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Beneteau 51.1

French giant breaks the mould with radical new design

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Beneteau's Oceanis 51.1 is a radical design with 'champagne glass' sections. Does that lead to the sailing equivalent of Lambrusco? Sam Jefferson finds out

Champagne glass sailing



Chines. Back in the days before yacht designers got hold of them, chines were generally steep coastal valleys – or in fact a method of taking cuts of meat from the spine of an animal (preferably dead). Anyway, once yacht designers got hold of them, they took on an entirely new meaning. In the world of yacht

racing a chine – essentially inserting a hard angle into the profile of the hull shape – can provide a yacht with a performance boost in certain circumstances. In the world of yacht cruising they are generally used to give a yacht a dramatic look and provide yet more internal volume aft.

Yet, in recent years, designers have begun to move away from the hard chine aft. To my mind this is no bad

thing. From a purely aesthetic point of view I have always favoured a curved backside over an angular one. That's just me though. You might feel differently; different strokes for different folks, as the Americans might say. Anyway, whatever the reason, chines are on the way out – or at least that seemed to be the case until the Beneteau Oceanis 51.1 turned up. She's designed by

ALL PICTURES: BENETEAU



Centaur which, for all its admirable qualities, is not necessarily the easiest thing on the eye. In fairness, those in the world of racing will be familiar with this concept of a forward chine which was used to good effect in the Rambler 88 (only recently; a yacht which, unlike any Westerly Centaur I'm familiar with, won the Voiles de St Barth's regatta). In common with Rambler 88, the Oceanis 51.1 carries off this forward chine with aplomb. The yacht looks smart and purposeful – a cunningly thought out two-tone paint scheme also helps her relatively high freeboard and the coachroof is low and sleek; the chine runs from the bow about two-thirds of the way down the hull and when you view the yacht out of the water it really is a very distinctive shape that adds a huge amount of volume to the hull forward. Back aft, the chine melts away and the stern swells out to a nicely rounded and shapely transom with twin rudders tucked beneath. It's an interesting new take on things and this is always exciting, as cruising yachts are rarely revolutionary yet there is something almost daring about this new yacht.

Chine on you crazy diamond

Beneteau appears to have gone a bit bonkers when it comes to branding up the range too, and there is a slightly bewildering choice of configurations comprising 'First' for a racer option, 'Cocofit' for a more out-and-out cruising option and 'Easy' for a nice simple set up featuring a self-tacking headsail, as already mentioned, plus in-mast furling. Combine that with keel options of 90, 70, 70/70 (the standard version) and off for the shallower draft version and you have a versatile and flexible yacht.

The answer was simple, stick the chine at the front of the boat. Indeed I was scratching their heads to try and work out how they could gain the internal volume of a chined hull without bucking the trend of a shapely, curved behind. Their answer was simple, stick the chine at the front of the boat.

I had to smile when I first viewed this; the last time I saw a boat with a chine at the bow it was a Westerly



with a carbon mast, 35 per cent more sail area and a deep bulbous keel as standard. In addition, the deck hardware is upgraded. This was the model I tested. In contrast, the 'Cocofit' version features that distinctive giant arch over the cockpit which Beneteau introduced across its range a few years back now. Meanwhile, the 'Easy' version comes with a self-tacking headsail, as already mentioned, plus in-mast furling. Combine that with keel options of 90, 70, 70/70 (the standard version) and off for the shallower draft version and you have a versatile and flexible yacht.

I stepped aboard the yacht via the electric dry dock landing platform with a second step that drops down obligingly and beckons you aboard. Having negotiated this, you find yourself in a comfortable and carefully thought out cockpit. The 51.1 has plenty of beam aft and that makes for more than ample room.

'Cruising yachts are rarely revolutionary yet there is something daring about this new yacht'

In common with many of the latest cruising yachts, Beneteau has opted to create two very separate areas in the cockpit. Forward of the twin wheel's is entirely devoted to the important business of lounging and there is a substantial single cockpit table which has room beneath for a liferaft, plus excellent handholds. Other than that, it's all about masses of lounging room with yet more cockpit cushions built into the aft section of the cockpit itself. The only drawback I could see is that it did mean that the mainsheet traveller was very far forward which might make it somewhat heavy in strong winds. Move on, and you get to the technical end of the yacht; the coachroof is entirely

