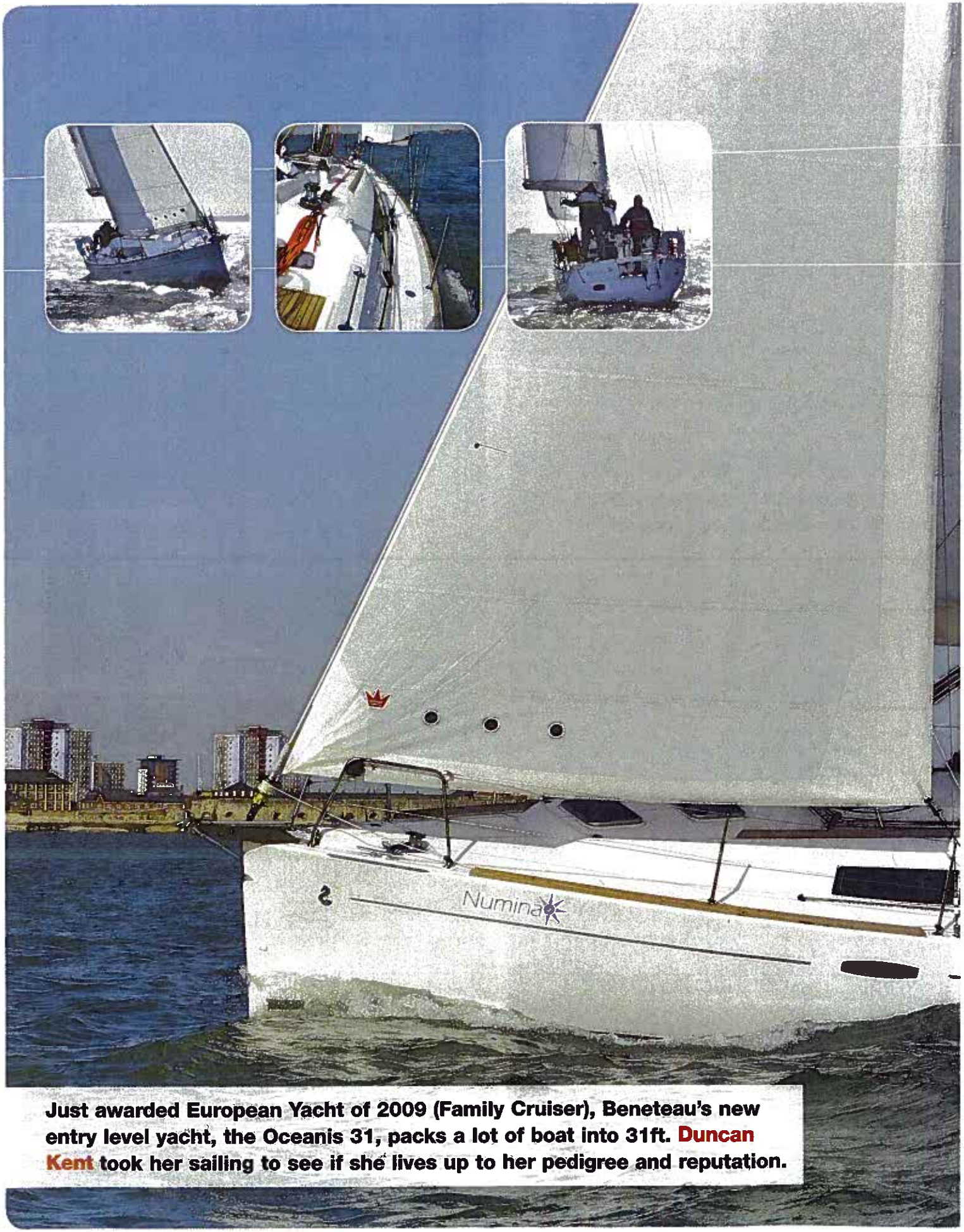
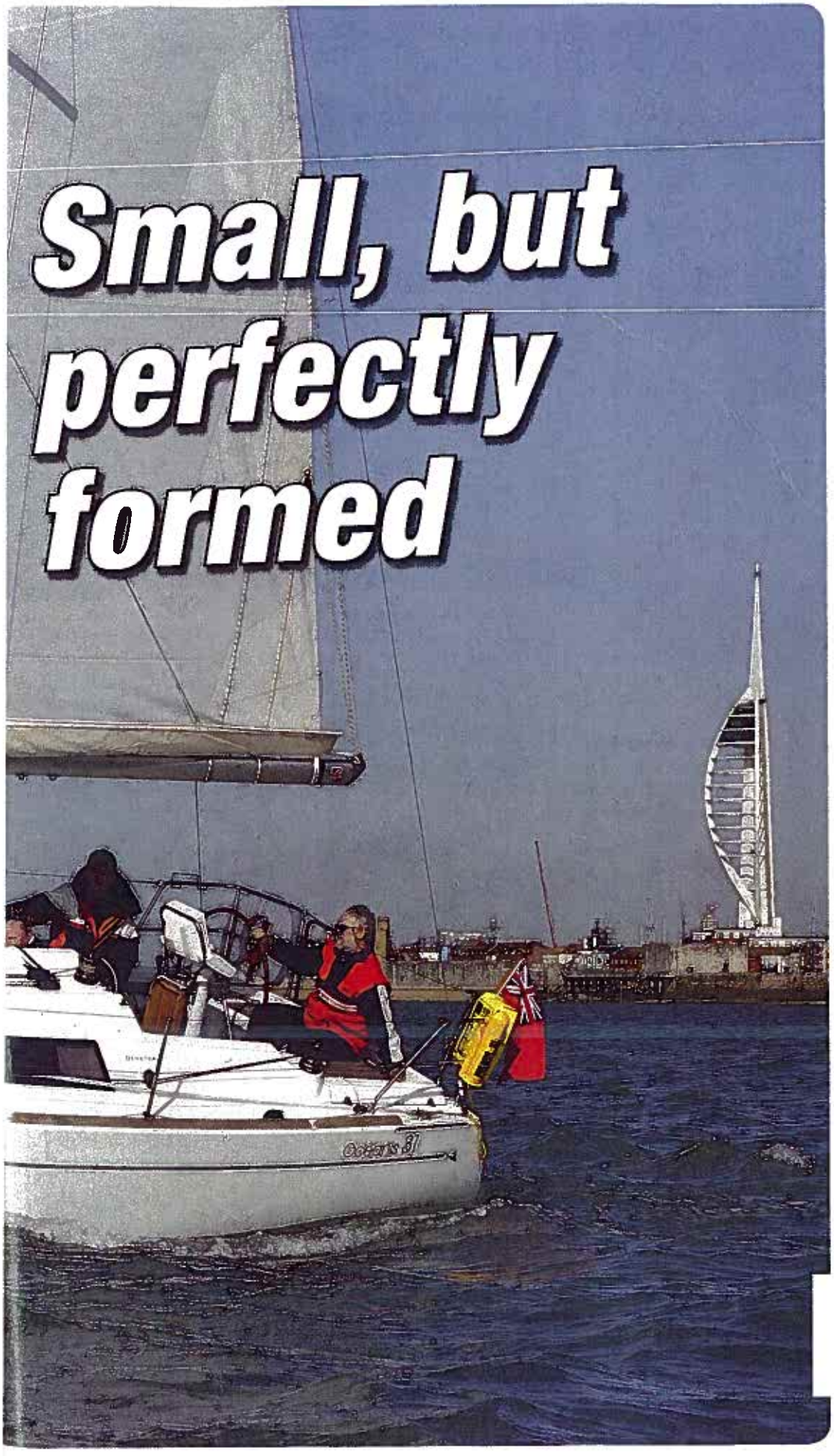


