



Rigged for racing, this Contessa excels to weather but the Beneteau performs best off the wind.

ARE MODERN BOATS BETTER?

There's no simple answer, of course – and anyway, designs change to meet different needs. So whether you want a slim, sleek hulled Contessa or a big, beamy Beneteau depends on your priorities. David Harding reports

It would be difficult to find two more contrasting yachts of a similar length than the Contessa 32 and the Beneteau Oceanis 321. Even so, both were designed for mainstream production building and, though each has incorporated plenty of original thought, neither was considered radical at the time. Give or take an inch or two, their hull lengths are the same; both have after cockpits, masthead sloop rigs and fin keels. Cruising comfort was another quality which both boats were designed to have in common. So how can they end up so utterly different? And what does each of them offer today's buyer?

In assessing their qualities, we should bear in mind that when David Sadler drew the lines for

the Contessa in 1970, competitiveness on the race course was a major consideration – as too were seakindliness and offshore passage-making ability.

By contrast, when the Oceanis was drawn some 23 years later, racing was less influential – and there wasn't a rule book in sight. Times had changed, which isn't to say that she wasn't designed to be a satisfying sail; her sail area/displacement ratio suggests that she's no sluggard. So they're far from being at opposite ends of the racing-cruising spectrum, but clearly we're looking at different images, different approaches and different markets. Whether one is better than the other depends on what you want.

Having said that, these two boats show how, with an almost

identical overall length, factors such as beam, freeboard, ballast ratio and hull depth can produce startlingly different results. And they could still end up next to each other at a boat show – the Contessa is well into her third decade, and still being built. Which boat would do for you?

A good place to start is with the hulls, and we'll look at the older boat first. By modern standards she's low in freeboard and narrow in the beam, with fine ends and generous overhangs. Next to her more voluminous contemporaries she looks small for her length, but to the more traditional sailor's eye she's pretty – a real boat-shaped boat. Her hull is fairly deep in section, with a long fin keel and a rudder mounted on a full-length skeg. A 47% ballast

ratio combined with an easily-driven, low-windage hull and low centre of gravity, enables her to continue to make to windward in a full gale in open water: in short, she's a traditional offshore yacht.

Tried and tested

Her ability to cope with severe weather conditions is one of the great strengths of the Contessa. Following the 1979 Fastnet disaster, the Royal Ocean Racing Club adopted her as the standard for stability to which others are still compared. Thanks to the features described above, she has an exceptionally high 'vanishing angle' (i.e. the angle following a knock-down beyond which she loses the ability to right herself) of 165°. Significantly too, her inverted stability is very small.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD

OCEANIS

For:	Against:
Excellent galley	High windage
Roomy accommodation	Restricted stowage
Plenty of light and ventilation below	Limited windward ability
Provision for stern-to berthing	Small chart table

CONTESSA

For:	Against:
Excellent all-weather sailing performance	Wet to windward
Comfortable motion	Limited accommodation
Solid, well-proven construction	Small mainsail and large genoa
Good sea-going layout	Awkward anchoring arrangement

All this makes her an extremely safe and capable boat. She's hardly spacious down below and rather wet to sail in a chop and in most conditions, she couldn't keep up with many of the modern breed of 32-foot cruiser/racers. But if you're the wrong side of a headland 5 miles from home with 30 knots on the nose, or beating off a lee shore in a Force 6 with a fishing net round the prop, she'll get you back without a fuss.

For many of today's sailors, however, priorities lie elsewhere. Why compromise accommodation and general living comfort just so a boat can cope with the sort of conditions they may never encounter? When it comes to interior volume, next to the Oceanis and her genre, the Contessa is very much the poor relation.

With her ample freeboard the Oceanis towers over the Contessa, whose boom is barely higher than the French boat's coachroof. She's 20 inches (0.5m) wider in the beam and has a much shallower, flatter-sectioned hull with a shallow, bulbous, cast iron fin keel giving her 13 inches (0.33m) less draft. She has short bow and stern overhangs and, true to modern form, her beam is much further aft, allowing room for a large after cabin (or two smaller ones) below the cockpit instead of the Contessa's single quarter berth.

High volume hull

Though the displacement figures for both boats are similar, the Oceanis's ballast ratio of 31.5% is a good deal less than the Contessa's, making her hull heavier (hardly surprising when you consider its greater volume) and giving her a higher centre of gravity. Initial stability is largely derived from her beam and hull shape, but the figures suggest that her vanishing angle is probably rather lower. Statistically, then, we're not looking at an ocean-

going yacht; rather a spacious, high-volume cruiser with the emphasis on comfort for coastal waters – which is precisely what many people want.

