

Sailing in France

Jeanneau and Fountaine Pajot visit June 2009

By: Chris Bent, Bay Yacht Agency

I am sitting at my desk on the second floor of the Annapolis Yacht Haven building, looking out over the beautiful and busy summer harbor below. Annapolis, known as much for its great seafood as it is for its great sailing, has a sister city across the Atlantic. And I have a secret...the oysters are better over there!



And the wine and sailing are not half bad either. The historic port town of La Rochelle is the sailing capital of France, and home of Fountaine Pajot catamarans (and several other major yacht builders). It's also a short drive to Jeanneau's sprawling production facilities in Les Herbiers and Cholet in the Loire Valley. The old port of La Rochelle is guarded by twin medieval towers, where the French really got one over on the English Navy during the 100 years war. The town's winding streets are full of fantastic restaurants, cafes, and interesting shops. The people are very hospitable, and sailing is the

common language.

The brilliant blue skies of summer last well into the evening, with sunlight until 10:00 and 11:00 pm. It illuminates the limestone buildings and cobble streets with a magical resonance. The modern marina facilities, where thousands of sailing yachts call home in this part of the world, is a vast sea of masts. It's the largest marina facility in this part of Europe. Although positioned approximately in line with Halifax, Nova Scotia in terms of Longitude, the climate here is balmy with the influence of the Gulf Stream. Palm trees and subtropical vegetation make the place look more like southern California in that respect.



I recall sipping a cool, thirst quenching Muscadet wine from a nearby vineyard, with a plate of succulent Isle de Ray oysters, rich in salty brine followed by the tangy, aromatic vinegar sauce you can only find in this part of the world. They are delicious. I eat them for lunch every day when I am here. I crave them when I am home.



I traveled back to La Rochelle for a couple of reasons. Jeanneau has just launched their new 57, an incredible new design by all indications, and I am eager for a ride. Fountaine Pajot has also surprised the sailing world with a new 41' sailing cat, the "Lipari", which was conceived, designed, and built in total secrecy.

I am traveling with John and Susan Rosa and their young daughter Sarah, owners of a Jeanneau 49 Deck Saloon. John and Susan have been thinking of moving up to a larger boat, and I have made sure that the 57 has been on their 'radar' since it was announced. I am also meeting up with my colleagues, Eric Smith and Douglass Dillard, in La Rochelle to see the Lipari 41 and attend the annual dealer meeting and party at founder Jean Francois Fountaine's country home there.

I met up with the Rosas at Montparnasse Train Station in Paris. They have spent a wonderful few days touring the City of Lights, before heading out with me to the coast. That evening, we arrive in the city of Nantes, and the weather is ominous. 30 knot winds out of the southwest (worst possible direction for the Bay of Biscay) and driving rain, but by dinner time, things are improving. We even manage a drink outside before bedtime.



The next morning, we are met at our hotel by Eric Stromberg, the energetic and incredibly enthusiastic Vice President of Sailboat Design for Jeanneau. I have known Eric for several years, since his time as customer support representative in Annapolis, and followed his amazing rise through the company – well deserved.

The weather has cleared; the sun is shining and not a cloud to be seen in the brilliant sky. We make the short drive to Jeanneau's Les Herbier production facility, which I have not toured for several years. This is one of the largest boat building facilities in the world, and only one of several operated by Jeanneau. We spend considerable time in the massive hull of a new 57, hull #2, as it is assembled. It's a great opportunity to see where everything is run, and the incredible engineering that goes into these boats. By the time the design actually hits the production floor from the conceptual and design phases on the computer, nearly every detail has been thought out in excruciating detail. The building of the boat has been simulated to within very small tolerances on the computer, so that when it is actually time to build hull number 1, there are no surprises. It's amazing technology that really hides the complexity of the process.

Having spent considerable time in boat building facilities, I am always struck by how orderly, efficient, and clean Jeanneau's manufacturing plants are. Everyone is busy with the work at hand, with a quiet competence. There is almost no scrap material lying around, very few bits of fiberglass, wood, and other chunks of boat by-product that I am used to seeing in American boat yards. All of Jeanneau's facilities are ISO-9001 certified, which subjects their production methods to rigorous independent audit, ensuring consistency. So in a down market, it's impossible for the company to cut corners as one could imagine smaller operations might be tempted to do. It's impressive to see.



Hull #2 of the 57 is nearly finished, giving us the opportunity to spend some time below decks. The rich interior is modern, warm and inviting. I did not know how John Rosa, a conservative retired Navy Captain, might react to this more modern look. He loved it, said it was even better than he had imagined, and much brighter and more inviting than the Jeanneau 54DS. The layout is similar in the main saloon, but the cabins and heads are much larger. The aft cabin is vast, with standing head room all the way around the bed. Large storage areas abound, and all of the mechanical systems have been well thought out in terms of location, easily accessible. My service people back home will love this boat!



After a great lunch in the private Jeanneau dining room, we're off to the coast. We arrive at the marina in Les Sables d'Olonne, and are immediately impressed with the huge mast rising above all the others. The 57 is even more impressive in the water, her sleek styling speak of speed through the water. The cockpit



is enormous, there is room here for a dozen people to be completely alone. The transom folds down opening up a large dinghy garage, which is going to be a key selling point. Another great feature of the cockpit is the huge seating area aft of the helm station, where a half dozen of your closest friends (or family) can sit with you while you sail the boat. All lines lead to the helm, you never have to go forward to trim sheets or adjust lines. Of course all the winches are electric on this boat.

The new Volkswagon turbo marine diesel is so quiet and smooth, at first it's difficult to tell if the engine is running at all. I idle out of the harbor at 4 knots, smooth as silk. The big beauty is so well behaved, its effortless getting her off the dock and steering through heavy traffic in the narrow canals leading to the ocean. A festive crowd along the quayside waves as we motor out.

Moments later we are clear of the harbor entrance, with 10-12 knots of northwest breeze and a gentle rolling swell of 1-2 meters, very nice conditions. The mainsail is effortlessly unfurled with the electric winch, same for the big headsail. We sail close hauled at a smooth 6-7 knots, slicing through the water with a solid, gentle motion. The helm is very responsive, the boat sails like so many other Jeanneaus I have enjoyed sailing over the years. It's an awesome romp across the cool blue Bay of Biscay, with the beaches and uniquely French coastline shining in the sun behind us.

More to come...

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See the boats: <http://www.bayacht.com/jean1.htm>