Just awarded European Yacht of 2009 (Family Cruiser), Beneteau's new entry level yacht, the Oceanis 31, packs a lot of boat into 31ft. Duncan Kent took her sailing to see if she lives up to her pedigree and reputation.

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Small, but perfectly formed

European Yacht of the Year 2009

Every five years or so, prolific French production boatbuilder, Beneteau, launches a whole new range of yachts, both in its First performance range and its more cruising orientated Oceanis range – bringing them bang up to date with contemporary design and thinking.

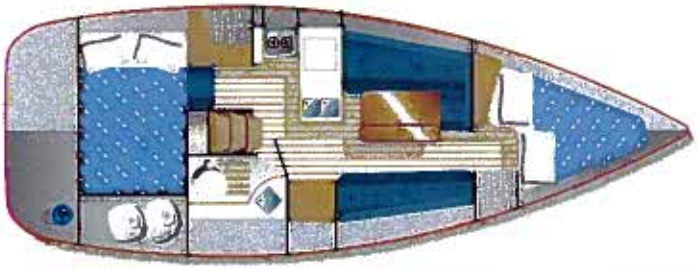
The new 31, hot on the heels of – and following in the modern style of – the new Oceanis 37, has a much lower, sleeker, profile than her predecessor with a more pronounced sheer giving her an up to the minute look. Innovative features such as her all in one companionway hatch and easy access liferaft stowage are great for family sailing and her straightforward, but well planned decks and conservative sailplan make sailing her a light-handed task.