In common with cruising owners, Contessa skippers with roller-reefing genoas may sail their boats with no more than the occasional trip forward when under way. But the decks are designed to be worked on. They're wide, and because of the boat's narrow beam, the shroud bases are well outboard, making it easy to pass inside. Wooden grabrails extend the whole length of the coachroof (its top is well below life-line height) while the bulwarks provide secure foot-steps – though feeding the mooring lines through them to the foredeck cleats is considerably more awkward than simply dropping them into open-topped fairleads.

Once out of the Oceanis's cockpit, the view is very different. A short grabrail each side on the coachroof stops in line with the

front of the hatch cover, though ahead of the shrouds there's the babystay to hang on to. But the numerous hatches and ports, combined with the shiny, sloping sides to the coachroof, provide plenty of skidding area for the feet of the unwary. In fairness, I should add that with all primary sail-handling controls led aft, the need to go on deck when under way isn't likely to arise very often.

Anchors aweigh

A stemhead fitting projects the anchor (you're left to choose your own) well clear of the hull – forward, even, of the pulpit. Not pretty, but necessary due to the almost vertical angle of the stem. A generous-sized well accommodates the chain and warp.

On the Contessa you're provided with a 25-lb plough complete with ground tackle, but it lives in a well with a small lid. You wouldn't expect this sort of boat to sail around with what racing types would refer to as a 'can opener' on the bow, but wriggling it out of the well, past the forestay and through the pulpit onto the roller would be an event worthy of the Krypton Factor.

There's quite a strong Mediterranean influence on the Oceanis's cockpit layout and stern. A separate moulding form-

ing the centre of the helmsman's seat and aft coaming lifts right out to provide a convenient walk-aboard passage. Twin backstays keep the rigging out of the way, while scallops out of the side seats give you plenty of room to slide your way past the wheel. Even with the seat in position, any cockpit water can flow straight out of the stern.

A broad sugar-scoop transom provides a bathing platform with a fresh-water shower and single-stepped, hinge-down ladder. A sensible feature is the rubber fender strip all the way round the transom lip. Not only does it protect an area that's always vulnerable (particularly during stern-to berthing) – it also hides the hull-to-deck joint – an area that otherwise takes builders a long time to make good.

The cockpit is wide and nicely protected by generous coamings. A large locker to port houses bulky items but there's no small stowage (something the Contessa provides in the form of coaming lockers). A lip on the adjoining gas locker's lid is trapped under the edge of the main locker – a secure but inconvenient system: you need to open both lids to get to the gas.

Apart from the genoa tracks and cars, the Oceanis's deck is uncluttered. A four-sheave deck



The Contessa has 'classic' looks and sails like a thoroughbred but her narrow hull is less spacious.



Still looking good after 16 years, Zay Zay's interior belies her cruising/racing career. Nevertheless, the Contessa is decidedly cramped compared to modern designs, particularly the galley which is functional rather than luxurious. However, the navigatorium provides a half-Admiralty sized chart table and a proper seat.

organiser, four clutches and a self-tailing Lewmar 16 winch at the after end of the coachroof cope with the mainsheet, main halyard and reefing lines, while a pair of Lewmar self-tailing 30's look after the genoa sheets. Provision is made in the port hand deck moulding for the addition of an organiser, winch and clutches for spinnaker gear.

Keen sail trimmers won't enjoy the mainsheet system which, instead of a traveller, simply uses two pad eyes ahead of the main hatch. From the boom blocks it's led forward to the base of the mast and then aft. Disregarding the implications of the lack of a traveller, any such system could spark off a debate on the value of a clear cockpit versus the ability to control the sheet from behind the wheel. For a boat like the Oceanis, where open space takes priority, this is an understandable and economic solution.

To provide 74 in (188 cm) of clearance under the boom in the

cockpit, the Beneteau's gooseneck is no less than 42 in (107 cm) above deck. Sail area is generous, supported by a sturdy-sectioned, deck-stepped Isomat mast with swept-back caps and lowers, while a babystay provides forward support. Mainsail stowage is made easy by a zip-up sail cover which lives on the boom and is supported by lazy jacks. Two of the three battens stop just short of the luff, providing some of the handling advantages of a fully-battened sail without the need for expensive cars – and the small amount of roach means there's relatively little compression towards the luff.

