

MULTI

A QUICK TOUR OF FRANCE'S MAJOR MULTIHULL BUILDERS

By Peter Nielsen

Our whistle-stop tour of French multihull builders begins in Bordeaux, famous first and foremost for its viticulture and also as the home of Lagoon Catamarans. If you've never experienced a major boatbuilding operation in its pomp, the row of aircraft

hangar-sized buildings that house the world's largest multihull manufacturer and its sister company, luxury monohull builder CNB, will open your eyes. Industrial-scale sailboat-building has died a lingering death in the United States, but in Europe it not only survived the recession, it seems to be thriving. France is the epicenter of European boatbuilding, and Lagoon and CNB are part of the mighty Groupe Beneteau, the Godzilla of sail and powerboat manufacturing.

As we drive over the bridge across the Garonne river, a

line of white hulls moored to the far riverbank signals the location of the 25-acre CNB/Lagoon complex. Just across the river is the new wine museum, a gigantic, rounded silver structure designed to evoke the swirl of wine in a glass (but which reminds me of a runaway blob of mercury), whose siren call will awaken the oenophile in any sailor—and there are plenty of both in France.

We arrive at the plant late in the afternoon, and the workers are slowly making their way out of the gates as marketing director Alexandre Dauberville guides us into the first of the cluster of buildings that comprise the CNB/Lagoon plant.

The first thing I notice in the mold shop is the smell—more to the point, the lack of it. The styrene stench that has historically permeated fiberglass-boat factories is a thing of the past here. Strict European environmental laws have seen to that; it is so expensive to control styrene emissions that it

COUNTRY



The combined CNB/Lagoon plant takes up a healthy chunk of real estate on the bank of the Garonne river in Bordeaux

is easier for builders to go to closed-mold construction. Lagoon, thanks to its background in building high-tech racing multihulls, was one of the first production builders to adopt a resin-infusion process, in which fiberglass rovings and core materials are laid up dry in the mold, which is then covered with plastic sheeting before a powerful pump creates a vacuum that sucks the resin into the layup. Cored hulls can thus be made lighter and stronger, and quality control—those words come up so often that it must be tattooed into the Lagoon subconscious—is much easier when you know you’re not going to find voids in the laminate. Plus, it makes for a much healthier working environment.

A long row of lidless catamarans, awaiting their innards and deck molds, stretches into the distance as we walk onto the assembly floor. I am surprised to learn that only 50-plus-foot cats are made here in Bordeaux—the new 50, 52, 560 and 620. The smaller boats—the new 40, 42, 450 and evergreen 380—are built in Belleville-sur-Vie, some

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A Neel 45 tri in build: right, the first of the new Neel 51s takes to the water

hours away. For someone who has witnessed the slow death-by-a-thousand-cuts decline of American boatbuilding over the last decade, it is hard to believe that 50ft to 65ft cats could sell by the hundreds. Indeed, so successful has the new flagship, the massive 77ft *Seventy 7*, been that it is getting its own production facility in order to keep up with demand.

Having produced some 4,000 boats since 1984, and on track to build 400 this year, Lagoon's position atop the production multihull tree remains strong, despite the best efforts of competitors like near-neighbor Fountaine Pajot and South Africa's Leopard. What is the reason? Dauberville cites the brand's 30-year association with design geniuses Marc van Peteghem and Vincent Lauriot Prevost (VPLP), along with its attention to detail and carefully nurtured reputation for building strong sea boats. Another reason, surely, must be that Lagoon sprang out of the hotbed of racing multihull development that has so captured the French imagination. Whatever, it is one of Lagoon's boasts that its boats make up the bulk of the multihull fleet in the annual Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC).

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That evening we are on the road to La Rochelle, one of my favorite towns and the home of many boatbuilders, of both the one- and two-hulled variety. Its municipal marinas

house thousands of boats—most of them with masts—and the town is indelibly linked to the sea. Catamaran builders Privilege, Fountaine Pajot, Nautitech and Bali are either here or close by, along with Neel Trimarans. It's a Mecca for multihull mavens, and for seafood lovers.

Just an hour farther down the road, in Les Sables d'Olonne, is Privilege Marine, founded in 1985 by Philippe Jeantot (who is also the founder of the Vendée Globe round-the-world race that starts and finishes here). An upscale brand known for its luxurious semi-custom interiors, Privilege builds good-looking, solidly constructed cruisers. Fortunately, we arrive in time for a brief chat with Jens Gerhardt, CEO of the Hanse Group, which had just bought a controlling interest in Privilege.

Was Hanse's interest in multihulls piqued by rival German boatbuilder Bavaria's acquisition of Nautitech a couple of years before? Gerhardt smiles. Diversification is

key in the modern boatbuilding world, he says. Multihulls are catching on fast, and not just in the charter market. It's good to have a foot in the multihull door, and linking to an established brand is not as risky as starting from scratch.

