

BOAT TEST

By John Kretschmer with photography by Bob Grieser

Beneteau First 40

Stylish and fast, this latest racer-cruiser has already won the Sydney-Hobart race

There are boat tests, and then there are boat tests. I sailed the exciting new Beneteau First 40 for a few hours after the United States Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, last fall. The wind was fresh and we flashed our open transom to plenty of boats as we skidded across the crowded harbor under spinnaker. On the other hand, this past December, Australian Andrew Saies and his crew sailed *Two True*, a just-out-of-the-box First 40, 628 miles in just less than four days. They were on their way to an overall win in the most recent running of the Rolex Sydney Hobart race. This legendary Southern Ocean get-together can test the mettle of the stoutest sailors and the most promising boats. *Wicked*, another new First 40, claimed second place overall, finishing just behind *Two True*. To my way of thinking, all three boat tests do a great job of defining the capable and versatile new Beneteau First 40.

Beneteau is hoping that the First 40 takes up where the wildly

successful First 40.7 left off, that is, winning serious races all around the world while also appealing to a broad cross section of performance sailors. And judging from the early results, the world's largest sailboat manufacturer has hit the target once again. Designed by Bruce Farr, the First 40 does an admirable job of blending a truly fast hull with a very stylish interior. And although another magazine named the Beneteau First 40 the crossover boat of the year, that's not quite right. It's not likely you will buy the First 40 because of its interior, although the oak-finished cabin is certainly handsome and surprisingly comfortable. Let's be candid, the reason for buying a Beneteau First 40 is because you want to sail fast all the time, and there's nothing wrong with that.

The details

The First 40 looks fast tied to the dock. From the plumb bow to subtle raked stern, the lines are essentially straight and thoroughly modern. And yet, I know this sounds contradictory, there is something classic, at least from a racing aesthetic, about the look too. I like the low-profile, wedge-shaped cabintrunk and the wide, workable side decks.

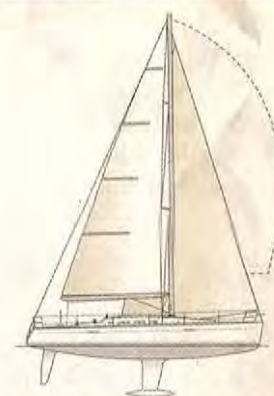
The First 40 is built somewhat conservatively with a solid hull and cored deck. This appeals to me and reminds me of the original First series boats. I just sailed a 1981 First 456 to the Bahamas. It was an Admirals Cupper in its day, and it still sails brilliantly, but what impressed me the most was the quality of the construction. The boat was in excellent condition. I suspect, many years after this review is long forgotten, the same will be said about this new First 40.

The vinylester resin-infused layup is sophisticated and features zone-specific stitchmat laminates for extra strength in high-load areas of the hull. A structural grid, as part of a hull liner, is laminated to the hull. Using a mold for the grid and liner streamlines production and results in a strong, stiff and light composite. The deck is balsa cored to keep it light and also for thermal and acoustic insulation. Reinforced solid glass laminates support the deck beneath high-load areas such as sheet winches, tracks and the anchor windlass.

The main bulkheads are bonded to the hull through 360 degrees and the molded deck beams supply additional support. The balanced rudder blade is raked slightly and positioned well aft for optimal downwind steering. Two keel options are available. The standard model has a draft of 6 feet, 4 inches, while the 8-foot deep-draft model is proving more popular with serious racers. Both keels include flared iron sections with a lead bulb.

On deck

The large cockpit features a scooped-out single wheel and ingenious removable seat/lockers. With the seats removed, the crew is able to sail the boat aggressively without having to climb over anything during maneuvers. You can muster a lot more power on a winch when standing up. With the seats in place, the cockpit becomes more accommodating and they also double as good-sized storage lockers. The life



Beneteau First 40

LOA 41'3"; LOD 40'2"; LWL 35';
Beam 12'9"; Draft standard 6'4";
Draft deep 8'; Displacement 16,614 lbs.;
Ballast 7,369 lbs.; Sail area 848 sq. ft.

Sailaway Price \$299,000

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raft locker is cleverly located beneath the sole. The open transom allows easy access to the water by way of a fold-down ladder. There is not much of a bridgedeck, however, and although the cockpit is designed for almost instant draining through the transom, it wouldn't take much for water to slosh below.

Clever features aside, the First 40 cockpit is all about sail handling and helming efficiency. The 63-inch wheel is best steered from either coaming where the visibility is unobstructed. The mainsheet traveler is on the sole just forward of the wheel. The sheeting arrangement is the so-called German system, where the sheet winches are also used for the mainsheet. Speaking of sheet winches, the First 40 features Harken 48ST primaries and spinnaker winches located on the coamings and two 44STs mounted on the aft end of the coachroof where most sail control lines are led. The single backstay comes standard with a hydraulic adjuster.