The Contessa's keel-stepped mast has a slimmer section, with virtually in-line caps and well-spaced forward and after lowers. The mainsail seems a bit on the small side – reflecting her age – with the boom ending just abaft the coachroof. She has less downwind sail area (until the spinnaker's set) and it's harder work winching in the comparatively large headsails.

There's a full-width traveller on the bridgedeck and on *Wight Rabbit*, the boat we sailed, this is fitted with a 3:1 control and an endless 4:1/8:1 mainsheet system. Being the current class champion and one of the most successfully-raced Contessas of recent years, she has plenty more high-powered string on board to keep the racing crew happy, but many cruising owners make do with simpler systems.

To take photographs of the two boats together, we sailed them in company for a while on various points. As we expected, holding the Contessa back was a problem – she would pull away on a reach and quickly disappeared upwind.

Nonetheless, the Oceanis was

no slouch. In flat water with between 17 and 21 knots across the deck, she clocked up 4.8 knots, close hauled at 35 degrees apparent. We weren't being very kind by carrying full sail. Heeled over at about 20 degrees, she made it clear she wasn't totally happy by making plenty of leeway.

Trials of youth

But it's revealing to see how a boat behaves when hard-pressed and, to her credit, she remained quite manageable on the helm. Though there wasn't a great deal of feedback through the wheel, the sizeable rudder – it's almost as deep as the keel – kept her on track up to a far greater angle of heel than is the case with some modern broad-bodied boats which break away alarmingly early.



A few rolls in the genoa brought her more upright and added a good half knot to the speed. Her wake was still streaming out astern at a noticeable angle – as but the message as you'd expect from a beamy boat with a fairly shallow draft was that she preferred to be kept flat. It would be interesting to see her cope upwind with stronger winds and rougher water, but within the confines of



HOW THEY COMPARE?

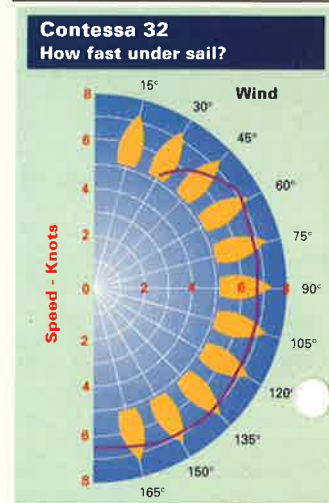
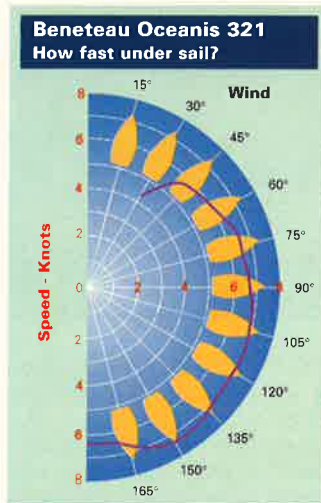
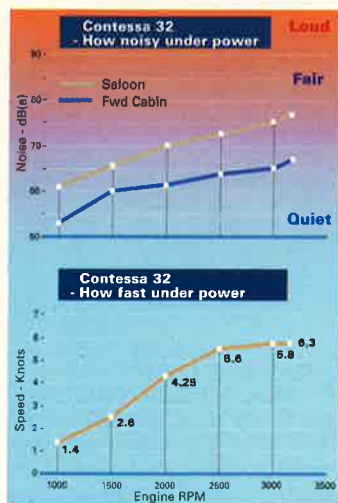
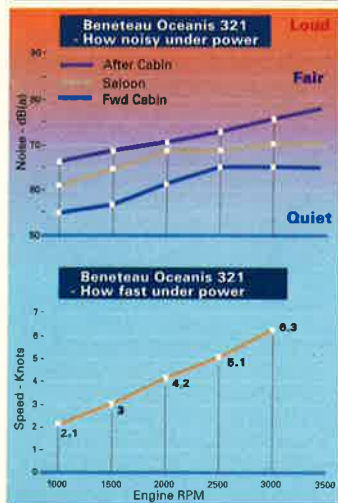
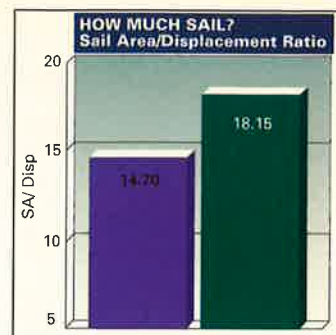
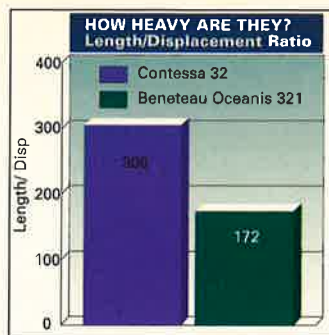
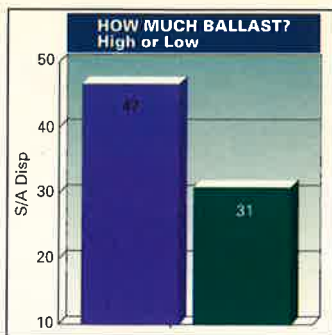
	Oceanis 321	Contessa 32
Length overall – ft (m)	32.7 (9.95)	32 (9.75)
Length waterline – ft (m)	29.3 (8.95)	24 (7.31)
Beam – ft (m)	11.2 (3.42)	9.5 (2.9)
Draft – ft (m)	4.25 (3.42)	5.5 (1.65)
Displacement – lb (kg)	9700 (4400)	9500 (4308)
Ballast – lb (kg)	3053 (1385)	4500 (2040)
No of berths	4/8	3/6
Headroom (saloon) – ft (m)	6.3 (1.93)	5.9 (1.8)
Sail areas		
Main – sqft (sqm)	247 (23)	176 (16)
Foresail – sqft (sqm)	376 (35)	361 (33)
100% fore tri. – sqft (sqm)	269 (25)	236 (22)
Total main + foretriangle	516 (48)	412 (38)
Rig type	masthead	masthead
Engine hp (kW)	18 (13.5)	18 (13.5)
Fuel – gal (lt)	13 (60)	10 (45)
Water – gal (lt)	42 (190)	18 (82)
Builder/Supplier	Beneteau	Carl Phillips
Telephone	(01703) 223225	(01703) 457577
New price inc VAT	£63,774	£70,206

