

## **CRUISING WORLD ' BOAT OF THE YEAR'**

### **BEST PRODUCTION CRUISERS UNDER 40 FEET**

In the category that comes closest to what we might call an entry level are four boats that range in size from 33 to 38 feet. Of them, three are built in the United States (the Beneteau 343 comes from Marion, South Carolina, though her builder's corporate headquarters are in France); the Dufour 385 is imported from La Rochelle, France.

The smallest boat in this category is the **Hunter 33**. Billed as a boat that's fast and extremely responsive, one that's meant to feel more like a sportboat than a cruiser, the 33 hit many of its design objectives. The 33 would be ideal for a family who wants good value in a versatile coastal cruiser and Wednesday-nighter, Alvah reckoned. Steve praised the 33's handling characteristics under full sail and main alone or under power, where it proved to be responsive and very maneuverable.

The **Beneteau 343** follows a popular trend that increases interior space with a raised coachroof and incorporates panoramic deck lights for more ambient light down below. She looks and feels large for her size and offers unrestricted visibility and movement without dodger or bimini. The test boat had a full-batten main, a folding prop, and a six-foot-one-inch deep-draft keel--in other words, none of Bill's three go-slow factors. Consequently, she delivered six and a half knots of boat speed on a beam reach in 10 knots true. The 343 also turned heads with a steering column that swivels 90 degrees to clear the passage through the cockpit.

The biggest in this class of production cruisers was the **Dufour 385**, the midsize model in what Dufour calls its "three-digit" series, which is the cruising heir of Dufour's former "Classic" line. The boat has an exceptionally large cockpit and is the only boat in its class with twin helms, another solution for opening the cockpit passage from the transom to the companionway. The traveler was placed on the coachroof, quite typical for cruisers, but at the expense of a dedicated dodger coaming, which makes retrofits more difficult. The test boat came with a furling main, a fixed prop, and a five-foot-nine-inch keel; still, she happily delivered boat speeds of four and a half knots in a light morning breeze.

The **Hunter 38** surprised the judging panel on several counts: first, by meeting her design objectives so well, and finally by performing so well under power and sail. She was presented as a family boat that offers ease of sailing for a couple or for new sailors, a cruising boat meant to handle coastal and moderate offshore conditions. We tested the owner's version, which intrigued Bill: "The aft cabin was very well done for a 38-foot boat. I liked the passageways on both sides because it really helps the ventilation." Labeled through-hull fittings, clustered in one area, big double stainless-steel sinks, settees that function as sea berths, and an optional Bose sound system indicated how well Hunter is tuned to the wants and needs of its clientele.

Above deck, the 38 garnered high marks for a well-conceived anchoring layout that features a Simpson/Lawrence windlass, twin anchor rollers, and a cleat for the anchor rode. "Chocks and cleats were fine, and the emergency steering was very good; the [deck] flow was good; the handholds were good," noted Alvah. Steve liked that "the boat was incredibly maneuverable both under power and under sail." The traveler on top of the bimini arch kept all sail controls close to the helm and out of the cockpit. Some judges wished for larger overhead windows in the bimini to improve visibility and sail trim. The three-point Bergstrom & Ridder rig with a large main and a small blade jib made sailhandling easy with a shorthanded crew.

The boat we sailed had all three speed-inhibiting features--in-mast furling, a fixed three-bladed prop, and a five-foot shoal keel--yet she hustled along at a steady six knots on a beam reach in 10 knots of true wind. For several years, BOTY judges have noted the growing influence of Hunter's in-house designer, Glenn Henderson, and nowhere has his sailorly touch shown through more clearly than in this boat. **For these and other reasons, the Hunter 38 wins this year's award for Best Production Cruiser Under 40 Feet.**