



PETIT, PLUS



All Beneteau yachts are clever; this one is small and clever,
the most difficult design brief.

Story by BARRY TRANTER; photographs by DAVID LOCKWOOD.

THE RIGHT-SIZED boat for you, goes the old waterfront adage; is the next size up from the one you've got now. This is usually accurate; it also implies a lifetime of discontent, never happy with your current boat, longing always for the future until one day the future has slid into the past.

Where is this leading? I'm getting around to the advantages of the small yacht and the fact that, apart from the TYs mentioned hereabouts, the small production yacht is as dead as Thylacine in this country. Where are the Endeavour 24s of tomorrow? Where is the first-timer's yacht, the new small yacht you can afford? The Beneteau First 235 may not be the whole answer, but like all Beneteaus, it provides what could be a role model for the Aussie yacht building industry, if such a body still exists in Kerrin's Wasteland.

From Groupe Finot, designers of the top BOC yachting breed, the 235 hull is lean and lively, with a straight stem, narrow waterline and maximum beam carried well aft.

Although the modern TY was created when NZ's Richard Hartley drew his TS16, the French pioneered the lightweight, beamy, small production yacht in the Sixties. Because internal volume was generated by the wide beam, coachroofs were lowered and this new type of stock yacht spread like a beer drinker's gut throughout France. You'd see intrepid Frogs everywhere around the coastline and the Channel Islands, cruising five and six up in 23-footers.

The First 235 is a direct descendant of that type of boat; in fact it is superficially similar to those older craft. Where the 235 scores for the Australian market is that it is available as a fixed or swing keeler. The swinger has high aspect pivoting keel controlled by a worm-drive mechanism, so whatever its rake it is always firmly locked. The long narrow blade retracts beneath the cabin floor, so the only intrusion on cabin space is the head of the heel, a stub about 400mm high set more or less beneath the table anyway. The keel is rotated by a socket drive mounted on top of the keel case, while a sliding ball arrangement on the

back of the case shows you the keel's rake angle.

It is the sort of configuration you would be happy with offshore. If you hit the bricks hard enough with the keel down, sorting out the mess may be difficult, but it is with a dagger-board, too.

The straight-stemmed Groupe Finot designed hull is 7.14m overall with a hull length of 6.57m, waterline length of 6.20m, beam at the 2.50m maximum, for a 1200kg displacement. The fixed keeler has 420kg of ballast, the lifting keeler only 60kg less at 360. The keeler draws 1.15m, the swinger 1.75m. Look at the drawings; when I described it as a high aspect blade, I wasn't kidding.

The 235 trims nicely so the knuckled forefoot is just at the waterline, meaning that when you're running it will probably be clear of the water much of the time, good for directional stability as the bow won't try to take over. At rest it is immersed, so it won't slap when anchored, and keep you awake at night, though sleeping in a lively little hull like this could be a now and again affair.

The 235 shows a lot of the familiar





Beneteau clever thinking, though at just under \$50,000 it will obviously not boast the equipment level of, say, the amazing S series. The cockpit coamings are beautifully angled to keep your bum in place, and there are teak heel strips each side. The mainsheet track is a short affair on the main bridgedeck just outside the cabin opening. Halyards are led back to jammers, vang and topping lift are not. The outboard clamps to the most basic bracket you can imagine — a slab of timber spanning the bottom of the transom opening, so it is a logical lift from its stowage spot in the starboard cockpit locker.

The rudder stock is a masterpiece of simplicity, a stainless bracket that supports the fibreglass fin, the latter locked in place by Nylon screws whose heels fit into dimples moulded into the blade. Moulded into the top of the transom is a rowlock fitting, so if all else fails, you can scull your way home, if you know how. The hole for this rowlock is unplugged; it drains straight onto the foot of the double quarter berth below.

As well as the roomy double you sleep one each side on the settee/vee berths,

From any angle, the baby Beneteau is sporty and nicely-proportioned, disguising relatively high freeboard and a pronounced coachhouse which provide almost full standing headroom below. Local designers could learn from the French penchant for styling.



after lowering the table and adding a cushion. On the port side is a galley with two-burner gas stove, sink and an icebox.

But the cunning bit is on the starboard side. The French spend plenty of time on their small boats — they are serious cruisers — so to starboard is a toilet, enclosed when you slide shut the door, and raise a ply panel in the forward face of the compartment. Now comes the tricky bit; a timber seat folds down over the head, so you can sit comfortably and use the small chart table mounted aft of the toilet position. You sit in the cubicle facing aft, as you would on a big yacht.

The nav area is no gimmick — I said the French cruise seriously in boats of this size — and though the sliding panels creating a separate dunny compartment may seem a bit, well, contrived, it is a novel solution to an old-age problem.

