Dufour 350

PBO TESTED

A boat to please the people

Whatever your taste in yachts, it's the mainstream cruisers that attract the bulk of the new-boat market – like the Dufour 350, as David Harding reports

At PBO, we like to look at boats that are different – the quirky, idiosyncratic, innovative and characterful; boats that appeal to sailors who do things their own way and don't care what the rest of the world thinks.

At the same time, we can't ignore boats designed for the broader market. After all, there's a reason why the Beneteaus, Jeanneaus, Bavarias, Dufours and Hanses of this world have become so popular. Their dominance is plain to see when you walk down the pontoons or along the aisles at any major boat European show.

To a newcomer, one broad-sterned modern yacht with chines and twin wheels often looks much like the next. Telling t'other from which can be a challenge and, as I found at the Southampton Boat Show recently, explaining the differences to someone who's new to the world of sailing isn't easy.

So where does the Dufour 350 fit in? How would you explain to a newcomer what sets her apart? Well, for a start this new arrival from one of France's best-known yards is among the six models in the Grand Large (GL) range, where the emphasis is on creature comforts. The other boats are the three Performance models (plus a day-sailer and the new 50ft-plus Exclusives). Dufour are far from being the only builder to separate the sporty from the cruisy, but one area where they have tried to distance themselves from the mainstream competition is in the quality of finish and fit-out. By no means are these boats the cheapest, and it's clear that they haven't been thrown together in a hurry.

At this stage I should point out that the 350 is not a totally new boat: she's a 335 that has been given a makeover. She has not been stretched, however: as is something of a tradition among French builders, her designation has little to do with length. The hull is 32ft 9in (9.98m) long, though one of the additions on the 350 is a moulded bowsprit to replace the 335's anchor roller. It looks better, takes her 'in a box' length to 10.28m (33ft 9in), and incorporates an outhaul for a cruising chute or Code 0.

Building from a base

Because the 335's hull, rig and foils were fine for what they were intended to do, they were left largely untouched. Changes were made all the same: chines were added running the last few feet of the hull to the transom, the lowers were moved right outboard to the same chainplate as the cap shrouds, the gooseneck was lowered and a self-tacking jib fitted as standard. Plenty has happened down below, too.

Having tested the 335 in PBO April 2012, I was interested to see how she had evolved, so I went along to the new South-Coast Dufour dealer, Universal Yachting, to have a look. It wasn't so much to make a comparison between the old and the new; more to see how the 350 shaped up as what is unashamedly a middle-of-the-road cruising yacht.

When testing a boat like this, it's hard to know whether to pray for a

In flat water and moderate conditions, the Dufour proved to be no slouch

Short chines towards the stern and the bridle for the centre mainsheet are new features on the 350

fresh breeze so you can push her a little or for more benign conditions because those are what most owners will choose to sail in. Bear in mind that the Dufour 350 was conceived neither for racing nor for what some might consider serious cruising; both disciplines in which you have to be prepared to push pretty hard at times. Boats designed for that sort of treatment could not be expected to match the Dufour in terms of space, easy living or creature comforts. It's a matter of horses for courses – but the good news is that the compromises in owning a roomy family cruiser are nowhere near as great as they once were.

Not so very long ago, high-volume cruising yachts often stuck to the water in light airs. When the wind picked up, they fell over and went sideways. The window in the middle when they performed acceptably well was typically between around 10 and 15 knots.

Light-airs performance suffered because the high volume led to a high wetted area. The rig wasn't powerful enough to unstick the boat because the combination of shallowish draught and a relatively low ballast ratio provided insufficient righting moment to balance anything bigger in a breeze. Deeper keels and taller rigs also place greater structural demands on a boat, calling for more thorough engineering – which costs money.

Things have got a lot better over the past decade or two. Keels are now typically deeper and centres of gravity lower. Headsails have less overlap, allowing the rigging to move outboard so loads can be lower. Composite engineering has moved on, too. There were very good boats around 20 years ago – some of them still very good by today's standards – but the equivalent of the Dufour 350 from 1996 would be no match for the boat we see today. And it so happens that my testing of new Dufour models does go back almost exactly 20 years.