As mentioned earlier, the side decks are wide and easy to navigate and work. The nonskid is superb. A small teak toerail lends a bit of elegance. The tall rig includes a ta-



Showing off its Rolex Sydney Hobart Race winning ways, the recently launched Beneteau First 40 powers through the Chesapeake Bay.



pered three-spreader spar set up as a 9/10 fractional rig. The standard spar features double spreaders. The standing rigging is comprised of flattened, superstrong dyform wire. The single pod chainplates virtually eliminate the worry of crevice corrosion down the road. A hydraulic vang is standard, as is a double foil on headstay. The deck is prefitted for spinnaker gear.

Underway

Back on the bay, Garth Hitchens from Annapolis Yacht Sales, the local Beneteau dealer, had assembled a crack crew to put the First 40 to the test. As soon as we cleared Back Creek and canned the engine, we popped the spinnaker, a broad shouldered S1 chute that immediately powered up the First 40. The conditions were ideal: 10 to 14 knots with a modest chop. Driving toward the Bay Bridge, we sped up over 7 knots on a deep reach. Heating things up a bit to stay in deep water we accelerated over 8 and then flirted with 9 knots.

It was nice to have an accomplished crew in place and we executed several surprisingly fast jibes.



The cockpit was a flurry of activity as Garth and his team were also sailing the boat for the first time. Taking the helm I was impressed how easy it was to sail under the kite, the steering was fingertip easy and the boat felt extremely well balanced. There was not a hint of skittishness. We eventually dropped the spinnaker and raised the No. 2 headsail with the wind building to near 20 knots.

The First 40 is primarily designed for nonoverlapping headsails. Bringing the boat into the wind and trimming hard we maintained good boat speed, even when pinched up high. We tracked nicely and worked to keep the boat flat and fast, we flew up into the reaches of the Severn River. Tacking through 80 degrees, we accelerated smartly as we made our way back toward the broader bay.

Down below

We came about one last time and headed back toward the marina on Back Creek. I reluctantly gave up the wheel and dropped below. The companionway is easy to negotiate with just three steps and two well-positioned handholds.





The 40 easily shoulders aside the bay chop, above. Facing page, the crisp and clean interior is a mix of laminates and oak veneers. The layout features a nicely appointed galley and a generous wraparound navigation station.

The interior is bright; a mix of white laminate and light oak veneers. The arrangement is fairly predictable. The galley is immediately to port when you come below. It's well thought out, with double sinks facing forward, a good sized icebox/fridge and a smallish two-burner stove. There is not much counter space, but with a cover

board for the stove, you can certainly make the galley work. There is a surprising amount of storage, including a dedicated rubbish bin, a small thing I know, but something that's really needed.

The wraparound nav station is opposite the galley and is the best feature of the interior. It includes a chart table and a desk, perfect for

a computer, and plenty of room for radios and repeaters. I applaud Farr and Beneteau for including a nav station at all. The saloon includes settees port and starboard with storage above. A centerline table opens up to allow seating for most of the crew. I wonder if any thought was given to adding a pilot berth on one side in lieu of the small outboard locker bins. It would seem to make sense, given the serious nature of the boat, and provide a true, out of the flow, sea berth.

The forward cabin offers a V-berth, a dressing chair and a small hanging locker. The head is to starboard. It's compact but has the essentials—what else do you need in a head? It's interesting to see a 40-foot Beneteau, First Series or not, with just a single head. I think it makes perfect sense. There are two equal double cabins aft, a curious use of space, but an arrangement that Beneteau has proven is very popular. Name another 40-foot boat that can win the Bermuda Race and the Wednesday night series and has three private sleeping cabins? There's good natural light with several hatches and a molded white liner. Ventilation is terrific with opening portlights complementing the overhead hatches.

The First 40 is powered by a 3-cylinder, 40-horsepower Yanmar with a saildrive gear and a two-bladed folding propeller. Performance under power was very good as we hurried down Back Creek. It was necessary to "parallel park" the First 40 with little room between two other new boats, and we slipped in without a fuss.

Engine room access is from behind the companionway and through each aft cabin. The fuel capacity is 36 gallons, and the rotomolded tank is located under the aft bunks. The standard electrical system includes one house and one starting battery. If you want to race offshore, or take a summer cruise, the battery capacity will need be beefed up. The freshwater system consists of two 26-gallon rotomolded tanks under the port and starboard settees. Pressure water is standard as is a manual backup pump.

The Beneteau First 40 is a performance boat that we can all aspire to, and that's vital in these difficult times. It is designed for "like" racing, not one-design, and that's also important today. This boat appeals on many levels to be sure, but what will assure the success of the First 40 is the fact that it lives up to its name.