Though she proved to be quite stiff and stable at sea with deep appendages keeping her upright and on track, she surprisingly only carries a B (Offshore) RCD certificate. Whether this was done for financial reasons (getting A-rated can be quite pricey) or whether it's stability/buoyancy under test proved wanting, I don't know, but it has to be a consideration if you plan to take her ocean sailing.

Below she is bright, spacious and comfortable with a very workable layout for family living and day sailing. I predict she will become a very popular small family boat that won't break the bank when parked in a marina.



Accommodation



1 & 1a Saloon

Below she is bright and comfortable with 1.83m/6ft headroom, thanks to her vacuum-infused solid coachroof and deck, but it's relatively basic. She has room for six to eight at the table, which has a single drop-leaf and no fiddles. The mast support drops through the centre and a second tube – for the cables – has been turned into a grab post by the addition of a leatherette covering.

What she lacks below is stowage in easy to get to places. Yes, there is some space under the settees (provided you don't have the second water tank) and there are very small cave lockers behind the seatbacks, but there are no lockers above the seating, only shelves (with particularly useless fiddle bars), which are too narrow for books, and anyway books would block out the topside portlights.



The settees are straight, but tapered. They measure 1.95m x 0.71 (6ft 4in x 2ft 3in max) to starboard and just 1.75m x 0.65m (5ft 9in x 2ft 1in) on the port side.



2 Galley

This is pretty good for a small boat and has most features you'd need for a cruise in standard trim, including a fridge, twin sinks, pressurised hot water, a gimballed 2-ring cooker with oven, gash bin, crash bar, four shallow lockers above and a pan bin below. No dedicated cutlery accommodation, though, apart from a narrow bin to the left of the cooker. Light and ventilation are good.

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3 Nav station

Although it faces aft and uses the after end of the starboard settee as a seat (which means it can't be used on passage if someone is sleeping there), this is fine for today's style of coastal cruising. It has enough space for the necessary instruments, a table with stowage for Small Craft Folio charts and a fused DC/AC electrical panel with tank/battery gauges. A small open bin takes pilot books etc.



4 Heads

Once again, not bad for a 31-footer with 6ft headroom. It is housed in an easily cleaned moulding with an electrically pumped shower drain, moulded sink and built-in holding tank for the forward facing loo. Locker space is good, as is ventilation through the opening portlight.

5 After cabin

This is a good size with the large (2.20m/7ft 3in x 1.68m/5ft 6in) double berth placed transversely – a sensible idea for sleeping at anchor or in port, but obviously no use at sea. A single, 6ft+ longitudinal sea berth could be made, however, using the seat and deploying a lee cloth. Considering this boat was designed for coastal cruising, I think this makes the best of the available space. There's a good size hanging locker, but no shelves and the water tank takes up all the space under the bunk. Two opening ports and one fixed offer ventilation and light.

6 Forecabin

A small step down into the forecabin boosts the headroom to a generous 1.87m/6ft 2in under the forehatch and a slide-out extension creates a 2.12m x 1.36m x 0.33m (7ft x 4ft 5in x 1ft) vee berth, but leaves no standing room. There is some stowage underneath and a small hanging locker together with long shelves above the berth for odds and ends.

7 Engine

Front access to her 3-cylinder diesel is poor due to her companionway steps not lifting high enough. This forces you onto your knees to carry out simple maintainance tasks. Side/rear panels help, though, for reaching round the back.





NEW BOAT TEST BENETEAU OCEANIS 31



SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	9.66m	31ft 8in
LWL	8.69m	28ft 6in
Beam	3.39m	11ft 2in
Draught (shoal/deep)	1.30m/1.80m	4ft 3in/5ft 10in
Displacement	4,052kg	8,933lb
Ballast	1,295kg	2,849lb
Sail Area	47.4m²	510ft²
Fuel	130ltr	29gal
Water	130ltr (+160ltr option)	29gal (+35gal option)
Berths	4-6	
Engine	21hp Yanmar 3YM20	
RCD category	B-Offshore	

Designers Finot-Conq & Assoc/Nauta interiors.
Builder Beneteau SA, St Hilaire, France.
UK dealers See www.beneteau.com for nearest.
Test boat supplier Ancasta Yachts (Hamble) 023 8045 0000 www.ancasta.com.
Price From £80,632 inc UK delivery and commissioning. Price includes Raymarine speed/depth, electric windlass, fridge, radio/CD, AC shore power, hot water, 2 x 70Ah batteries, 25A battery charger, gimballed cooker/oven.