The layout is honest; it acknowledges that you will want to sleep only four on a 23-footer, and doesn't try to hide the dunny sheepishly behind a half bulkhead or under the vee berth, where 'privacy' is created by a curtain. Good grief! So you combine the toilet and nav table in a big area with the maximum headroom. However, the panel which slides up the forward face of the compartment doesn't



really conform to the roof lining; it simply doesn't seal. It doesn't matter, though it is not like Beneteau to let such a detail pass.

On the Water

THE wind was weird, almost straight out of the north at somewhere between 6 and 12 knots. We had only main and number 3, which, in the gusts of 12 or a bit more, was a nice combination, as the little #3 could be hand-held, tacked instantly and flattened without using the Lewmars. OK, maybe we had 15 in spots, enough to drop the main down the traveller a little when we had two on board. With the photographer's weight to the gunwale the little Beneteau was noticeably stiffer.

The 235 is not aggressively beamy on the waterline aft, so it remains well-balanced. With the gunwale down, one-

finger steering keeps her straight. This is a bobbing, buoyant hull, not extreme in any dimension so it remains in control if the proper, minor adjustments are given when needed. She is dinghy-like in reactions, yet doesn't demand dinghy-style panic when over-pressed. In fact, with the gunwale down she keeps driving, big-boat style.

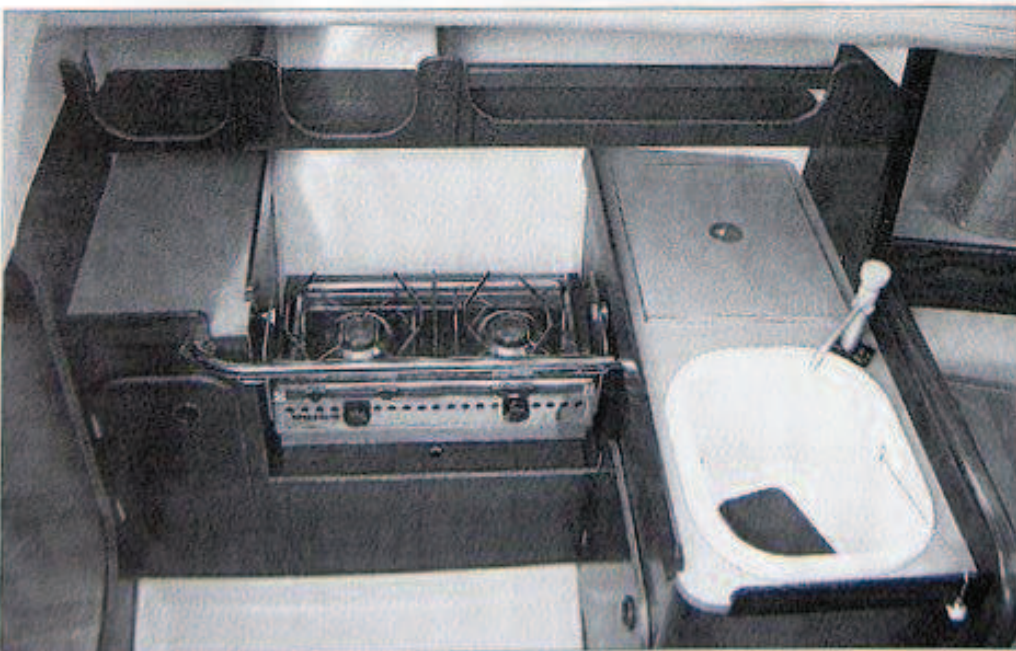
That long skinny keel keeps her on her feet, and doesn't let you down when asked to provide lift coming out of a tack, for instance. There was no waiting for it to grab the water when loaded up at low speed. With only a main and #3 to play with there's not much to report on

Neat L-shaped galley unit with two-burner stove, sink and icebox wouldn't look out of place in a 30-footer. Entry to double quarter berth is adjacent, something of a stoop.

the boat's performance. It was easy to coax into surfing mode, even with limited sail area, when a decent swell appeared.

The First 235 is as clever a cruiser/racer compromise as any of its bigger brethren.

Which brings us back to where this story began. Boats of this size are very versatile; you can keep them on a mooring, trail them, make limited offshore hops. Maintenance won't be crippling. Stable enough to avoid terrifying the kids, light enough to be fun. There is no direct Aussie equivalent to the 235. There are a number of similar hulls, but are all racers. Perhaps there are one or two cruiser/racers of similar dimensions and characteristics. But they wouldn't have a private toilet that converts to a navigation table.



BENETEAU FIRST 235

LOA	7.14m
LWL	6.20m
Beam	2.50m

Draft:

Fixed keel	1.15m
Swing keel	1.75m
Displacement	1200kg
Ballast (see text)	360kg

Sail area:

Main	14.40 sq m
Working jib	7.60 sq m
Spinnaker	36.30 sq m
Price:	\$48,000

Builder: Beneteau, St-Hilaire-de-Riez;
Importer: Beneteau Yachts Australia,
Sydney. Phone (02) 327 2088.