A race-winner goes cruising

Can a boat that's capable of beating the best on the race course really make a practical cruiser? David Harding salutes the Salona 35 to find out

New boat test

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n PBO we don’t normally test boats that have just won their class in a highly competitive racing series. This time, however, we made an exception, because the boat in question is a family cruiser. It just happens to be a family cruiser that's fast, fun to sail and, yes, capable of winning races.

In the 2012 Hamble Winter Series, the first Salona 35 to arrive in the UK topped her class comfortably, scooping a clean pair of heels to competitors that gave her 20 points under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster). Under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster). Under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster). Under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster). Under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster). Under IRC (boats that should, in other words, be appreciably faster).

The first thing to say is that it’s no good trying to carry full sail in 20 knots of wind. We suspected as much, only trying it to start with because no reefing lines were even run through the boom. Like many fractionally-rigged sporty cruisers, the Salona 35 is her instant response to any sort of sailing, the Salona might well become exhaustingly frisky if asked to do anything more than this. While the Salona would rarely, if ever, be your sort of boat.

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The Salona 35 is more spirited than a lot of dumpier alternatives designed solely for cruising; far more responsive and obedient yet, in many ways, also easier to handle. I’ve said it before and I will say it again: with a non-extreme, well-designed sailing yacht, fast doesn’t have to mean frightful.

A pedigree performer

The Salona 35 is a development of the Salona 34, designed by J&J and built in Croatia, down the coast from J&J’s offices in Slovenia. Salona build a range of sporty cruisers that have established a name for themselves racing under the IMS rating system in the Mediterranean. They’re broadly in competition with Dehler, Beneteau’s Firsts and some of the J boats; designed not only for people who like throwing them around the racecourse, but also for those who want to be able to cruise quickly and efficiently. Plenty of people enjoy both racing and cruising, swapping the laminates and the gang of heavens on the sail for the Dacrons and the family crew for a week or two during the summer. What separates them from some (but by no means all) dedicated cruising folk is that they’re not prepared to cruise slowly. They like boats that are fast, responsive and fun to sail, that will get them there when they want to go with a smile on their faces. They might not quite enjoy as much headroom in the aft cabin or such a luxurious shower when they’ve arrived but they’ll have spent less time bouncing around getting cold and wet on the way and might well be sitting in the cockpit enjoying drinks and nibbles while the slower cruising boats that left at the same time are facing the prospect of missing the tidal gate and spending another night at sea. If that’s your sort of sailing, the Salona might well be your sort of boat.

For serious pot hunting under IRC, you’ll want the Irokar composite keel designed by Jason Ker, optimised with the help of CFD (computational fluid dynamics) and fitted to our test boat. The aim was to achieve the lowest possible centre of gravity without using a bulb, minimising drag and, significantly, the rating (currently 1.00). The racing alternative is the 2.15m (7ft 1in) bulb, though the bulb-stepped keel can be a slimmer section than a deck-stepped equivalent, while rod rigging is used just to save weight in the stern. More importantly, it transmits the force from the rudder to the helm without the inertia of a heavy stainless steel wheel. There’s no avoiding the fact that you need to shorten sail earlier than on some dedicated cruisers, though I didn’t get the impression that she would run out of power or become excessively tingly if asked to blast into 35 knots and a confused sea for a few hours.

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The Salona 35 is more spirited than a lot of dumpier alternatives designed solely for cruising, yet easy to handle

The GZ curve shows the maximum righting moment at 0° and an angle of vanishing stability (AVS) at 12°

Lines are let out under removable garages on the coachroof in a layout that’s simple and efficient. The kicker and pole downhaul is split to both sides

Slicing her way windwards in 20 knots of breeze with a crew of two, a reef in the mainsail and Dacron sails, the Salona shows her cruising credentials

The Salona 35 boat test. Scan with QR code with your smartphone or visit www.pbo.co.uk/salona35

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In the groove

What’s most striking about the Salona is her instant response to the finger-slight helm. She offers a precision and sensitivity that few boats can match. Carbon wheels help, of course. Contrary to what some people believe, carbon isn’t used just to save weight in the stern. More importantly, it transmits the force from the rudder to the helmsman’s hand, whereas the inertia of a heavy stainless steel wheel has a deadening effect.

The Salona uses twin carbon wheels each mounted on an angled pod on the inside of the cockpit. Even though the stem is far from wide by modern standards, this arrangement offers the dual advantage of placing the helmsman (or helmswoman) well outboard for good visibility and of allowing an easy walk-through between the wheels. All that was missing on our test boat were the