As with so many limited-production builders, times have been tight for Privilege, despite a loyal owner base. Skilled workmanship of the type needed to build out to owners' specifications doesn't come cheap, the production process desperately needs modernizing, and there was a sense of reprieve about the Hanse Group buyout. With the group's purchasing power, global sales and dealer network, and the promise of a streamlined build process that will retain the Privilege quality yet substantially decrease build cost, Gerhardt and longtime Privilege boss Gilles Wagner believe the future is bright.

For a few years now Privilege has produced just three models—the 50ft Serie 5, the 64ft Serie 6 and the 74ft Serie 7—all of them desirable, good-looking and expensive boats designed by Marc Lombard. Already, says Gerhardt, new models are being discussed. "Maybe some smaller boats," he adds. The plan is to increase production from the current eight to 10 boats a year to 20 or so in the short term. In the long term—who knows?

"It is a completely new market for us," Gerhardt admits, before, rather ominously, noting that the days are numbered for small, independent builders such as Privilege. "The boat industry is like the car industry was 100 years ago," he tells me (and with a background in the auto industry, he should know). "How many of those brands are still here? Only the big will survive."

Outside, a towering Serie 7 sits on a trailer as a work crew levered the detachable stub keels into place underneath it. These are designed to break free in the event of a hard grounding, so that the hull itself is not compromised. Inside, several other boats sit in various stages of completion, a few workers fussing over each one. The sense of regimented order so evident at Lagoon is missing here, hardly surprising in this small-scale operation. I suspect it will be very different once the Hanse Group's workflow and

technical improvements take root. It should be a shot in the arm for this respected builder, especially as Gerhardt is emphatic that its reputation as a premium brand will be strengthened, not diluted.

III

While it's difficult for a new brand to become established in the monohull world, it's different in the multihull arena. There's no better example of an interloper muscling



A Catana 42 takes shape



Bali's voluminous interiors have been a big hit

into the room and making itself comfortable than Bali Catamarans, an offshoot of the well-known Catana brand. Conceived by Catana Group CEO Olivier Poncin to make the most of the catamaran's most desired attribute (for cruisers, at least)—comfort—Bali's three models have firmly established themselves both in the charter and owner's

markets, thanks to their competitive pricing and unabashed focus on maximizing onboard living space, in the space of just three years. From the outset, Bali went after owners with no preconceptions, a strategy that has worked well for them. The fact that the cats actually sail well doesn't hurt them at all.

The 40ft 4.0, 43ft 4.3 and 45ft 4.5 will be joined this year by a 54-footer. The boats are built in the old Harmony Yachts complex near La Rochelle, one of M.

Poncin's former businesses, employing a resin-infusion process that keeps weight and cost down. Hulls and bridgedeck are foam-cored and stiffened internally by a composite grid. The open-plan layout keeps furniture requirements to a minimum, and engines aside, the most mechanically complex part of a Bali is the mechanism that opens and shuts the "garage door" that seals the interior off elements at the press of a button.

I was surprised to see the unmistakable profiles of a couple of Catanas on the production line. While the main Catana factory is some six hours' drive distant in Canet-en-Roussillon on the Mediterranean coast, the Catana 42 is produced here alongside its cousins. The woodwork and interiors for all the boats are built in Canet-en-Roussillon and trucked up to the Bali plant for assembly and installation.

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The heart of La Rochelle's commercial port district is like a microcosm of French nautical culture. Outside the workshops and offices bordering a large, open square, a couple of brightly painted Mini 6.50 pocket ocean racers are propped up in one corner, a couple of sad-looking, outdated Open 60s await news of their fate in another. Next to the marina, a long row of gleaming new sailboats



await their rigs. In one large building, an intriguing-looking trimaran peeks out. Neel Trimarans founder Eric Bruneel worked for Fountaine Pajot for many years, doing his part to establish the brand as one of the most prolific builders of cruising cats. At the same time, he harbored a not-so-secret love of powerful ocean-racing trimarans, so it was perhaps inevitable that he would combine his two passions and come up with a trimaran that would not only have all the amenities of a cruising catamaran, but perform better on all points of sail.