TEST CONDITIONS

Wind speed 18-25 knots
Wind force 5 to 6
Wind direction W to SW
Wave height steep 2-4ft
Temperature 12°C

Test equipment

Stowe Dateline anemometer, fluxgate compass and trailing log sending data to a Toshiba T1910 laptop computer running Tactstar.



a fairly smooth Solent she was generally obedient and, once cracked off a few degrees, impressively quick. In fact, 7 knots showed up on the log with the apparent wind just abaft the beam, and she maintained around 6.5 until well off the wind. She has a very light feel; very much on the water rather than in it. She hove to quite happily, eventually crabbing at a gentle 2.2 knots.

Under power, with the 18hp Volvo 2020 driving a fixed 3-bladed propeller, she was admirably positive. From full ahead she would stop and turn both ways in astern even with, by then, a good 20 knots of wind on the beam. Top speed was 6.3 knots at 3000 revs. Her high windage meant she was blown sideways very quickly when manoeuvring at slow speed in the marina but, apart from this, the biggest inconvenience I found was the siting of the engine control lever. Instead of being mounted on the pedestal as you'd expect with a wheel-steered boat, it's a good stretch away on the starboard cockpit coaming.

Handle with flair

After the elevated perch of the Oceanis's cockpit, the water seemed very close as we headed out in *Wight Rabbit*. By now the tide was ebbing strongly and the westerly Force 6 whipped up a short, steep, wind-over-tide chop. Still rigged with full main and number 2 from the morning's gentler excursion, she seemed a bit hard-pressed. Nonetheless, with the sails flattened as far as possi-

ble she coped admirably with over 30 knots of apparent wind. A fair weight on the tiller told us she felt a bit overdressed (quite apart from the gunwale being under water for much of the time) but she carved her way to windward most impressively. These were the sort of conditions designed to let the Contessa show off, though the same qualities which give her such a smooth ride also resulted in the occasional salty shower reaching the cockpit. At just over 30 degrees to the apparent wind, she made a steady 5.5-5.6 knots, picking up to 7.2 on a close reach and peaking at 9.2 as we surfed through the Hurst overfalls.