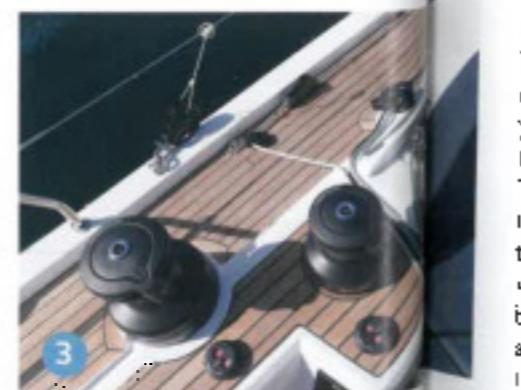
devoid of winches and clutches and instead all of the running rigging has been set in channels underneath the cockpit coamings, which all emerge right in front of the helmsman's handholds and can be dealt with via two pairs of winches which serve both steering positions. There is also a huge hatches back here and the dinghy is deployed via those fiddly telescopic pull up davits that personally I have never managed to deploy without getting them jammed or something mysteriously falling off.

The handholds were somewhat on the small side I felt, and the result was that the throttles lever didn't fit and was instead set low down and not in the ideal position for a spot of close-quarters manœuvring but other than that, this is a very efficient and ergonomically well thought out yacht which proved a breeze to handle. Wandering up forward, there was adequate deck width and decent handholds, the bow terminates in a apron

with an integrated anchor roller. There is the option of having the forward bow locker as crew quarters if required and this space is surprisingly pleasant compared to the dark dungeons that I have personal experience of.

Rise and chine

Step down below via an extremely carefully thought out companionway which has been thoughtfully angled and features plentiful handholds and you're in for a surprise. There's just so much space. You can't help but feel like going straight back up on deck to look on the side of the hull to check that this genuinely is a bit yacht as the labelling suggests. There is an awful lot of volume down here and this is particularly obvious forward where that chine really does open up the opportunity for what has to be class leading amounts of volume. There is also an awful lot of light. This is partly due to the vast amount of portlights and skylights, but it also helps that Beneteau has introduced a new finish, terraced brushed oak, that the test boat was decked out in and gave the yacht a very pleasant



1 The forward end of the cockpit is designed to be a lounge area with no running rigging in the way.

2 The cockpit is decked over and could perhaps still form part of the bimini.

3 Hull coamings run within each of the bimini.



ambience, there are four different layout options with anything up to four separate double berths with various permutations on this theme.

The choice favoured by most cruisers will probably be one large master cabin forward and a pair of doubles aft. If you choose this arrangement you get a positively palatial master bedroom with separate shower and heads. Meanwhile there are en-suites for both staterooms. In the main saloon area the galley is G-shaped and compact with an excellent bracing system should you be cooking up a storm in a storm.

Forward of the galley there is an L-shaped seating arrangement which auges in to a seating area and of the chart table. The chart table is actually far more generous

than many of the 51.1's rivals and is testament to the vast amount of extra internal volume that this is possible. All in all, the interior is lighter and noticeably different to many other production yachts and I must say I stepped back into the cockpit feeling deeply impressed with the manner in which Beneteau appear to have upped their game.

Under sail

All of this is all very well, but there is absolutely no point in managing to create all of this extra space if the boat sails like an absolute stinker. I tested the yacht off the Catalan coast and conditions were pretty modest with the breeze carrying between 10-15kts.

I was interested to see if she might be a bit sticky in such conditions as

ABOVE LEFT
The interior is exceptionally bright and looks very spacious for a 51 yacht

ABOVE RIGHT
The galley is modestly proportioned but seriously well set with plenty of storage options

that flare forward might start to drag as she heeled to the light winds. As previously mentioned, Beneteau had very wisely presented us with one of the 'first' models of its range which came equipped with the extra sail area, upgraded sail and a carbon mast. This doubtless all helped in the modest conditions and I have to say that they all behaved impeccably.

On the wind she was achieving a comfortable 6.7kts and she was light on her feet with a really impressive turn of speed. As it to back this up, I followed up a sail in the 51.1 with a quick spin in the Beneteau Oceanis 55 and – admittedly minus a genoa and with the breeze easing – this big yacht felt just more like what she was – a big heavy cruising yacht. All in all, the 51.1 was also exceptionally easy to handle and I have to say that all manufacturers have made real leaps and bounds when it comes to the leads of running rigging to ensure it all runs smoothly and is placed in precisely the right spot for sheet handing.

I had one minor niggle; it was that the helm felt a little stiffer than I expected.

Under power, the yacht behaved well and there was plenty of grip from the deep keel. Merry bat with two thrusters and you could turn the yacht on a sixpence and saw her into a tricky berth with the minimum of fuss.



