

BETTER BY FARR

A bit of fresh thinking – or in Bavaria's case, a deluge of fresh thinking – goes a long way, especially when it's from the minds of the Farr and BMW design houses. Toby Hodges joined the debut trials of the 55 Cruiser, a radical new flagship from the German production giants

There's a hearty sail locker in the bow, with its own steps, shelves, rails and access to the large chain locker – it's a proper bosuns' store. Plus there are small lockers under each cockpit bench large enough to hide a liferaft

Without meaning to be cruel, a recession can sometimes be a mixed blessing for the consumer. It ensures the survival of the fittest among manufacturers, who have to sharpen up or be outdone by the depleting and ever more ferocious competition.

Take Bavaria, who have acted boldly on a key market trend. At the moment the only production yacht market that could in any way be described as buoyant is in the mid-50ft range, an area not covered by the German builders up to now.

But Bavaria haven't just come out with a bloated 55ft version of their cruising fleet. They went the braver (and costlier) route of using Farr Yacht Design to draw the hull lines and advise on construction and BMW DesignworksUSA for the exterior design details.

The results are significant. But what strikes you first is her

staggering freeboard height and beam – she made a Bavaria 47 next to her look like a Flying Fifteen. These topsides encompass a gargantuan interior, while allowing that coachroof to remain sleek. Combine this with low coamings and large walk-through cockpit and it's easy to deduce that her target clientele sails in the calm sunny waters of the Mediterranean.

And dare I mention the other German boatbuilder? Because the Cruiser 55 has a certain Hanse look about her, which her hull windows, twin wheels and satin grey hull do nothing to disguise. But the coachroof portholes set her apart and echo the windows, setting off an angular theme throughout the boat. Modern obviously equals 90° corners.

Clean decks were strategic to BMW's aesthetics, so everything is hidden and led aft to maintain the look and there's a feast of clever ideas to help achieve this.

ON TEST BAVARIA 55 CRUISER

Engine controls and throttle are hidden under a deck hatch and the chartplotter recesses into the cockpit table (a neat idea, but needs refining)



The aft bench/sunlounger, which spans over 4m of beam, swings out to double as a gangplank. Plus it can slide forward to join the table (once wheels are removed) for alfresco cockpit dining for up to ten. Lowering electronically, the transom door provides a large swim platform (with steps) and access to the garage, which engulfs a 3.2m RIB with outboard. There's a deck hatch above for dumping fenders inside the dinghy

The sprayhood lowers completely beneath a cover and the washboard drops down into a recess, where there is also a large opening hatch for the sheet tails from the cockpit winches. Even the coachroof winches are sunken to keep the flush look



Sole panels behind wheel raise for the helmsman to brace against, while hiding fuel and water fillers



ON TEST BAVARIA 55 CRUISER



The forward ensuite is first class and a real selling point, with separate stand-up shower room. More like a hotel bathroom, it's spacious, with large contemporary sink and mirror, attractive downlights and plentiful stowage – including a lift-top laundry basket, if you don't opt for a washing machine.

A walk-in full-headroom dressing room resides in the 'hallway' of the opulent master cabin, with enough hanging and stowage room to swallow even a diva's wardrobe ... This allows for a completely uncluttered queensize double. There's still 6ft 2in headroom and plenty of light from two large overhead hatches and two hull windows. It may need a few pictures to detract from the vast amount of pale woodwork, which can seem more static caravan than inviting cabin



Linear it may be, but the galley is a refreshing design that utilises a workstation island, which with surrounding grab bars more than satisfies the seaworthy credentials. It rather resembles a kitchen in a modern flat, complete with front-opening, full-size fridge-freezer (there's a lift-top fridge too) and large deep sink and draining sink. Stowage is abundant



The saloon is less warm and cosy, more smart and spacious, with room enough to seat eight – once the double bench (with magnetic backrest) slides out from under the island. The softly lit glass cabinet forward looks attractive, but its practicality is questionable. There's stowage under and behind all seats, including two large drawers under both end seats. Plus there's a great provisions locker under the cabinet, including wine rack



A modern apartment

If there were such a thing, the Cruiser 55 would arguably have the largest interior volume to LWL ratio I've ever seen. I'm not keen on using tape measures on interiors, as lists of measurements can get a little dull, but suffice it to say that, at 6ft 4in, German idol David Hasselhoff, 'The Hoff', wouldn't feel in the least bit cramped.

Once you've digested this prolific amount of accommodation, you'll see Bavaria have included some smart ideas, combinations and options down here. The test boat was a four-cabin model, available also with three ensembles or in four and five-cabin charter guise, where the forward cabins can be converted into one large owner's cabin post

charter life. Here, the central flexible bulkhead is designed to be removed, with a kit available to transform the starboard heads into a dressing room.