All in all, she had a reassuring feel to her. True, the pull on the tiller would have been quite exhausting after a while, but all the Contessa owners I've spoken to since tell me that (suitably dressed) she can easily be balanced to sail herself upwind. And thanks to nearly half the weight of the boat being slung low down in the keel, after heeling progressively to about 22° she stiffened up and would go no further.

Manoeuvring under power posed no problems, the combination of the Yanmar 18hp twin-cylinder diesel and fixed 2-bladed propeller driving her along at a maximum of 6.3 knots with 3300 rpm showing on the rev counter. Folding props aren't allowed under the class rules, which stipulate a minimum diameter and blade width. Sensibly, they also state that the boat must be capable of at least 5 knots under power.

This is no great speed for a 32-footer (and with various prop and engine sizes some Contessas handle better than others) but it removes any possibility of racing owners going to extremes in their quest to reduce weight and drag.

Big value Beneteau

In terms of accommodation space for the money, the Oceanis is remarkable value and her layout is well suited to living aboard at anchor or in a marina. There's loads of space in every direction including upwards – headroom at the after end of the saloon is 75½ in (192 cm). First impressions are of light and airiness, thanks to all the ports and hatches and the white one-piece moulded headliner – though some may find it a bit bright and plasticky. There's plenty of glassfibre at floor level and around the bunk fronts due to interior mouldings which form the base of the furniture. This contrasts with the dark lustre of the neatly-finished cherry joinery.

Beneteau offer a twin after cabin version, but our test boat had the single. This not only makes it bigger – enormous is the only word – but also allows a longer galley. You sleep athwartships, with plenty of headroom to sit up and read in bed, while a port in the transom allows you to see out as well.

A large galley to port, with twin sinks, has plenty of work space and stowage, a fully-gimballed cooker with crash bar and two opening ports. Generally, it's very workable, but the fronts to the

three outboard stowage lockers also form the fiddles to the shelf on top – so when you open the locker you lose the fiddle.

Opposite is the heads – mainly smooth, easy-to-clean glassfibre mouldings with a shower sump and wooden lockers outboard. Stowage here is plentiful, but the plumbing below the basin could be arranged to give more room. And being so far from the centre-line of a fairly flat-bottomed boat, the toilet bowl itself would probably become useless at a fairly small angle of heel.

Navigation facilities are fairly basic. To sit at the small, aft, plotting chart table you perch on the end of the 70-inch (178 cm) long port saloon seat. A panel outboard houses the switch panel and provides mounting space for instruments. Extra lighting for night use would be essential.

There's loads of seating in the saloon, and the starboard settee could be used as a sea berth if necessary. Hand-holds are plentiful. Floorboards lift up to reveal a shallow bilge with the keel bolts easily accessible in the vestigial moulded stub. Under-bunk lockers port and starboard are formed by the interior moulding, so bilge water can't find its way in and you've the added attraction of a nice smooth surface inside. But mouldings also mean you lose several inches at the sides and ends, reducing their volume substantially. Otherwise stowage is provided by hull-side lockers below the two fixed ports in the topsides, with a shallow fiddled shelf on top.

The way forward

The fore cabin is through a pair of doors which come down only to bunk level. This allows them to be folded forward, flat against the bulkhead. Stowage is limited, most of the under-bunk space being taken up by the water tank which is fitted with a level gauge and an inspection hatch allowing cleaning – a seldom-seen and very practical idea. Most people would probably be able to fit through the 12½ by 17½ in (32 by 44½ cm) Lewmar deck hatch, but those of larger build might find themselves struggling, in which case the companionway is the only exit from the boat. Both forward hatches hinge from the rear – good for scooping cool Mediterranean (or English summer?) breezes down below, but a red rag to traditionalists.

Moving aft again, a large, heavy glassfibre moulding forms the companionway steps. Removing it gives access to the front of the engine and a panel in the after cabin allows you to get at the engine from behind. Compared with most boats of her

length, the Oceanis is vast down below – and the galley leaves the cook with no excuses. Her entire construction suggests that a good deal of thought was given to ways of minimising building time. In the accommodation, however, the well-finished woodwork tends to focus the eye and the overall impression is of a neat, tidy and clean area. If it's light and space you want, few can offer more than this in a 32 footer.



For space, the modern broad-beam cabins of the Oceanis 321 beat the Contessa hands down. The galley (above right) is far more practical offering larger worktops and more storage space. But with its wide use of glassfibre linings (above), some might find the Beneteau too artificial. Her chart facilities (left) are bit basic too with the navigator having to perch on the end of the port saloon seat.