NEXT MONTH
Kodiak 66
On sale 23 February

SAM'S VERDICT

The Oceanis 51.1 left me pleasantly surprised. I often come away from yachts from the 'big four' manufacturers – Beneteau, Jeanneau, Dufour and Bavaria – impressed with the sheer competence of them, but sometimes struggling to differentiate one from the other. That wasn't the case with the 51.1; she had an incisiveness to her that genuinely made an impression on me.

The champagne glass forward sections seemed to simply provide her with masses of increased volume, yet she remained slippery in light air. I would have loved to see how she performed pounding into a heavy head sea, but in the conditions we did get she was

excellent, and once you get your head around the 'Fast,' 'Easy' and 'Comfort' options they can actually keep things nice and simple and make this a massively versatile yacht. Likewise, the interior feels far less bland than many of her predecessors and contemporaries and I found it a genuinely pleasant and incredibly roomy space to be in.

What also left me impressed is that Beneteau is using its financial muscle to try to push the boundaries and that is good news for consumers.

DOCKS: ★★★★

CMI ORI: ★★★★

BLUEWATER: ★★★★★

THE SPEC

LOA 52ft 4in (15.9m)
Hull length 49ft 2in (14.9m)

LWL 47ft 5in (14.3m)

Beam 13ft 0in (4.8m)

Deep draught (cast iron)
7ft 7in (2.3m)

Shallow draught (cast iron)
6ft 1in (1.85m)

Performance draught (cast iron/lead)
9ft 2in (2.8m)

Displacement 10,712lb (4,864kg)

Fuel capacity (standard) 200lt

Fresh water capacity (standard) 400lt

Engine power 50hp

Furling mainsail (standard) 495sq ft
45.8m²

Self-tacking jib (standard) 519sq ft
48.7m²

Classical mainsail 500sq ft 50.8m²

Genoa 105% 637sq ft 61.6m²

Price (base) £241,000

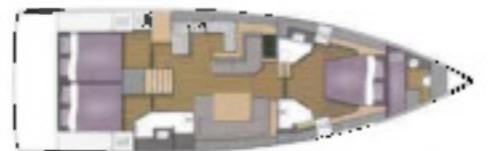
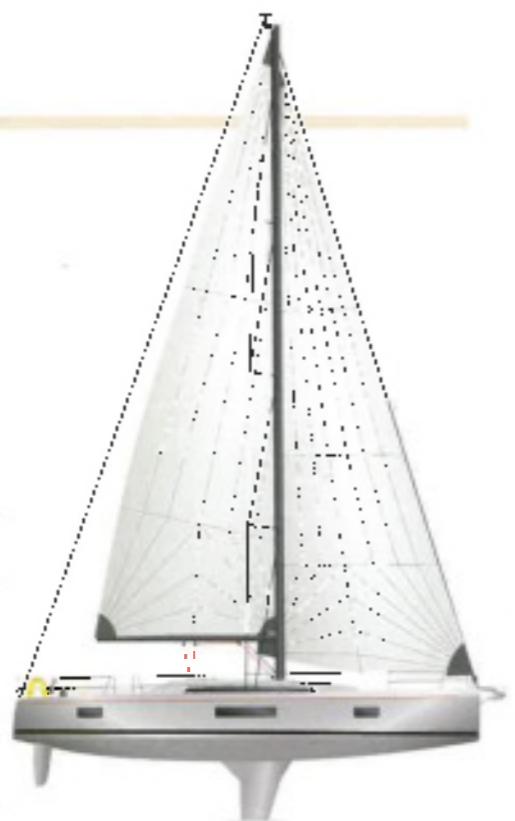
As tested £406,000

Contact beneteau.com

Website beneteau.com



For the latest news
ability and performance
beneteau.sailingtoday.co.uk

**ALTERNATIVE
YACHTS****HANSE 505**

Slightly smaller than the Oceanis, but also brand spanking new and fresh from the drawing board of Philippe Briand. Unlike the Oceanis, Jeanneau has opted to keep the chine at the stern end there is no shortage of volume available in this new design.

jeanneau.com
£251,000

**BAVARIA C50**

Bavaria's brand new C50 replaces the Bavaria Cruiser 51 and is a smart new design like the Beneteau you have three different specification options, 'Holiday' 'Style' and 'Ambition' so you can tailor the yacht to your own requirements.

bavariayachts.com
£299,000

**HANSA 505**

The Lürssen 505 has been around for a while now and she's a proven performer with a good track record. In common with the 51.1 she boasts masses of internal volume, with designer Jürgen Vrolijk utilising a high freeboard.

hansayachts.co.uk
£258,000