

# Beneteau First 45, A Crossover You'll Want to Take to the Races

With the new Beneteau First 45 you can race hard today and cruise easy tomorrow. A boat review from our July 2008 issue

By MARK PILLSBURY JUNE 20, 2008

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Standing dockside at the Strictly Sail Pacific Boat Show last spring, I couldn't help but sneak peeks of the new Beneteau First 45, there to make its North American debut. Even tethered fore and aft, without a mainsail flaked on the boom, the boat looked like a true performer. Wide side decks promised sure footing for crew heading forward for a sail change, the clear foredeck would be a spacious place to work when setting or jibing the carbon-fiber pole, and the cockpit layout would offer elbowroom aplenty for busy jibes and takedowns.

I'd been sent to Oakland, Calif., by Cruising World, (SW's sister publication) to test sail another, smaller offering from the French boatbuilder, but it had been mentioned that if sails arrived in time, a ride aboard the racy 45 for a shakedown sail could be in the offing. Two years earlier, I'd missed out on a chance to sail the First 50, the flagship of Beneteau's crossover line. I didn't want to miss this one.

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Like its big sister, the 45's bow is sharp, its shoulders broad, and the hint of a hard chine along its quarters implied a hull designed to heel to a point and then accelerate with every puff. Luckily, the delivery man came through, and I was off to Point Richmond to discover firsthand what this new boat from Philippe Briand Yacht Design and Beneteau is all about.

The First 45 is intended for the owner who relishes performance and comfort for self and crew. On deck, the boat is all business, from its foldaway anchor roller to its open transom. Hatches mount flush so there'll be no snags, all sail control lines are tucked out of sight, the cockpit and hardware are laid out to be manageable for the shorthander, but big enough for a racing crew, and a no-nonsense traveler spans the cockpit forward of the

twin wheels.

Step below, though, and there are comforts enough to call the 45 "home." Light oak and stained Alpi (multilaminar wood veneer) contrast nicely with dark leather upholstery in the saloon and cabins. Forward, an owner's stateroom includes head and shower and enough room to dress for dinner. Aft, there are two double cabins; both with soft-sided hanging lockers similar to those found on the First 50.

On the day of our test sail, San Francisco Bay's prevailing weather-sunshine, blue skies, and breeze in the mid 20s-had taken a holiday. Instead, the wind hovered around 10 knots, which in hindsight, was a good thing. Delayed in transit, the sails arrived late and were being pressed on in a hurry, leaving a few issues to be addressed once on the water.

Following the current trend to make big boats more friendly to small crews, the First 45 benefits from a large and powerful, full-batten main and a non-overlapping jib. With Harken 60 primary winches mounted within easy reach of either wheel, this means a singlehander or lone on-watch crew can easily tack and trim the headsail and power the main up or down by playing with the nearby traveler lines. The main is led outboard from the forward end of the boom and then aft to a pair of Harken 48 winches (port/starboard) on the cockpit coaming. Halyards are led to a like-size winch on the cabin top. In race mode, of course, there'd be other hands to attend to these chores, and fret not, the First 45 is set up with the necessary adjustable genoa tracks and spin gear to keep everyone busy.

Even flying a very flat main that would've benefited from a trip to the tailor (and was missing a lower sailslide), the First 45 turned in a respectable 6 knots over the ground in our light-air conditions, and tacked through just under 100 degrees. Cracked off to a reach we gained a knot or better. Later in the afternoon, the breeze built into the high teens and the boat settled in and then surged ahead. As a side note, given the intelligent placement of nearly every piece of sailing apparatus, I found myself scratching my head over the location of the chart plotter, which was at about ankle level behind the portside wheel. It was difficult to read and I could only imagine the position one would have to assume to punch in waypoints.

Below, when under way, the motion was steady and I found handholds in all the right places as I moved fore and aft. I can also report there were no squeaks or groans to be heard.

Not that there should have been. The hull is solid glass, laid up with bi-axial and uni-directional glass with an inner structural liner that's affixed both with adhesive and glasswork. Bulkheads are bonded 360 degrees to the hull and deck. The deck itself is an infused fiberglass and balsa sandwich, with solid glass areas where hardware is mounted. The mast is stepped through the cabin top and sits on the liner, which also carries loads from the chainplates, engine, and keel. The hull-deck joint relies on mechanical fasteners and polyurethane adhesive.

There are two keels available on the 45, a "shallow" 7'10" cast iron bulb and fin, and a deep, 9' lead foil. The boat we sailed carried the shallow keel. The rudder, riding on self-aligning swivel bearings and connected to the wheels with chain and cable, is responsive to the lightest touch. Closehauled, we rode along without a finger on the wheel and could easily fine-tune our direction with just a tug on the traveler. Under power at hull speed, the rudder had us doing donuts in the boat's own length.

The 45 is pushed along by a 54-horsepower Yanmar with saildrive and three-bladed folding prop. Fuel capacity is light for long-distance deliveries at 53 gallons, but then again, this is a boat that you'll want to be sailing.

The 45 we sailed came fitted with "S" (for sport) and racing options that include composite wheels, a teak cockpit sole, and a triple-spreader, 9/10 tapered aluminum spar with Dyform wire. The boat is also available with a carbon package that buys you a two-spreader carbon-fiber mast and rod rigging.

In either version, the First 45's galley, to starboard of the companionway, is well laid out. This boat had a four-burner propane stove and oven; centerline sinks, and refrigeration, of course. To port is a head with a shower that will double as a wet locker for those coming off watch. Forward, the ample nav station faces outboard, with plenty of room to add display screens, and a built-in space for the laptop. A pair of bolt-down chairs augments the saloon table and L-shaped settee to port amidships. To starboard, if fitted out with a lee cloth, the settee would make a handy sea berth.

The base price is \$310,00. The boat we sailed, with the S and race options, inverter, teak decks and other upgrades costs in the \$350,000 range.

Passage Yachts broker Torbin Bentsen, who was on board for the test sail, planned to spend some quality time tuning things up before heading off to a regatta down the Bay the following weekend. He later raved about the sailing, which on the second day saw the First 45 win its division and place fourth out of 250 boats (the boat's San Francisco Bay PHRF rating is a 24). He tells me I would have had fun, had I been on board. And to be truthful, the First 45 is a boat on which I'd love to bang around the cans. But, once again, it looks like I'll have to wait.

LOA 46' 2"

LWL 38' 7"

Beam 19' 9"

Draft 9'

Displacement 23,369 lbs.

SA (u/d) 1,232 sq. ft./2,276 sq. ft.

Base price \$310,000

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