An eminent yachtsman (who also happens to hold the Contessa in very high regard) told me that *"when they designed the Contessa, they drew the hull first and then just fitted in what accommodation they could"*. Not strictly true, perhaps, but she simply can't compete with many modern yachts in terms of space



down below – though some would argue that's something you don't want too much of on a sea-going boat.

Traditional interior

Her layout follows the traditional pattern: the head of the 7-foot-plus quarter berth to starboard forms the seat for the navigator, who has a good-sized (½ Admiralty) chart table with plenty of stowage space and bulkhead area for instrumentation. Opposite, the galley provides all the essentials, with a partial bulkhead to separate it from the saloon where there's a dinette to port. Both settees form excellent sea berths, while the table drops down to form a double.

It's noticeable just how much stowage there is on board, despite

FACTS & FIGURES

According to the SA/displacement ratio, the Oceanis should sail the pants off the Contessa, which is probably true in light winds and offwind – although the Contessa can redress the balance with a 787 sqft spinnaker. But tacking into the wind in our trials, the Contessa easily left the lighter Oceanis behind cutting closer to the wind and driving easily through the waves.



High, wide and handsome, the Oceanis has plenty of room down below.

the reduced comparative volume. No interior mouldings are used (apart from the heads, and the one-piece headliner) so in every nook and cranny there's space to put something. She can fit more in than many modern boats several feet longer. The deep bilge provided by the encapsulated keel allows space for the water tank below the floorboards.

Headroom is just under 6 feet by the companionway, but up by the heads the sole and deckhead have converged enough for you to know you're getting towards the pointed end of a slim-hulled boat. There's a wet locker opposite with a zip-down door, and a V-berth in the fore cabin. Aboard the Contessa you'd certainly need to be – or would soon find yourself – on fairly intimate terms with your shipmates.

Despite the relative confinement, it's a well-tested layout which is extremely workable at sea. There's a homely and solid feel, plenty of handholds and places to wedge yourself in, a secure galley and chart table and good sea berths. *Zay Zay*, the boat on which we took the interior photographs, was built in 1980 and has been sailed hard and long, but shows little sign of it.

Horses for courses

A Contessa 32 would be an unlikely choice for anyone going on a two-week cruise around the Aegean. Equally, it would be surprising if someone planning to circumnavigate the British Isles

chose the Oceanis. Ultimately, a boat can only be judged on how well it serves the purpose for which it was designed – and you certainly can't apply the same criteria when assessing these two.

The Beneteau may not demonstrate the same windward ability as boats of a more competitive nature or those intended for serious offshore work. But she's far from slow, particularly offwind, and is cleverly designed to offer a great deal of volume and live-aboard comfort for your money.

By comparison, people go for the Contessa because of her renowned sailing qualities, realising that if they want the extra space of modern fuller-sectioned cruising boats, or the speed of today's lighter, flatter-sectioned racing designs, they'll have to sacrifice something.

Yacht design is all about compromise. Taken to extremes, the best sea-keeping boat would be completely uninhabitable. The fastest would be dangerous and unmanageable, and the most comfortable in harbour would become dangerously unsafe as soon as it left its mooring. Yet speed is related to safety, and to be safe you need a degree of comfort. And of course there's the question of construction and price (see *Is She Built To Last?*, *Y&E*, Autumn/Winter 1995).

Designers and builders mix these qualities according to their market. The scope for choice is bewildering. It's up to you to decide where your priorities lie.

OCEANIS 321 - FACTFILE

Beneteau's replacement for the Oceanis 320 was launched at the Paris boat show in December 1993, and in the UK the following year at Southampton. As with many modern

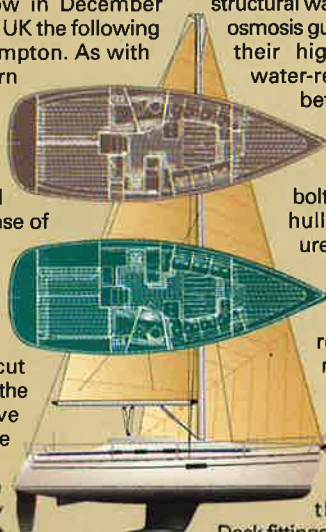
boats, the 321 uses an interior glassfibre moulding to stiffen the hull and form the base of much of the cabin furniture. It's fixed to the outer hull with a polyester paste and is cut away in parts of the bilge to give access to the bonding areas.

