



big wheel for steering from coamings

proper hardware for racing

eyebrows over opening ports reduce leaks and allow ventilation when it's raining

# BENETEAU FIRST 35

Another winner from France **BY PETER NIELSEN**

**OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS** Beneteau has completely replaced its aging First line of performance cruisers. The First 50 and 45, launched in 2008, were joined in 2009 by the First 40 and last year by the First 30 and 35. Like the 50, 45 and 40, the First 35 is a Farr design to the IRC rule, intended not just to blast around the buoys but to compete in longer races and also to cruise in comfort.

That's why there is a choice of three rigs: standard, performance (also aluminum but with rod rigging) and a carbon-fiber racing version. It's also why the cockpit is set up to accommodate a full racing crew but can also be easily worked by a cruising couple. The double-spreader fractional rig is powerful but its non-overlapping headsail is easy on the crew.

Although the boat I sailed was set up with a symmetrical spinnaker, the addition of a retracting bowsprit to take an A-sail on a snuffer or furler would make more sense for shorthanded crews.

The styling is understated, the most noticeable touch being the "eyebrow" above the portlights. This actually serves a purpose other than visual; it shades the portlights, and also lets you keep

them cracked for ventilation in the rain.

**Construction** The first 35's hull is constructed with a solid laminate of fiberglass mat and rovings and polyester resin, laid up by hand. The layup schedule also includes a layer of blister-resistant gelcoat. The deck is an injection-molded balsa/fiberglass sandwich, glued and screwed to the hull. An inner liner provides structural integrity, a base for furniture, and helps spread the loads from the rig and cast iron keel. A 7ft 3in-deep T-keel is standard. A shoal-draft keel drawing 5ft 11in is also available.

**On Deck** The cockpit is dominated by the massive wheel, which somewhat impedes easy access forward. The open transom style is becoming common on performance cruisers, and certainly adds to the looks of the boat. It can be closed off with a removable beam. There's reasonable stowage in a large locker and in a lazarette below the sole, which could also take a liferaft.

Well-sized Harken winches deal with halyards, control lines and the German mainsheet system. There is a full-width traveler ahead of the wheel. The lack of a

cockpit table indicates a racing bias, but cruisers will enjoy the seats, which are well-angled with deep coamings to lean against; they're set well apart but a full-length cleat on the sole provides an essential foot-bracing point.

The jib sheet tracks run alongside the house so access forward along the wide side decks is impeded only by the shrouds. There's a large anchor locker; the bow roller is detachable (and therefore not trustworthy in heavy conditions), and a windlass is optional.

**Accommodations** Wrapped in this sleek package are all the essentials for a comfortable coastal cruise or regatta week, framed by light Alpi blond teak and oak veneers throughout. Nauta Design did good work in styling this interior. Light streams in through the ports, overhead

In a clever use of dead space, the water heater is under the saloon table. The double doors to the forward cabin are another neat feature



PHOTO COURTESY OF BENETEAU YACHTS (TOP); (BOTTOM)



hatches and wide companionway. The saloon is well proportioned and functional; there is decent headroom and handholds are right where you want them. I was not surprised to find that the saloon is the same length as the First 40's, albeit a little narrower.

Between the two settee berths is a sturdy folding table, under which is the water heater. Both can be swung out of the way to reveal the keel bolts. The heater is there because it won't fit anywhere else, what with the aft cabin and large cockpit locker stealing all the room aft, and water tanks under the saloon seats. It's actually a clever use of what is usually dead space. I expect that the main complaint leveled against this boat will concern the shortage of long-term stowage, though there's enough for a few days away.

The interior is made even brighter by the double doors to the forecabin, a clever idea that facilitates access on either tack and vastly increases the feeling of spaciousness. I was pleased to see a large chart table, for these are becoming a rarity in modern boats. Of the two sleeping cabins, I would go for the forecabin every time; the ventilation is better, and the molded wheel well intrudes into the aft cabin's bunk. My only other criticism is that the galley lacks dedicated work surfaces, but that's also true of many other boats this size. All in all, this is a functional, cheerful interior.