Salona 35 boat test. Scan with QR code with your smartphone or visit www.pbo.co.uk/salona35 The GZ curve shows the maximum righting moment at 0° and an angle of vanishing stability (AVS) at 12°
optionally folding foot-braces—without them there’s nothing to keep the helmsman on the high side—and some handrails, which could easily be fitted to the forward side of the wheel pods. A removable brace between the seats can slot into sockets that can alternatively accommodate a table. Unless you have to fight gravity on occasions behind the wheel, it’s impossible not to enjoy guiding the Salona upwind. She’s easy and surprisingly forgiving to sail, demonstrating remarkable tolerance if jibed or sailed too deep while making it clear that she’s not appreciating your efforts. Find the sweet spot, however, and she’s off. This is a boat with a definitive groove. A driver who concentrates will be rewarded. One whose attention wavers won’t be punished by finding himself alternately stalling and broaching. Punishment will be in the form of progress that’s simply not what it should be. Capering an impressive all-round performance, the Salona points like a demon, lacking around 75% even in the short and solid the towed under a small jib, which forced us to sail deeper than we would otherwise. Thankfully she didn’t throw any of that chop over the crew. Her fine, relatively low bow cut through the water with minimal fuss. Barely a drop found its way aboard the mast. A fine bow is a feature she shares with most inshore performance yachts. Where she differs, remaining carrying her maximum beam further forward than many, is as common among those influences as the IMS. This, combined with a relatively slim hull, can result in a boat that’s less hard-nosed and more akin to a sloop in a straight line when pressed. The Salona certainly scored in those departments, remaining exceptionally well balanced even if we deliberately provoked her by sticking the helm deep in, the helm stayed like light and the rudder lost grip only when the gunsale was awash. That’s a function of the rudder’s design as some designers fit tiny rudders to race boats to minimise wetted area, gaining performance in light air at the expense of control when the going gets lively. A glance at the Salona’s underwater profile shows a high aspect-ratio rudder blade that’s almost as deep as the keel. Being mounted forward on a boat with a narrower stern than many, it also tends to stay in the water. The Hamble Winter Series threw up a few breeze races and the crew reported no problems maintaining control on the downwind legs: up went the spinnaker and off went the boat at 11 knots. A tough running mode and with no spinaker on board, we had to content ourselves with sailing the boat well within its limits downwind. We slipped along, occasionally semi-surfing, at a lazy 9-10 knots. It was interesting to sail the J/105 designed Salona shortly after the Bruce Farr-designed Bavaria 33, as tested in the May issue of PBO. Bavaria have moved away from J-boats. In favour of Farr, a world-renowned designer of high-performance race boats who created a new Bavaria that sail well for a high-volume cruiser. Now here I was sailing a boat designed by the team that Bavaria left behind; a team often associated with the earlier and distinctly less-sporty Bavarias, yet whose Salona 35— with a little help from Jason Ker—was in a different class of performance league to the Farr-designed Bavaria. It goes to show that talented designers such as J/105 and Farr can create cruise yachts or sporty boats. It depends what they’re asked for.

Rapid rotations
Back in the Salona’s cockpit, there was a lot of activity on a full-width track on the sole immediately forward of the twin wheels. Normally the mainsheet trimmer will play the 6:1 sheet and 4:1 line, but for the Salona the helmsman could easily swell and backstay, but you’re short-handed the helmsman can easily reach the sheet.

We experienced the importance of this during an unplanned Hobie 16 overboard) in Hampton Water. Recovering a dark-grey beanie from a 16-yarder under sail in 20 knots of wind is never going to be easy, and it did take us a few attempts—some of them unsuccessful only because of the wind direction. From behind the wheel I was able to control the mainhaul, grabbing several bights to yank the boom into the middle and throw the boat into a tack even when she was barely moving. With a lot of boats well ahead to give up and use the engine.

One thing I had found earlier was that, when we have to, the keel and rudder stalled to the point where we couldn’t give round to carry on sailing. We had to bring the boat across. It’s worth knowing these things in case you have occasion to perform pinpoints under sail. Back in the marina, more ‘in case’ checks included lifting the cockpit sole to see where the emergency tiller would fit. It all looked perfectly serviceable, though improvements could be made to the mouldings under the fitting sections that provide access to the rudder head and the stemway. Water had clearly been flowing over the lips designed to keep it out, and was pooling inside the hull. A draught tube to a skin fitting wasn’t doing its job and run that water would always sit in its lowest point. Some simple mods to the fitting to channel the water straight through the open transom would solve the problem.

Even easier would change to was the hinged on the cockpit lid to starboard. The lid opens to the point where it stands upright, but won’t swing back far to rest against the guardrails. This presents two problems: it won’t stay open on its own, and the hinges could be opened out of the moulding if someone leaned against the open lid.

Fit and functional
Elsewhere on deck, as you’d expect it from a boat with an already-impressive race pedigree, everything seems to work. Hardware appeared to be up to spec and in the right place, not that we had occasion to use much of it— principally the Harken 46 track and blocks for the headsail and the 40s on the coachroof. A solid wooden bollard adorns the deck, unlike on some race boats where it’s discontinued amidst an attempt to make life more comfortable for the weather-coal crew (for whom the yard will lower it on request). There’s even a full-depth anchor locker with provision for a windsail. One particularly nice feature is the under-deck drum for the headsail roller-furling. Where it can be made to — and there are design considerations that preclude it on some boats — it makes such a difference to the appearance. The non-up finish is passable, if not as extensive as I would like, and the hatch covers are proud rather than flush, providing useful foot bracing points on an angled deck.

PBO’s verdict
As a performance boat, the Salona is quite something: she’s spirited, amazingly responsive and potentially fiendishly fast yet, at the same time, remarkably forgiving and easy to handle. Beneteau’s generally functional and more fully-fitted than a good many sports-cruisers, if perhaps a bit bland and in need of some technical tweaks. Her looks are not of much boat you’re looking for in the search area, or by calling our Copy Service on tel: 01202 440830

www.pbo.co.uk

www.dehler.com

Dehler 35

£125,000

Designed by Simonis Voogt, Dehler’s contender in this size range is in broadly similar vein to the Salona and Beneteau and is also available with a choice of cockpit sail and twin rudders. Dehler’s 35 continues the Open Class style of recent models designed for this Slovenian builder by Rob Humphreys. Keels can be deep or even deeper.

www.dehler.com

Elan 350

£115,000

With her chirp hull, broad beam and twin rudders, Elan’s 350 continues the Open Class style of recent models designed for this Slovenian builder by Rob Humphreys. Keels can be deep or even deeper.

www.elan-yachts.com

Salona 35 on test

Beneteau First 35

£121,429

Beneteau’s successor to the First 34 comes from Bruce Farr’s office. Bigger than the Salona, with a higher IRC rating and the choice of deep Tbulb keel or a shallower, more conventional fin.

www.beneteau.com