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Deck, sails and rig

1 Cockpit

The cockpit is spacious and well planned. The smallish wheel and cutaway enables easy all round access and a large instrument console takes a 12in chart plotter. The optional wooden folding table also has a light. The helm seat lifts for easy access to the wide transom step, fold-down boarding ladder and cold water deck shower, but sticks up awkwardly when open. The large, L-shaped port quarter seat lifts to reveal liferaft stowage and a two-bottle gas compartment, and the deep cockpit locker to starboard is large inside, but with restricted access.

The companionway hatch cleverly incorporates a single acrylic washboard that is attached to and stows with the hatch in the garage. Seats are wood-inlaid, but not the sole, although she does have a wooden foot restraint block.

2 Decks

Access to the side decks is easy and safe with an effective moulded non-slip surface.





The genoa tracks are inboard, while the shrouds are out by the toe rail, leaving an easy walkway between. I don't like the wooden half rails on the coachroof; they're difficult to grab quickly. Also, though solid wooden toe rails look nice, they don't allow quick attachment of blocks etc.

Her foredeck is not wide, but it's safe enough for handling the ground tackle. She has a single, stout-looking bow roller and a deep chain locker with a below decks plinth for windlass mounting.

The four mooring cleats provided are adequately sized and all open with rubbing strips but no fairleads.

3 Sails & rig

She has a 9/10th fractional rig and conservative sail plan for easy handling. Her mast is supported by two cap shrouds, two lowers from just beneath the single, swept spreaders, twin backstays and a forestay with furler. She has a rope kicker and topping lift at the mast, otherwise all lines are led into the cockpit.

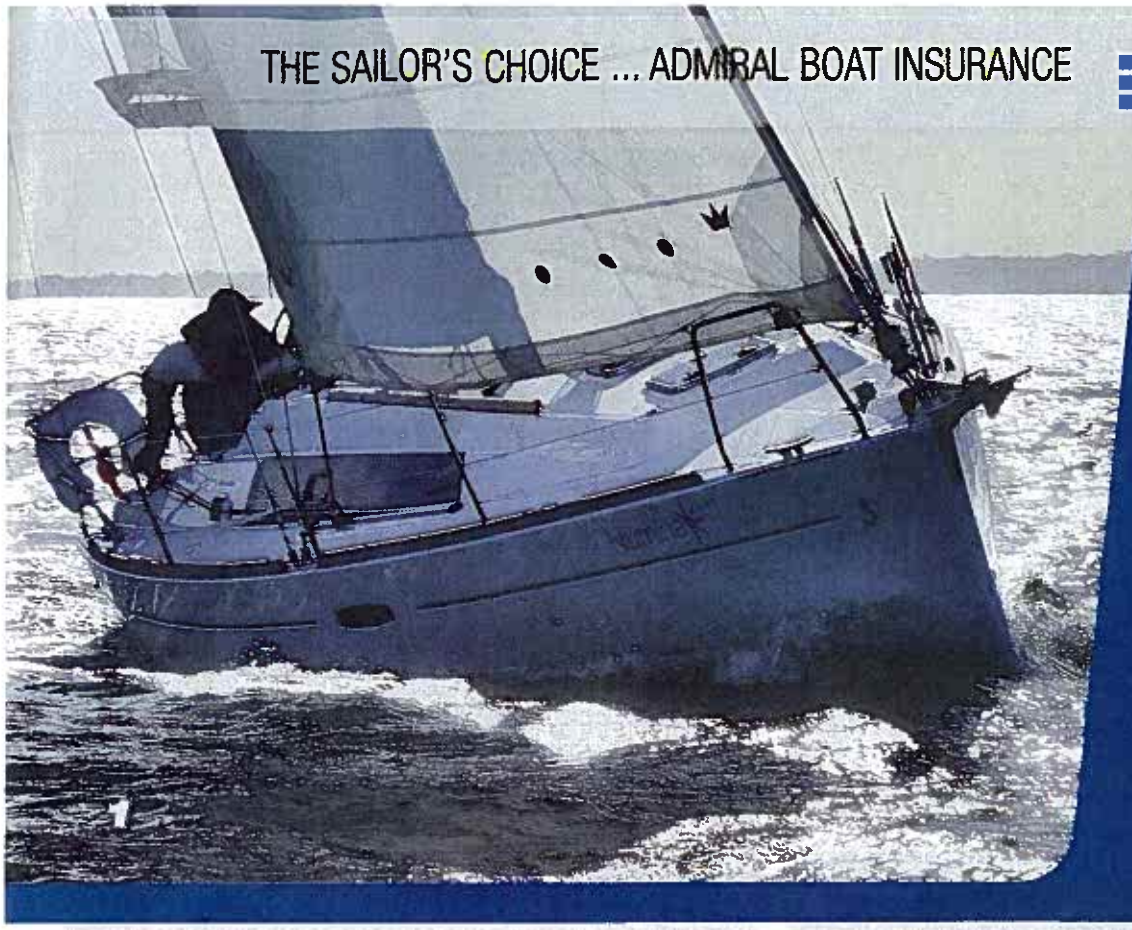
Genoa cars are cockpit adjustable and winches within reach of the helm, but the mainsheet is led from the track, just ahead of the hatch, to a single coachroof winch. A second (to my mind a must for reefing) is extra. Winches are all Harken 32.2 STC.

