



A masterpiece

The Jeanneau range started when Henri Jeanneau commandeered part of his father's workshop in 1959 to build speedboats – first in wood, then in GRP. When he branched out into sailboats he chose van de Stadt (who was already building GRP yachts in Holland) for his first two designs. But Jeanneau soon turned to French designer Phillipe Harlé who'd already made his name with his hard chine plywood giant-killer; the mighty Muscadet.

Harlé's first GRP yacht for Jeanneau was a small cruiser-racer that turned out to be a masterpiece. With an overall length of 25ft, a beam of 8ft 10in and a weight of 3,968lb, the Sangria had all the makings of a successful package. Its ballast ratio of around 42%, DLR of 257 and SA/Displacement ratio of 14.79 ensured stability and respectable speed. This was borne out early in its career when two Sangrias came second and third in class in the JOG/GCL Cowes to Dinard race.

The accommodation was also a success, the twin berth forepeak, amidships heads and spacious saloon proving to be practical both in harbour and at sea. And a subtly disguised reverse sheer helped achieve good headroom. An incredible 2,150 were built between 1969 and 1982, putting Jeanneau well and truly on the map.

Harlé then teamed up with Finot in 1970 and designed the 28ft 6in Folie Douce which was renamed the Brin de Folie in 1975. Over 10 years a remarkable 820 were built. Its combination of a 22ft 2in LWL and beam of 10ft 2in provided plenty of comfortable space below while its sleek Harlé-Finot lines gave excellent performance. Little wonder it sold in such large numbers.

It's interesting that in this era Jeanneau eschewed the use of multiple inner mouldings, preferring to bond all-wood interiors into the hulls. This simple but reliable method of production kept weight down while making a rigid and robust structure. It's also easy for a surveyor to see what's going on.

I once asked Angus Scott – long time supremo of Jeanneau distributors Euroyachts – about this method of construction and he replied: "It's ironic that at the time when we were struggling against prejudice from the pink trouser brigade to get the boats going in the UK, they were perceived as less than robust; when in fact they were bullet proof. The number of old Jeanneaus sailing around the world today is testament to this." In the 1979 Jeanneau continued its 'merry

go round' design policy and commissioned yet another budding IOR designer to come up with a 30ft cruiser-racer.

A hairy ride

This time it was kiwi Ron Holland who got the nod, and he came up with the Rush 31. Much in the IOR mode of its day, the Rush has 10ft 4in beam amidships but a very fine bow and stern. This ensures exceptional sailing ability to windward but can lead to hairy rides if over-canvassed on a run or broad reach in strong winds.

The Rush 31 won a big following and variants were adopted for the Figaro sponsored single-handed circuit and the Tour de France à la Voile. Sadly neither of these events had an equivalent in the UK

but both were extremely successful in France, with widespread coverage and a big following. As a result, the Rush went on to be a commercial success for Jeanneau and around 600 were sold.

In 1982 the French designers Joubert-Nivelt came up with the 30ft 6in Attalia 32. Thanks to its beam of 10ft 9in it had space to become one of the earlier cruisers to include an aft double cabin and heads. A SA/Displacement ratio of 17.18, DLR of 192 and ballast ratio of 39% pointed to an above average performance and 250 of this sleek yacht were built.

The next new designer to sign up with Jeanneau was Tony Castro, who was no stranger to the range having worked with Ron Holland on the Rush design. But now Castro had parted company with Holland and opened his own design office, scoring a major success in 1981 when his IOR design *Justine III* carried off the One Ton Cup. Jeanneau commissioned him to design a production cruiser based on this boat and so the Sun Shine 36 appeared in 1982, followed by the 'stretched' Sun Shine 38 a year later. Leading French magazine *Bateaux* says it is 'one of the best performing and enjoyable of its type;



LEFT Jeanneau Sun Light 30
BELOW Centreboard version of the Jeanneau Sun Dream 28



Camille Moirenc

Sylvie Curty

SailingScenes.com

recommended to those keen on a lively sailing boat rather than to those looking for a placid cruiser.' So it is not surprising that Jeanneau built 770 of them between 1982 and 1988.