In short, the layout is wide open and contemporary, the feel light and airy, and the look minimalist and smart. Bavaria used Wenge timber heavily on their 43, 47 and 51 models, which they have continued on the 55, but in a lighter colour – ours was in walnut with oak-floor finish. But more attention to detail and quality control has been paid than we're used to on a Bavaria. Floorboards still creak, as does the deck above when anyone walks on it, but Bavaria have listened and there are grab-bars aplenty to accommodate the open spaces.



Suffice it to say that, at 6ft 4in, German idol David Hasselhoff, 'The Hoff', wouldn't feel the least bit cramped

Typical modern navstation: small and functional, with angular lift-top table, but a bit bland

Heads are nice and light (again with huge headroom), boasting a proper shower permanently mounted on a stand. A seat/cover drops over the small heads and a Perspex door keeps the wash area dry. This has a smart, deep, lipped basin and large mirror.

Identical double aft cabins have excellent headroom, changing space and stowage in tall double hanging lockers. Fiddled shelves run the length of the generous doubles and four portlights help keep these cabins airy. Hatches aft provide access to steering gear.

ON TEST BAVARIA 55 CRUISER



The 55 showed a keen turn of pace in the flat water of Palma Bay

A Bavaria with brio

Sailing the 55 proved something of a psychological test. On the one hand I was thinking: "Remember, it's a cruising Bavaria", while the more excitable part of my brain responded: "Yes, but it has been penned by some of the best performance brains on the planet." Luckily, the result was just how she should be: quick, easy and fun.

Unfurling the sails to a warm Force 3 on a typical, flat-water morning in Palma Bay, the 55 immediately showed a keen turn of pace. Despite the light airs, she was soon tracking upwind at 6.5 knots. But what quickly gnawed at me was that this came at the sacrifice of VMG: we were struggling to point higher than 50° true (30° apparent) at full gallop. The culprit turned out to be the genoa tracks, which had been mounted too low to keep the aesthetics of a clean deck. By barber-hauling the clew we were able to move up a gear and point over 5° higher – a short track on the coachroof has since been mooted.

We were fitted with the standard deep keel (2.35m), furling genoa and in-mast vertically battened main and the sails were polyester laminate (Dacron is standard).

As we headed offshore, still slipping along at around 7 knots, the breeze filled in to reach a steady Force 4. With 13 knots across the deck we were nudging 8 knots close-hauled, with the twin rudders delivering consistent tracking, let down only slightly by some play in the steering.

The sail set-up proved itself. While the brochure may quote a displacement of 16 tonnes, she was apparently measured at 18.2 tonnes half-loaded. Yet as soon as the wind

touched double figures, you couldn't hold her back: so with electric winches the 106 per cent foresail is a more powerful and versatile option than a self-tacking jib, without being a handful. A Sports package is offered, however, with taller mast and larger, fully battened main.

Beam reaching in these textbook conditions was a joy and we hit 9.5 knots on a broad reach in 16 knots – rewarding passage speeds and certainly an altogether more exhilarating ride than any other cruising Bavaria. But with only a very lightweight Code 0 aboard, it was a crying shame there was no asymmetric as her broad aft end design promises downwind potential.

Helming is comfortable with no coaming to straddle, but only the aft set of twin 58 winches are reachable (these can be powered as an option). A 'German' system led the mainsheet forward on the boom then aft to coachroof winches, where banks of clutches each side also handle the hidden mastlines.

With her low coachroof there are no visibility issues, but there's also very little cockpit protection or backrests for bracing crew. Instead they're compensated with plenty of sunbathing area: 7.5m² alone on the fully flush foredeck, plus large side decks and a huge aft bench that spans the transom. With so much clean deck area, getting the teak option is a must.

Going forward, there's a lot of boat to fall across (4.75m beam), with little to stop you doing so in a sea. The guardrails are low and the short handles on the coachroof only shin-high. The upside is that there's very little to snag sheets or stub a toe on!

Conclusion

All credit to Bavaria, they haven't simply extended their 51 and stuck a designer sticker on it. Although this is a high-profile showboat, there'd be no point paying for top dollar designers if you didn't build it properly – this prototype 55 shows a fastidious level of quality control.

Farr are reliably good, but this is the second BMW DesignworksUSA boat we've sailed and both have impressed us by bringing fresh, yet practical ideas into deck and interior design.

Some might question the height of the freeboard. I appreciate Bavaria wanted to fit a garage in below the cockpit and give good headroom in the master cabin, but you do feel dwarfed in the saloon and anything other than stern-to boarding will be a challenge.

Once again Bavaria have redefined the term 'a lot of boat for your money', and this is a whole lot of boat. The German builders have upped their game at a critical time, thanks to the positive input of fresh thinking. It will be interesting to see the response from the French builders Jeanneau and Bénéteau – due to launch a 57 and 58 respectively during the summer.