Space and pace can be combined more successfully now than ever before. In simple terms, today's high-volume hulls are generally more efficient than those of earlier generations. They're powered by more efficient rigs that are balanced by more efficient keels, so the boats go better and are less twitchy than many of their elder brethren. A decade or two ago I would often come home from testing a mainstream cruiser thinking what a challenge it had been to sail: the combination of a broad, voluminous hull, shallow keel and shallow rudder, especially if paired with a rig that called for the headsail to be reefed in any breeze, often made the boat ponderous, unengaging to sail and prone to broaching. Pedigree performance boats were not only faster and more fun but often easier and more forgiving too.

That's how things were. Given the developments we've seen since the turn of the century, and from my experience with the Dufour 335, I had much higher hopes for the 350.

Marks of modernity

All the modern 'essentials' are present in terms of features and styling, including the chines (though they're more like chinelings in this case), the twin wheels and a transom that's almost the beamiest part of the boat.

When the back of the cockpit is hinged down, you have an enormous boarding-cum-bathing platform which, combined with the twin wheels and the absence of a backstay, makes for easy boarding when you're berthed stern to. Whatever the pros and cons of backstayless rigs when it comes to sailing, they have their plus points in marinas.

Once aboard you find a big, wide cockpit divided laterally by a substantial table. The table is on the extras list, but you really wouldn't want to be without it: you can brace yourself against it, stand on it when tidying away the mainsail (unless you choose in-mast reefing) and use it for stowing anything from cameras or binoculars to bottles of wine. A cockpit this wide without something solid in the middle might be a liability on a cruising boat.

Stowage is in a half-depth locker to starboard and a pair of lockers beneath the sole abaft the wheels for the dinghy and liferaft.

Moving forward from the cockpit is easy thanks to the wide side decks and outboard rigging. A chunky wooden toerail lends security and, in the bow, the anchor locker incorporates a plinth for a windlass and provides space for a fender or three as well.

Goodies galore

Our test boat had all the kit included in both the Liberty version (an upgrade from the Day Sailer) and the Grand Prix pack, so she sported sails in a cruise laminate, a 108% headsail instead of a self-tacker, gear for an asymmetric spinnaker and, importantly, a two-bladed folding prop instead of a fixed. The keel was the standard bulbed iron fin, giving a draught of 6ft 3in (1.9m). If you really need to save draught you can pay extra for a 5ft 1in (1.55m) alternative.

One way in which Dufour and the Italian designer, Umberto Felci, have refrained from following modern trends is in sticking with a single rudder. Boats with sterns this broad typically have twin blades, but here we find just the one. As usual there are pluses and minuses. A single blade keeps the engineering simpler and generally gives the helm a lighter, more responsive feel as well as being less likely to catch weed. What really matters is that it's big and deep enough to keep the boat on track when she's heeling. That's where twin rudders tend to have an advantage.

Further analysis on paper can include a look at the polar diagram and the boat's lines and statistics, all of which suggest that the 350 should be no slouch. She has a sail area/displacement

The broad transom, twin wheels, drop-down platform and absence of a backstay make for easy boarding from the stern

Wide side decks, outboard rigging, a respectably narrow headsail sheeting angle and a Facnor FlatDeck roller-reefing system – all signs of a boat with some performance pretensions

ratio of 18.3 – perfectly respectable for a cruising boat – and her displacement/length ratio is just under 210. By traditional standards, that's light. For a modern cruiser with minimal overhangs, it's not unusual.

What none of the readily-available statistics will give you is an indication of the wetted area. When you look at the numbers of some boats, you might think they should be quick – but so many more elements come into play including, of course, whether they're prone to sticking to the water in light airs. Broad beam at deck level doesn't condemn a boat in this respect; it's what's in the water that matters.

Easy sailing

If you like sunshine, gentle breezes and conditions that are generally as benign and undemanding as can be, the day when we managed to head out would have been your perfect day's sailing. The trouble was that it presented the boat with no real challenges: even a mere eight knots of true wind, as we had initially, will produce 11-12 knots over the deck upwind and that's enough to get most boats going when the only waves are those thrown up by passing powerboats. When the breeze eventually freshened to 14-15 knots we clocked speeds in the low 6s and tacked through around 80°. The helm remained pleasantly light

Fold-down seats by the wheels give a good choice of helming position

and the linkage between the wheels was noticeably smoother than on the 335.