Smaller sister

Delighted with this success, Jeanneau commissioned Castro to design a smaller sister. The 29ft 6in Arcadia (built 1983 to 1986) shows Castro's penchant for a boat that performs well with its DLR of 188, SA/Disp ratio of 18.02 and ballast ratio of 43.5%. It's a worthy small sister to the Sun Shine and sails well in all conditions. Creature comforts are also there thanks to a beam of 10ft 4in. Features include an aft cabin, aft heads compartment, L-shaped galley, proper forward facing chart table, saloon with U-shaped settees and a breton-style forecabin.

Hot on its heels in 1987 came Castro's 28ft 8in Sun Way 28. Despite a slightly shorter LWL and narrower beam than the Arcadia, the accommodation was much the same. But the rig was fractional rather

BELOW RM970 BOTTOM RM 890 interior

'An incredible 2,150 Sangrias were built, putting Jeanneau well and truly on the map'

than masthead and deep or shoal draught keels were offered, as well as a twin-ruddered pivoting keel version drawing just 2ft 2in with the keel raised.

Jeanneau was so pleased with the Arcadia that it also used the same hull, keel and similar accommodation layout for the 29ft 6in Sun Dream 28 that was built from 1987 to 1991. However the Sun Dream 28 was given a completely new deck, with a revised stern and an elegant 'panoramic' roof replacing the Arcadia's wedge shaped roofline. Around 800 of these three Castro models were built.

In 1986, Jeanneau turned to yet another 'ton cup' winning designer and Daniel Andrieu came up with the Sun Light 30 followed in 1991 by the slightly stretched Sun Fast 31. Its 30ft 6in LOA, 25ft 3in LWL and 10ft 7in beam gave it more space below than Tony Castro's previous slightly smaller designs. Its close sister, the more

'cruisey' Sun Odyssey 31, had two different saloon layouts offering an alternative linear galley and U-shaped settee opposite. It also forsook the Sun Fast's twin spreader fractional rig for a masthead rig.

Two other French yachts designed by Gilles Vanton are worth considering. The Kelt 8.50, Kelt 29 and Feeling 29 are all basically the same design and it is reckoned around 1200 in total were built from 1983. Even though just under 28ft long, the 24ft 9in LWL combined with a beam of 10ft 4in gives good headroom and a spacious interior with a 'breton' forward berth, full width U-shaped saloon settee, galley, forward facing chart table, aft heads and aft double cabin.

The majority were built with a swing keel that retracted into a substantial grounding shoe so total ballast came to 1,470kg out of a displacement of 3,130kg. The Kelt 8.50 that I test sailed in a stiff breeze was commendably stable, although the relatively shallow rudder became quite heavy if the mainsail was not eased in the strongest gusts.

As with any lifting or swing keel yacht, a thorough inspection of the lifting gear and pivot bolt is essential before buying. Load-bearing parts that move and live in salt water can give problems with age.

Twin keels

And what about French twin keelers? Very few have made it over to the UK, but if you come across an RM 890 (29ft 3in) or RM 970 (31ft 9in) it would be worth a look. The RMs are unusual in many ways: made from epoxy sheathed plywood they're light, strong and most come with low drag and efficient modern twin keels (drawing 4ft 11in on the 890). The accommodation is spacious (the 890's beam is 11ft 3in) and airy. And they sail very well. Not everyone's cup of tea perhaps, but well worth a look... if only to provide a contrast to more ordinary yachts!

Spare parts for yachts built overseas can be hard to come by, and costly. For initial research it also pays to seek out British-based owner's associations. As an example, I've always found the UK Jeanneau Owners group (jeanneau-owners.com) particularly helpful and informative. The UK Beneteau Owners Association (boauk.org) also runs extensive forums.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter K Poland crossed the Atlantic in a 7.6m (25ft) Wind Elf in 1968 and later spent 30 years as co-owner of Hunter Boats. He is now a freelance journalist and PR consultant.



Carmille Moirenc



Sylvie Curry