**Under Sail** I spent an enjoyable afternoon on board the First 35 in the company of a half-dozen other sailing writers, all jostling to get their hands on the big wheel. The wind speed seldom exceeded 10 knots, but it was more than enough to get this easily driven hull scooting along at 7-plus knots. With optional inhaulers on the jibsheets, towable genoa cars, and the outhaul, cunningham, vang and backstay adjuster all falling easily to hand, this is a real tweaker's boat. But non-racers shouldn't be put off by all the strings; you don't need to be Russell

Coutts to get this boat going fast.

I found the helm neutral and fingertip-light once the boat slipped into its windward groove. Its predecessor, the 34.7, tended to demand constant attention from driver and trimmers, but from the moment you take the wheel you can tell the 35 is a forgiving boat.

Tacking, the First 35 kept speed up all the way through the wind and powered up as soon as the jib was sheeted in, pointing readily to within 30 degrees of the apparent wind. Sightlines from behind the big wheel were excellent, and the mainsheet was within easy reach, though if you were alone on deck you'd have to leave the wheel to tend the jibsheets.

A couple of miles under spinnaker revealed no bad manners; the boat carried the kite from dead downwind up to around 75 degrees off the wind under perfect control.

The ratios indicate a fast but not extreme boat, with a high power-to-weight ratio and an efficient hull form. The high-aspect ratio rudder and deep T-keel, with its skinny foil, are not at their best at low speeds, but this seems such a slippery boat that going slow should not be much of a problem.

**Under Power** Like Jeanneau, Beneteau has finally succumbed to the allure of the sail drive concept. The 29hp Yanmar diesel swings a two-bladed Flexofold folding propeller; it would be sacrilege to put a fixed-blade prop on a boat such as this. The installation is quiet, and with the exception of the oil filter, all maintenance points are easy to access. The boat spun in its own length under power and backed up under perfect control.

**Conclusion** It is never easy for builders to come up with a successor to a boat that has established a large and loyal following. The First 36.7 was such a boat, and the First 35 improves on it in many respects. It deserves to build a similar reputation. **NSR**

#### Other boats to look at:



X-34



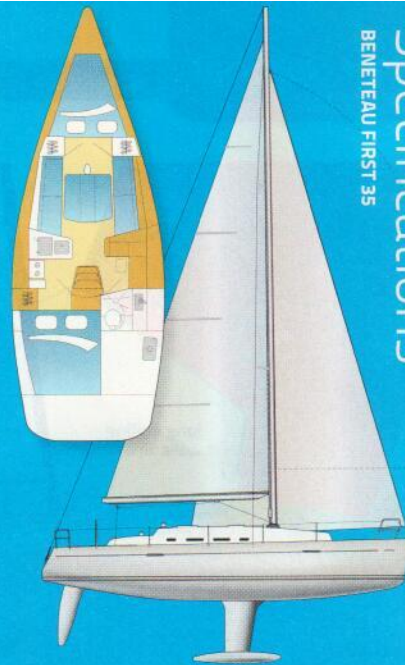
Archambault 35



Dufour 34e

## Specifications

BENETEAU FIRST 35

**HEADROOM** 6ft 2in**BERTHS** 6ft 6in x 6ft (fwd); 6ft 6in x 5ft (aft)**LOA** 35ft 7in // **LWL** 30ft 7in**BEAM** 11ft 11in**DRAFT** 5ft 11in (shoal draft);  
7ft 3in (deep keel)**DISPLACEMENT** 12,125lb (deep keel)**BALLAST** 4,431lb (shoal); 3,682lb (deep keel)**SAIL AREA** 780ft<sup>2</sup>**FUEL/WATER/WASTE (GAL)** 20/53/21**ENGINE** 29hp Yanmar sail drive**ELECTRICAL** 110 AH (house);  
70-amp engine battery**DESIGNER** Farr Yacht Design/  
Nauta Yacht Design**BUILDER** Beneteau USA, Marion, SC,  
843-629-5300, beneteauusa.com**PRICE** \$185,000 (sailaway)

### Our Take

#### PROS

- Excellent performance
- Easy handling
- Bright interior

#### CONS

- Open transom not kid friendly
- Limited stowage