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BENETEAU OCEANIS 51.1

This new model lets you build a boat
that is just for you and no one else

BY ZUZANA PROCHAZKA

Groupe Beneteau introduced the .1 line just a few years ago with the launch of the formidable 41.1—a “refreshed” (or let’s just call it a “fixed”) version of the original Oceanis 42. The changes made to the 41 were wholeheartedly embraced by the market, so the French builder expanded the concept to other models. This year, they introduced the fifth in the series, the 51.1, which replaces the Oceanis 48. The mindboggling number of permutations and combinations of features available on this model make this production boat seem nearly semi-custom and that’s likely to strike a chord with boaters who want a personalized experience.

WITH FOUR DIFFERENT interior layouts, five rigging plans, three keel types and a choice of 160 available options for 700

resulting combinations, buying this model could seem intimidating. However, Beneteau simplified the approach by offering three main versions: the racer called First, the cruiser named Comfort and the simple day-sailer known as Easy. These versions target three different market segments—with one hull design at three price points. Once you’ve figured out your sailing style, then just spec the must-have options and it’s as if the boat was a one-off design created just for you.

RIGS AND CONTROLS A quick overview shows that all three versions share a 7-

Spar triple spreader, deck-stepped mast and a new hull that is chined over one third of its length. The standard draft is seven feet, seven inches but a shoal draft is available at six feet, one inch. Then come the differences: The Easy day-sailer comes with a self-tacking jib and a mast tricing for the mainsail. There are only two winches to manage lines. The Comfort cruiser adds an internal D1 lower cockpit, two more Harken winches, an arch for the mainsheet attachment point, sunbeds on either side of the companionway



and an outdoor grill. Finally, the First racing version adds five feet to the mast (76 feet clearance for an additional 35 percent sail area), which can be either carbon fiber or aluminum, and a nine-foot, two-inch keel with a bulb. With this enhanced performance package, the winches and deck hardware are upgraded and a hydraulic backstay and composite wheels are added.

On all three, the primary winches are now positioned

1. An array of overhead hatches and hull ports make the boat airy and livable.
2. The 51.1 is racy, about a dozen features and practicalities. For example, the raw seat turns from a sideways lounge when it's time to relax. 3. There's plenty of storage space both in the galley and in the accommodations.

so that anyone who is grinding twice forward and can see the sails, which is a great and much-awaited move. The composite spilt takes the anchor well away from the plumb bow to prevent the inevitable drag during anchoring and it also provides an attachment point for the bowsprit. It naturally elongates the hull, making the boat look longer and sleeker.

INTERIOR Layout options include up to five cabins and four heads (if you count the crew quarters in the forepeak). Our test boat had three cabins and two heads with the master stateroom in the bow and two cabins aft, each with its own head. Six people aboard will find plenty of teakwood and privacy both inside and out.

The galley is C-shaped and is port with soft-close drawers for plenty of storage space. The space provides good brace points so it won't be a struggle to prep meals underway even on a port tack. The large nav station is up against the forward saloon bulkhead and a little far from the cockpit for good communications between driver and navigator. Its wide seat turns

into a sideways lounge with a pop-up feature in the middle to support your legs when it's time to relax rather than navigate.

THE HIGHLIGHTS The first model to be launched under Beneteau's new marketing director, Giangiacomo Gicotti, the Oceanis 51.1 is all about clever features and practicalities, both large and small. The lifelines have been raised a few inches as they should be on a distance cruiser. Hinged-up foot braces at the helm work well when hoisting but tuck away when not in use to minimize toe-slapping. The large aft lazarette has plenty of room for fenders, lines and a Fischer Panda genset that has ground access all around. The cockpit table is massive with excellent handholds. The ratty storage at the aft

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THE SPECN

LOA	15.94 m / 52' 4"
LWL	14.55 m / 47' 9"
Beam	4.8 m / 15' 9"
Draft	6' 1", 7' 7", 9' 2"
Air draft	21.50 m / 70' 1"
Sail Area	93.00 sq m / 1,007 sq ft
Displ.	14,926 kg / 32,922 lbs
Water	440 L / 116 USG
Fuel	200 L / 53 USG
Power	80-hp Yanmar with Saildrive
Designer	Beneteau Recreational
Built By	Groupe Beneteau France
Sold By	Grand Yachts, Vancouver 604-687-6943

end and a refrigerator at the other. In between is a wood tray insert that can be loaded up with drinks and snacks in the galley and brought up to the cockpit.

There's no shortage of storage space with two sunbeds on either side of the companionway and a large sunpad on the bow. A clever plancha grill swings out from the aft bench so the chef can stand on the electric swim platform to cook in plain air at the barbeque. Beneteau has also brought over the optional hideaway dinghy davits from their powerboat line. They retract completely out of the way when not in use so as not to impinge on the boat's deck profile, but can carry the dinghy easily so you won't need to haul it on deck or tow it behind.

Below, the companionway is exceptional, as usual. Large, well-angled steps are flanked by sturdy railings so coming up deck or docking below will be easy for everyone including older folks, kids and even pets. The French company should win an award for their approach to entries as they're both functional and visually appealing.

As is Beneteau's trademark, the boat is bright and airy. An array of overhead hatches in the saloon and master cabin together with the hull ports throughout the length of the boat, make it very livable below. This is helped by a new finish called "brushed oak" that adds texture for the appearance of real wood and brightens the bulkheads.

Showing a true understanding of how boats are used, Beneteau offers tankage upgrades. Standard fuel capacity is just 53 gallons, which is great for racing due to the reduced weight, but not ideal for a distance cruiser. An option for an additional tank

doubles this capacity and will allow cruisers to run farther and stay self-sufficient at anchor for longer periods. An upgrade also is available for fresh water where 87 gallons may be added for a total of 210.1 l at the showering begin-

THE LOWLIGHTS Of course, no new boat is complete without some head-banging tradeoffs. There are a couple of things I keep harping on with Beneteau models and I guess I will continue until something changes. First,

there's not enough separation between deck fls. On the port side, the water and waste fls. are only four inches apart. The possibility of contamination of the water tanks is high, not to mention that it's a bit gross.

Second, there are few handholds below. In an attempt to streamline interior design, Beneteau overlooks the practical. There's a long traverse from the companionway to the master in the bow with little to hang onto. That's great at a boat show but not much fun when it's blowing 20 outside and the boat is on its end.

Third, the twin aft cabins could benefit from better ventilation. Not everyone likes to run the genset and AC at all times and the aft cabins will get stuffy with just those small ports that open onto the cockpit. They provide neither a good source of air nor privacy.

Finally, there's my absolute pet peeve: The engine throttle, wind instrument repeater, windlass remote panel, and bow thruster controls are on the starboard side and down by your ankles. You need to bend down to operate the thruster and engine, taking your eyes off the bow just as you're docking. This has nothing to do with the

Beneteau joystick drive called Duck & Go (that lets

together the engine, thruster and autopilot) is an expensive option but one that may (will come owners). Most people will likely opt for the larger engine and a bow thruster and have no trouble manouevring into even the tightest of slips.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This 31'er is growing and that's a good thing. Groupe Beneteau's economies of scale in production (they have eight plants building sail and power-boats around the world) combined with their attention to detail, bring together the best of both worlds: a plethora of choices, exceptional opportunity for personalization and a production build price point. With all that, you really can feel like the new 31' was created just for you and no one else. **ME**