



BENETEAU FIRST 40

The latest in a line of successful racer-cruisers

BY ANDI ROBERTSON

→ THE FARR DESIGNED FIRST 40 IS THE follow-up to Beneteau's highly successful First 40.7, a boat that won a series of key international races and quickly established itself as a performer. Over the boat's 11-year lifespan, Beneteau has sold more than 800 First 40.7s to customers around the globe.

Launched in Europe less than a year ago, about 90 of these new 40-footers have already been sold, and the design scored first and second places under IRC in the most recent Rolex Sydney Hobart race. Right now the 40-foot market is probably even hotter than it was when the 40.7 debuted, with a

number of strong competitors both on the racecourse and in the marketplace.

Construction The First 40 is built in a similar way to the First 45 and the First 35, with the hull injection-molded into a closed mold using polyester resins, fiberglass and a balsa core. Injection allows good control of the hull weight and produces a very regular laminate. A structural inner liner is bonded throughout to the hull, and all major loads are carried by a chassis of solid laminate moldings. The deck is balsa-sandwich-reinforced with unidirectional rovings.

There are two keel options: a shallow version that draws 6ft 4in and a lead-cast iron T-keel that draws 8ft. The T-keel weighs about 760lb less than the shallow one, has substantially less wetted surface and produces a significant performance advantage.

The hull shape appears beamier, lower and sleeker than the 40.7. It is also a foot longer than the 40.7 with 25 percent more righting moment, thanks to a number of new build technologies that have lowered the center of gravity and reduced the overall hull weight.

Powerful stern sections are complemented by a generous, but shallow aft overhang to reduce the static, measured waterline and wetted surface area. Of course, as soon as the hull heels the effective waterline increases. The shorter waterline also brings the wheel forward, providing plenty of room aft for the helmsman and a tactician.

Under Sail We test-sailed the boat not long after the model was launched, in Marseille, France. In light conditions, with 5-8 knots true wind, the boat moved nicely through the water, especially upwind where the feel from the rudder was extremely light and well balanced. With the T-keel, the boat feels similar to the First 10R but is nowhere near as fidgety. Nonetheless, it is vital to build flow over the foils before looking for height upwind. On the racecourse, slow-speed mark roundings will benefit greatly from precise steering and careful coordination with the trimmers.

In 10-13 knots, the boat quickly fell into a groove, tracking nicely with a very light helm, thanks to the high-as-



The belowdecks finish of the First 40 is light and airy, thanks to its light oak veneer.

pect rudder. It responded nicely and predictably to both the puffs and good sail trim. The boat thrives on correct twist control. With vang and mainsheet trim of prime importance, backstay tension is secondary.

In cruising mode, the First 40 seemed plenty stiff and safe enough to do all the work for the crew. Downwind with the kite, the boat was happy to soak low even in the lighter breeze, retaining a good feel on the helm. In 15-22 knots of breeze, it was a joy to steer upwind, even with just three aboard as crew. A few inches of ease on the mainsheet was all it took to keep the boat on its feet. We made 6.7 knots and more with minimal effort and no weight on the rail. When pressed, the boat was happy to pinch high, feathering in the gusts with a precise, accurate feel from the rudder.

As the breeze built to 20-22 knots, the boat's motion became something of an eye-opener. It had an almost unexpected urgency and it was a pleasure helming her in among the waves and playing around with the sail plan. In every respect the boat was responsive with nice, smooth acceleration and a light, enjoyable helm.

The cockpit is excellent. Removable cockpit lockers can be left on the dock during racing, as can the transom seat.

The simple A-frame wheel pedestal is neatly executed in cast steel, keeping the weight low. Below the helm there is a generous, liferaft-sized locker with excellent access to the steering quadrant. The overall balance between ergonomics for the racing crew and safety and comfort when cruising is excellent. Sail controls are also well placed.

Accommodations The interior finish is very nice. The production techniques for the wood joinery present a uniformly high quality appearance throughout the boat. The layout belowdecks is similar to the 40.7, with the head forward, creating an ensuite cabin arrangement in the bow. The berth is 6ft 8in long and about 2ft at its narrowest.

The light oak veneer creates an airy, contemporary ambience. The nav station has lots of flat surface area and easy access for mounting instruments. The twin aft cabins are spacious, with 6ft of headroom, hanging lockers and decent sized berths measuring 6ft 6in long with a good 5ft at their maximum width. The saloon is accommodating and pleasant; the atmosphere is ideal for evening meals while cruising or relaxing after a race.

On the down side, with the table on centerline, the saloon is not great for laying out sails or working in general when racing. There could also be more hand-holds. I felt a little vulnerable moving around when the boat was well heeled.

Conclusion A healthy upturn in the sales graph suggests that the good-looking First 40 is set to match the success of the 40.7. In many respects, the boat's looks are a little more conservative than those of its predecessor, but that's not a bad thing. It is a well-thought-out performance cruiser-racer that will no doubt go from strength to strength. **NSR**

Other boats to look at:



Dufour 40E Performance



X-Yachts X-40



I/122



Specifications

BENEteau FIRST 40

HEADROOM 6ft 3in // **BERTHS** 6th 8in x 5ft 5in (fwd), 6ft 6in x 5ft 1in (aft)

LOA 41ft 3in // **LWL** 35ft

BEAM 12ft 9in

DRAFT 8ft (deep); 6ft 4in (std)

DISPLACEMENT 16,614lb

BALLAST 6,610lb (deep); 7,369lb (std)

SAIL AREA 1,054 ft²

FUEL/WATER/WASTE (GAL) 36/52/12

ENGINE 40hp Yanmar w/sail drive

DESIGNER Farr Yacht Design

BUILDER/AGENT Beneteau USA, Marion, SC, 843-629-5300, beneteauusa.com

PRICE \$222,340 (base boat)



Our Take

PROS

- Delight to steer
- Easily worked in a wide range of conditions
- Cockpit combines racing ergonomics with cruising comfort
- Nice finish belowdecks

CONS

- Saloon lacks space for storing sails and working below when racing
- Lack of hand-holds below