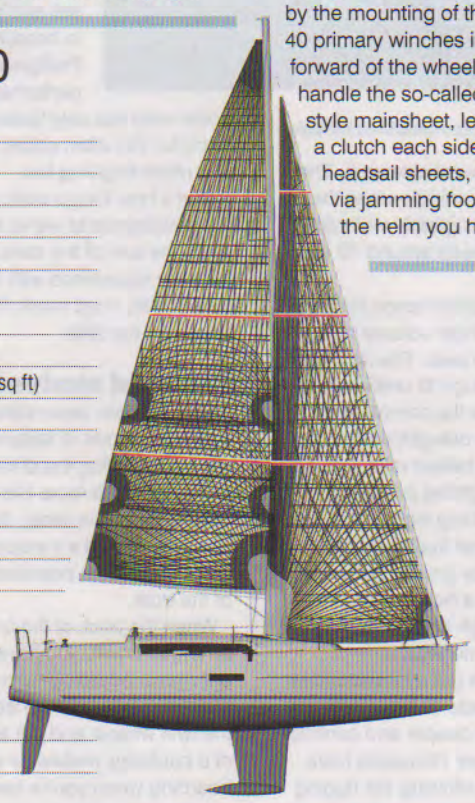
Features new to the 350 include fold-down seats each side for the helmsman, increasing the choice of helming position. With such a broad stern you have a good view forward when simply sitting behind one of the wheels. Sliding further outboard is an option if you're feeling keen.

Single-handed sailing is helped by the mounting of the Lewmar 40 primary winches immediately forward of the wheels. They handle the so-called German-style mainsheet, led through a clutch each side, and the headsail sheets, which arrive via jamming foot-blocks. At the helm you have to remember that it's often easier for you to do the trimming than it is for the crew. At one stage while reaching with the asymmetric spinnaker I was thinking we needed to trim in a little mainsheet, but waited for my more-than-competent crew to do it. I then remembered that the winch was right next to my hand. It's no problem for the crew to trim – he or she just has to get used to working from the aft end of the cockpit. But if you're issuing instructions to someone who's new to sailing, don't ask him or her to pull in or ease 'the brown rope'. They're all brown. Cordage is traditionally colour-coded for a reason, and I can't help thinking that sacrificing colour-coordination for clarity might not be such a bad idea.

A neat feature is the use of a bridle rather than a traveller for the mainsheet. On a boat of this size I would still much prefer a mainsheet with a conventional purchase taken to a traveller in the cockpit. If you're going to have the sheet attached to the boom forward of the companionway, at least it's now common practice to have it split and led aft each side so it's within reach of the helm rather than stuck up on the coachroof where the helmsman can only look at it in frustration as the boat goes into yet another broach. Nonetheless, to have half a chance of sailing efficiently you do need

Tech spec: Dufour 350

Length including bowsprit: 10.28m (33ft 9in)
LOA: 9.98m (32ft 9in)
LWL: 9.05m (29ft 8in)
Beam: 3.54m (11ft 7in)
Draught – standard fin: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
– shallow fin: 1.55m (5ft 1in)
Displacement: 5,674kg (12,509lb)
Ballast: 1,550kg (3,417lb)
Sail area (main & 100% foretriangle): 57.50sq m (619sq ft)
Displacement/length ratio: 209
Sail area/displacement ratio: 18.35
RCD category: A
Engine: Volvo D1-20 diesel saildrive
Headroom: 1.85m (6ft 1in)
Designer: Umberto Felci
Builder: Dufour Yachts, France, www.dufour-yachts.com
Test boat provided by: Universal Yachting, Hamble – www.universalyachting.com
Price (ex-yard) from: 109,900
As tested: approx. 129,600



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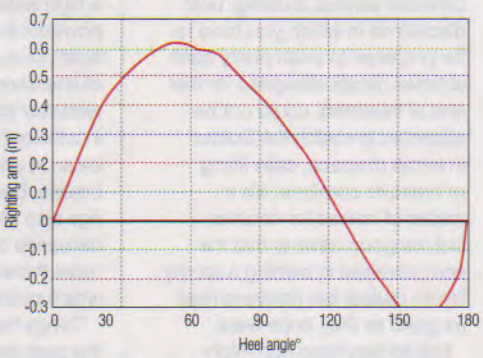