Beneteau are understandably cautious about releasing much in the way of construction detail, but state that they use both isophthalic and orthoph-

thalic resins depending on the application. They offer a five-year structural warranty and an anti-osmosis guarantee tied in with their highly-secret 'BWS' water-resistant barrier between the single gelcoat and the laminate.

Cast iron keels are bolted and fixed to the hull with a polyurethane glue, which is also used in the hull-to-deck assembly. A return on the hull moulding is coated with the adhesive; the deck sits on this with the aluminium toe rail on top and is then through-bolted.

Deck fittings are bolted through reinforced areas of laminate, with aluminium backing plates in inaccessible areas.



CONTESSA 32 - FACTFILE

Few boats still in production have such a long and distinguished history. Since she first appeared at the London Boat Show in 1971, over 470 Contessas have been launched, and in many circles she's long been accepted as the 32-footer by which others are judged.

In the mid 1960's, Lymington boatbuilder Jeremy Rogers started glassfibre production of the Contessa 26, a modified Folkboat with a masthead rig designed by one David Sadler. By early 1970, such was the demand for a larger version that research into a new design began in earnest. Departing from the Folkboat tradition, and taking into account the then new IOR (International Offshore Rule) rating system, the 32 was drawn with a fin-and-skeg underwater configuration. Racing success soon followed; the first two boats, owned by designer and builder respectively, between them made a pretty clean sweep of the silverware in Poole and the Solent in 1971. Rogers also added a Cowes Week class win in '72 to his previous year's victory. After nearly 10 years of production, the Contessa was one of the smallest boats to make it safely through the '79 Fastnet race. Though still attracting a strong following, she had been competing for a number of years against the newer breed of beamy, shallow-hulled, lightly-ballasted yachts which were criticised so harshly in the subsequent report into the race. Her sea-keeping reputation further enhanced, she continued to go from strength to strength; towards the end of the decade, output from the Lymington factory was running at 8 boats a month.

Leaner times in 1982 saw some changes in Lymington and the formation of a new company, Contessa Yachts. But after about three years, production was taken over by Rodney Barton, before moving up to Mike Slack's Lowestoft yard in 1988. Slack built a few boats over the next six years alongside the Sadler 32. Then, in July 1995, Rogers brought the moulds back to his new factory in Milford, just outside Lymington: the Contessa 32 was re-born.

CONSTRUCTION

Few current boatbuilders have had the opportunity of examining 25-year-old examples of their work to determine whether anything should be changed. And in the case of the Contessa, in structural terms, not a lot has been. It says

something about the amount of future use people expect from their already hard-sailed boats that owners of both the 26 and 32 are often prepared to spend considerably more than their second-hand market value having them re-fitted by their original builder; Rogers' factory is usually full of Contessas in for re-sprays, interior refurbishment and general overhauls.

The 32's hull is a solid laminate, laid up using chopped strand mat, and woven rovings in the form of E-glass. Resins are Scott-Bader's Lloyd's-approved orthophthalic, non-pigmented below the waterline. Though isophthalic resins are now preferred by many builders, the Contessa's renowned durability speaks for itself; besides, while not playing down the importance of high-quality materials, Rogers stresses the importance of

way the hull is laid up – particularly the all-important skin coat – in determining how well it lasts.

Her 4500 lbs of ballast is in the form of lead, encapsulated within the keel to provide a particularly low centre of gravity. And consistent with this traditional approach, apart from the headliner there's only one interior moulding, for the heads.

Structural reinforcing inside the hull – which, being of relatively low volume, is subjected to smaller twisting and compression forces than many modern boats – is provided by stiffening members bonded directly to it, including the continuous and partial bulkheads throughout length. The deck sits on a strip bonded into the hull a few inches below the gunwale. A mix of resin and glass seals the two together and a teak stake caps the join. It doesn't provide attachment points every few inches, as does the now almost-universal aluminium toerail, but Rogers points out that letting in a new section – or even replacing it entirely – is relatively easy if it's damaged.

Detailed changes have of course been made over the years. Ever mindful of the need to make maintenance as easy as possible, for example, Rogers has designed a new 'easy-to-remove' stern rail – which will still fit the original boats – while the headliner now has access hatches to simplify removal or replacement of deck hardware. Any colour hull – within reason – can be moulded, and a variety of woods can be used for the joinery. Interior variations, such as pilot berths, can also be incorporated. Semi-custom building is the order of the day.