She may not be everyone's cup of tea, but the 55 will appeal to many a modern buyer – particularly those in the Med and charter boat markets. She's manageable, fast and fun.

FOR AND AGAINST

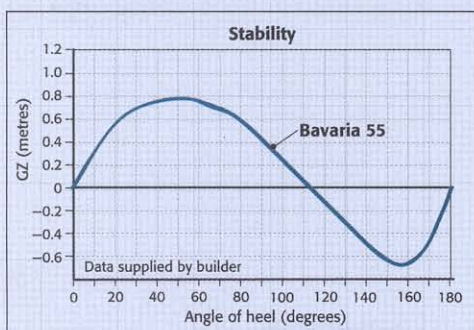
- + All windows and portholes have Oceanair blinds
- + Tanks are central and low
- + Gas springs used on most lockers
- Not enough bilge access
- Lots of corners to fall against

Prototype teething troubles:

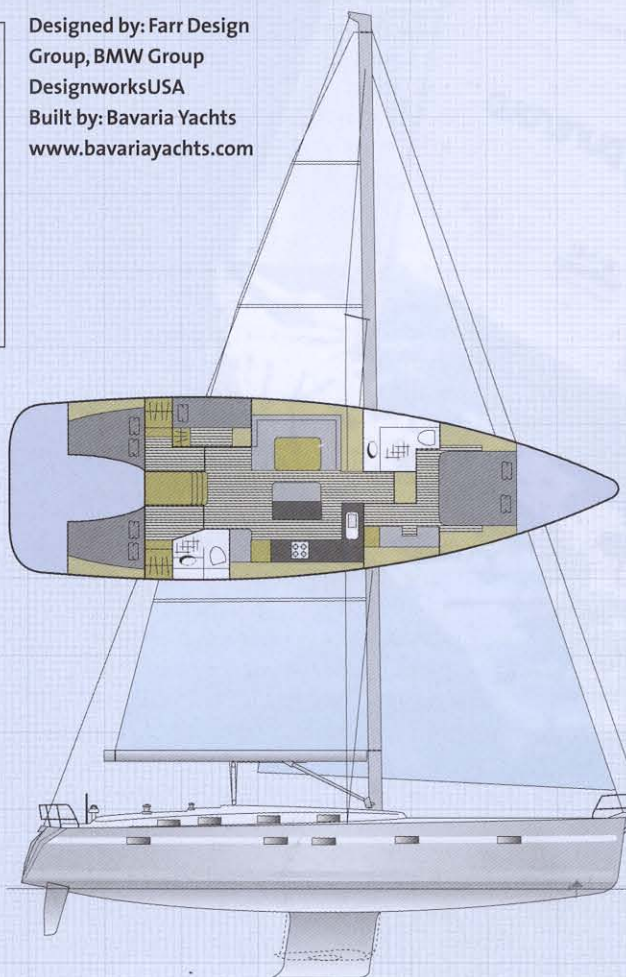
- No cockpit drains
- Aft bench too heavy to manoeuvre
- Drawer latches fail to prevent some sliding open at heel (including bench seat)
- No hatch drains



Above: the transom garage can hold a 3.2m RIB, easily launched over the boarding platform. Left: a good sailer, but that freeboard is something to behold



Designed by: Farr Design Group, BMW Group
 DesignworksUSA
 Built by: Bavaria Yachts
www.bavariayachts.com



Bavarias in build

Fifteen of this latest model have been sold to owners on designs alone. Impressive – until you learn that Bavaria need to sell 6-8 boats A DAY (including motorboats), to keep fully staffed!

The stats are mind-boggling. While production is down to 1,000 this year, with their fourth new plant for large motorboats, Bavaria can produce 5,000 boats a year. One of the reasons for this, and one that's still relevant for the 55, is that they use the same materials and techniques for each boat. Hulls and decks are hand-laminated – so it doesn't matter if the order is for a 31 or a 55, it's the same workforce and procedure.

"If we get good feedback, we will implement this design on other models, but we won't change our existing range," commented sales director Stephan Bayerle.

SPECIFICATIONS

Bavaria 55 Cruiser

LOA	16.72m	54ft 10in
LWL	16.16m	53ft 0in
BEAM (MAX)	4.75m	15ft 7in
DRAUGHT	2.35m	7ft 9in
DISP (LIGHTSHIP)	15,500kg	34,171lb
BALLAST	5,500kg	12,125lb
SAIL AREA (100% FORETRIANGLE)	119m ²	1,283ft ²
BERTHS	6-10	
ENGINE	Volvo Penta	
POWER	82kW	110hp
WATER	700lt	154gal
FUEL	380lt	84gal
SAIL AREA: DISP	19.5	
DISP: LWL	102	
PRICE (EX VAT)	£221,992	