The GZ curve shows the maximum righting moment at 53° and an angle of vanishing stability (AVS) of 126°

This boat is finished in the optional pale oak instead of the standard moabi. It also has the three-cabin layout, which pushes the heads and chart table further forward

something other than a central strong point. A traveller is one solution, but a bridle is not a bad alternative. It doesn't call for active control like a traveller, so in some respects there's less opportunity to get things wrong, though it places more emphasis on the use of the vang (kicker) to control twist. Not insignificantly, a bridle is much cheaper and quicker to fit.

The headsail is tacked to a Facnor FlatDeck roller-reefing system, which keeps it nice and low even though it's above deck.

Further aft, one aspect that would concern me is lack of space to mount instruments where the crew as well as the helmsman can see them – there's no hatch garage and the only obvious mounting positions (except on the mast) are the aft end of the table or coamings.

Back to the handling, the boat did everything that was asked of her. She hove to obediently, spun in a tight 360° in either direction and would bear away with the sheets pinned in except in the fresher gusts; then she would spin up and straight through the wind in a manner that was anything but half-hearted. On the whole the deep single rudder worked well.

Below decks

It's a light, bright and welcoming environment down below. Our test boat was finished in pale oak as opposed to the standard moabi and it also had the optional three-cabin layout. Inevitably the second aft cabin to starboard pushes the heads further forward so, instead of a permanent chart table, a smaller one drops down to extend the settee berth with an infill cushion.

Because of the hull's generous proportions, there's a lot of room down here. Double doors to the forecabin give a semi open-plan feel to increase the feeling of space.

The finish is generally neat and solid. On the whole, the interior has been thought about: the lockers along the sides of the hull hinge from the bottom on gas struts so their contents don't fall straight out, for example. There's a foot pump to supplement the electric pump in the galley, where low-level lighting means you're not working in your own shadow. Details like this make a difference.

Ferreting around in the nooks and crannies revealed nothing particularly worrying or out of the ordinary in terms of systems of structure, though one feature that needs no ferreting to appreciate is the resin-infused, single-piece deck moulding that obviates the need for a separate headlining. Deck hardware is bolted straight through, plastic caps protecting bonce from bolts. Fiddles and grab handles are more generous than on many boats. Naturally there's a 'wine cellar': lift up the sole board immediately forward of the companionway steps. Behind the steps is access to the Volvo saildrive engine – 20hp as standard, upgradeable to 29hp.

Here's the chart table in its operational position...

...and lowered to extend the settee berth

PBO VERDICT

On a day like we had it was hard to find fault with the way the Dufour 350 sailed. With a clean bottom, new sails, a folding prop and minimal weight aboard, there was little to hold her back. When the sea picks up, the motion of boats with high-volume hulls tends to be less comfortable than that of performance boats or serious cruisers and, of course, everything feels different when you're bouncing around at 25° of heel. In most conditions, though, the Dufour would be an easy boat to live with. She's a reasonably slippery performer, not unattractive in a modern sort of way and with interior styling that's sure to find favour. There's no doubt that she does what she's designed to do very well indeed. PBO

Other boats to look at

Beneteau Oceanis 35

PRICE: FROM £98,087

The Beneteau's hull is the same length as the Dufour's. She also has twin wheels, a broad stern and a choice of both keels and layouts, but the chines run the full length of the hull and she has twin rudders too. ■ **www.beneteau.com**

Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 349

PRICE: FROM £102,650

In terms of appearance and vital statistics, it's a similar story. This time, however, there's also the option of a lifting keel. She has twin rudders and two- or three-cabin layouts. ■ **www.jeanneau.com**

Bavaria 34

PRICE: FROM £91,334

Only slightly shorter than the French boats despite her name, this design by Bruce Farr is a development of the Bavaria 33 and the earlier 32. Choice of keels, cabins and single or twin wheels. ■ **www.bavaria-yachtbau.com**