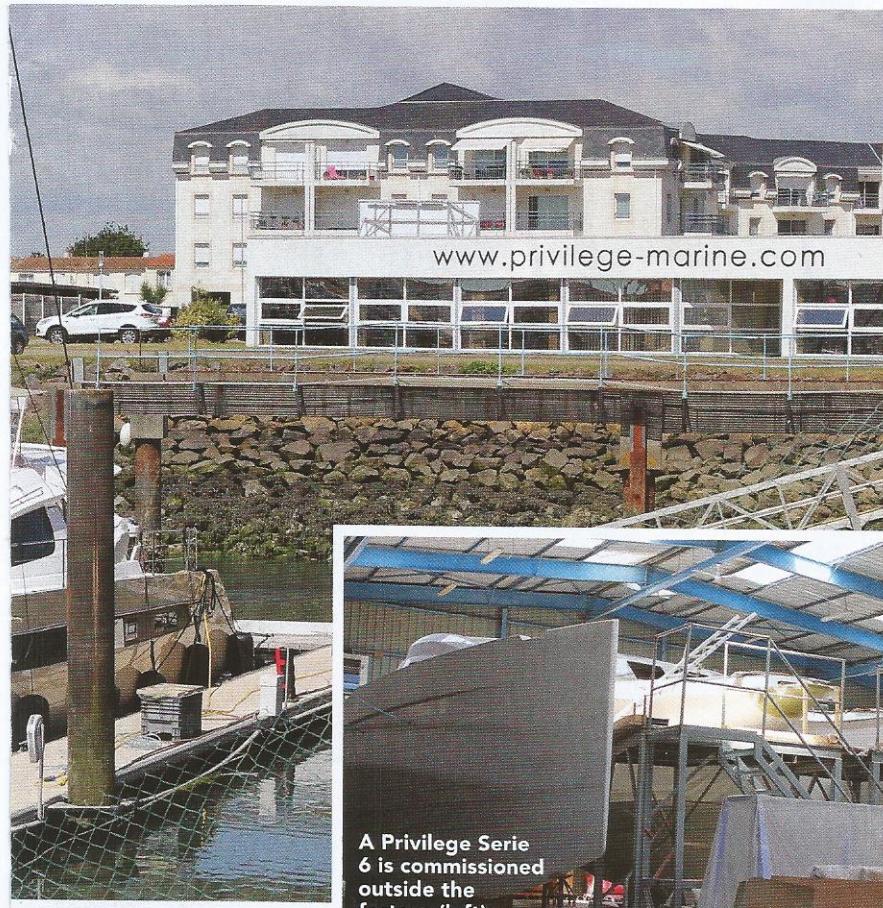
Six years after he launched his first boat, the Neel 50, Bruneel's vision has been validated with a successful 45-footer, a gargantuan 65-footer and a new 51-footer that offers a unique cruising platform in a hotly contested category. A new factory building is under way, and with a healthy order book, Neel is now a well-established player in the production multihull scene.

The first of these Joubert/Nivelt designs, the Neel 50, had a flying-saucer look to it that



Since Bavaria bought Nautitech, production has more than tripled





A Privilege Serie 6 is commissioned outside the factory (left); the Hanse Group will modernize production

took some getting used to. The styling has evolved, but what hasn't changed is the amazing amount of space inside these boats. The new 51 has four staterooms and four heads in a layout that doesn't feel at all cramped.

Bruneel's ocean racing experiences in lightly built but tough tris impressed upon him the importance of meticulous construction protocols, and to that end he's hired a top-notch building team. The hulls and decks are resin-infused, as are bulkheads and interior furnishings; all the boat's systems and fuel and water tankage are concentrated low down in the "basement," below the floor of the main hull. For ocean-crossing, the combination of centered weight and wide beam equates to a high righting moment and a more comfortable motion.

Trimarans have always had a devoted and evangelical following, and in their smaller forms, such as the Corsair and Dragonfly folding-ama boats, quite a numerous one. With two dozen Neel 45s on the water and plenty of interest in the 51, it may be time for the bigger ones to enter the mainstream.



Something of a shockwave rippled through the multihull world back in 2014 when Germany's Bavaria Yachts announced its purchase of French catamaran builder Nautitech. What would happen to this small builder with a fine reputation for building quick, seaworthy cats?

Three years later, the answer is plain to see. The Franco-German alliance is working well, with a new line of Nauti-



techs selling strongly, and plans to expand production exponentially over the next few years. Marketing director Vincent Guiot explains over dinner that when Nautitech owner Bruno Voisard sold the company, he was building 15 to 20 boats a year and had just launched the successful Open 40, but had no money to produce the 46ft version that was on the drawing board.

The Bavaria effect was immediately felt, as the company's vast purchasing power cut costs dramatically, and the construction process underwent a transformation that cut build times. Interior woodwork is now produced at the Bavaria factory and assembled at the Nautitech plant in Rochefort, a short drive from La Rochelle. "In the first year we built 17 boats, this year we will build 64, and next year we are aiming

for 94," says Guiot. "We are looking at a new factory in La Rochelle which would let us build 180 boats a year."

The Nautitech plant is, as I've now come to expect, scrupulously clean and well ordered. The production line mirrors that of Bavaria's monohulls—once the hulls and decks (resin-infused, foam-core construction, of course) leave the mold shop, they progress down the line in a seven-step process where teams install systems and build out the interiors. Workmanship is precise, and protocols are followed strictly.

Next step for Nautitech is to expand the range, which currently includes the Open 40, two versions of the Nautitech 46 and two of the 54. "There is a gap between the 46 and 54 that needs to be filled," says Guiot.



Unfortunately, we are unable to visit Fountaine Pajot, another iconic catamaran builder based in La Rochelle that has substantially enlarged its operations since I was last there in 2011. Nor did we have time to visit Outremer down in La Grand Motte in the south of France, nor Catana. We do, however, call in at famed monohull builders Dufour, on the outskirts of La Rochelle, whose marketing head tells us that they too are working on the first of a range of catamarans, which will be launched next year. Since Dufour used to own Nautitech, there's a kind of symmetry here—and another reason to name La Rochelle the world capital of catamarans. *