She has a 105 per cent furling jib with UV strip and a semi-battened, two reef mainsail with lazyjacks.



THE SAILOR'S CHOICE ... ADMIRAL BOAT INSURANCE

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Verdict

She's a fun boat to sail, handles fantastically and is one that I'd feel safe to cross the Channel in as well as coast hop. Below, she's comfortable and packs a lot of desirable gear in, but the finish was a little wanting in some areas and I came away with a few splinters after rummaging around. Stowage would be an issue for long term cruising, but for weekends and coastal work she is just what the doctor ordered.

For

- Easy to handle under sail and power
- Spacious and comfortable below
- Well planned cockpit

Against

- Not the cheapest 31-footer on the water
- Only one coachroof winch
- Lacks accessible stowage

Performance

The 31 is moderately lightweight with a shallow underbody and full waterline, so she's no slouch.

Despite having a relatively low ballast ratio of around 30 per cent, her standard deep keel keeps the cast iron ballast well down, which stiffens her up without slowing her down.

1 Closehauled

We took her sailing in the Solent on an ideal day with a F3-4 breeze and flattish seas. Setting the sails took minutes and could be done by a young teenager easily. It wasn't long before we were closehauled, mainsail only out of Portsmouth, trying to keep within the channel marks and slicing through the wind *v* tide chop in the harbour approaches. She felt delightfully balanced, light on the helm and nicely controlled – even as we pinched her up to keep inside the marks. A steady 12kn breeze gave us 4kn until we hoisted the headsail, at which point our speed increased by a knot and she got more into a groove.

Bearing away to 35° off the apparent wind really freed her off and nudged the log to a respectable 6-6.5kn as the wind increased slightly. At 45° off she settled into a comfortable gait and I could leave the helm without the autopilot once the sails were trimmed.

She tacked through a decent 82°-85° and was pretty slick with it too. She's a boat in which you'd be happy to beat up a narrow river, on your own, with every confidence that she wouldn't embarrass you as you wove between the moorings outside the yacht club.



2 Reaching

Her favoured angle was around 50° off the apparent wind, which by now had increased to 14-16kn and was giving us close to 7kn through the water. She was in her element in these conditions, but I felt she would have been equally capable in 20kn+ with an offshore sea.

She has a lowish AVS (Angle of Vanishing Stability) of just 113.4°, but the resulting GZ curve shows the first part of the curve, up to 50° of heel, to be steep – meaning that she remains stiff up to and beyond the angle of heel at which you would normally reef.

On a beam reach we were tramping happily along at 7-7.4kn in winds of 14-16.5kn and, despite throwing her about a bit, she never flinched or hinted at any odd quirk. In fact she was a fun boat to sail, being obedient yet sprightly.

Letting the wind come from her quarter slowed her a little, her speed dropping slightly to 6.5kn with white sails only.

3 Downwind

Sadly, we didn't have a downwind sail on board, so as soon as the wind was behind us our smallish genoa was sheltered and started to flap.



However, her main is a good size and gave us a constant 5.6kn boat speed with the wind 150° off the bow. I don't doubt this would increase easily to the high sixes with a cruising chute or even a gennaker.

Off the wind she tracks reasonably well, but needs a little more attention paying to her helm when coming off a wave.

Under power

She spins around virtually in her own length and her deep rudder bites well, ahead and astern, so manoeuvring into marina berths is easy. Her sleek superstructure is not so prone to wind effects and the little propwalk evident can be used to your advantage.