

THE simple life

Bahama Boats may have an exotic name, but their design philosophy is rooted in the ascetic mood of an earlier recession

Martin Smith reports



Above: Table erected on 23ft and **Right:** a detail of the 23-footer's steering position



For a man who was an Olympic sailor – he raced in the Flying Dutchman class for France for eight years and has rebuilt a classic French sailing boat – Bruno Gandolphe, boss of Bahama Boats, is almost Taoist in his ideas about his motorboats. “I believe that people are happy when they have only the things around them that they need, and no more: and most people are carrying around huge amounts of gear that they won’t ever use. When I get time to go out with my family, I just grab a bottle of wine and a pizza, and off we go. Anything else around me that I don’t use is just slowing me down. My boats should do all that their owners want, but I want them to be simple too.”

With this in mind, a standard Bahama boat will have no leather upholstery, no spotlight and probably no fridge, but what that austerity gives you is a whole lot of freedom, not to mention a light and lively boat.

Taoism’s views on boats are unknown, but the religion’s belief that superfluous material possessions are a hindrance to a happy life – ‘dust in the soul’ – is a pretty good principle to take onto the water.

Boats do have a nasty habit of getting cluttered up all by themselves, so it’s as well to start off as sparsely as possible, but for all the talk of a clutter-free life, Bahama boats are by no means austere: “It’s just that if I think that a hole will do for a door

Left: The 23ft with hood extended
Below: The 20-footer planes well



handle, rather than an expensive, complicated polished stainless knob, that's what I use," explains Bruno. It's the original sportscar ethic, with a dash of religious ideology: lightness = speed, asceticism = clarity.

The impetus for building the Bahama boats, as their name suggests, came from the islands in the Caribbean Sea, where Bruno was holidaying when he saw an aged craft that he liked the look of. That original boat, which Bruno still carries a picture of, was a small Albury utility boat, built around 1945, in an era when money and horsepower were hard to come by.

Simplicity of line

The simplicity of both line and finish appealed to Bruno, so on his return to France he contacted his friend and local wooden-boat builder, Jacques Audoin, and the pair obtained plans for the Albury from the Wooden Boat collection before coming up with their own design.

Bruno, who had already rebuilt a local sailing boat alongside Jacques, produced his first Bahama 20 in 2005. The intention was to sell the first boat, but Bruno bought it himself, so that, with a boat on the water, it could be used to drum up interest. Bruno then obtained finance to produce a mould from the plywood original and now, in March 2010, there is also a 23ft (7m) version, and 37 craft built.

The Ile de Ré, Bahama Boats' home, and the surrounding La Rochelle area is something of an enclave for small-to-medium-volume, classic-inspired boat building companies. On the tiny, low-lying island there is Latitude 46, building speedy dayboats and commuter-styled motor launches; Rhea Marine, building workboat-inspired, small, chunky motorboats and, now, Bahama. With the French tax system making life particularly hard for these mid-sized businesses, the firms keep a close relationship, that might have been closer – in 2006 an investor approached all three firms with a view to amalgamating them under an umbrella organisation. In the end, no deal could be struck, but Bruno hooked up with the investor, using the money to set up a larger production facility.

The partnership, however proved short-lived; in no time at all the backer pulled out and Bruno ended up having to raise finance to buy back the share of the business and set up elsewhere on the Ile de Ré.

Talking to him today you get the feeling that he's glad to be a one-man band again, with full control of the company ethos. "I can take the design where I want. If someone makes a suggestion that I like, I can incorporate it into future designs; if not, I ignore it." And he likes to do his designing by hand and eye. Along with Jacques Audoin, a skilled wooden-boat builder and

previous winner of France's prestigious craftsman award, the *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* prize, he drew out lines for the 20, 23 and the as yet unbuilt 26ft versions on paper before having them digitised for pattern and mould making: "You cannot get a beautiful, fair curve by computer," he explains. The results are sleek, clean boats that exude the simplicity that Bruno seeks.

Any colour you want

Boats are laid-up in GRP with a balsa core below the waterline, using polyester resin, in a facility on the mainland near La Rochelle. The reason for using polyester over epoxy is the enormous range of colours that this allows – virtually anything in the spectrum, and, as if to prove the point, in the factory in the later stages of fit-out is a purple-hulled Bahama 20 for a previous customer's sister – each to their own taste.

Structural members, bulkheads and all furniture are constructed from plywood, while the decks are coated in layers of epoxy before finishing in a polyurethane, non-slip coating. Build times are by no means extravagant – from placement of order it is possible to have a 20-footer on the water in around eight weeks.

Though Bahama was started before the current global downturn, its modern take on the classic US utility boats that, in the aftermath of the last great recession of



Left: 20-footer (grey hull) underway
Below: Colour choices: 20-footers in stock



Left: Bruno Gandolphe, left, and designer Jacques Audoin
Right: The simple vee berth of the 23ft Model



1929, were produced by Chris Craft and others to suit slimmed-down purses seems to suit the current climate.

On first encountering a Bahama boat, simplicity without doubt rules the scene, and there's a definitely endearing quality about the retro-feel and lack of clutter. There are holes instead of door handles, wooden toggles instead of complicated catches and, in a real hark back to the 1970s, gelcoat and paint finishes instead of varnish, but these features also contrive to make the boats practical and hard-wearing. A Bahama boat is not going to have you spending your hard-earned play-time primping and preening; and when the kids, dogs and whatever else leap aboard, covered in sand and who knows what... who cares? These are boat to have fun with.

Though they're inspired by the low-cost, low-powered utility boats of the 1930s, things have moved on, and these days massive performance is available from relatively tiny outboard motors. Perhaps in his quest for simplicity, Bruno prefers to use modern, clean-burn two-stroke motors over the heavier and more expensive to maintain four-stroke models, but of course the choice is up to the buyer.

The cockpit of a Bahama is a convivial place, with the driver placed centrally to starboard and the passenger seating arrayed around him. Assisted by the big, efficient

windscreen, this means conversations can be held even at speed and that no-one is left feeling out of the loop, while if more protection is required a pram hood is stored inside the windscreen.

Early Bahamas were open virtually to the transom, with slat seating, but this has been replaced by short-backed, athwartships, cushioned seats and the model we were trialling, the 23, had an aft, laid-teak sundeck. This tidies up the whole line as well as giving ample storage beneath and may well prove to be the preferred option.

Variations

There are two basic layouts available for both the 20 and the 23ft models: Classic, open behind a windscreen, and Sedan with a three-quarters enclosed, roofed wheelhouse – but there have been many variations, including inboard engines and an electric motor for a water taxi on the river Loiret near Orléans.

On hitting the throttle of the 150hp Evinrude, the 23 rises in a balanced fashion, the bow barely rising to eye-line before quickly settling to allow good visibility. The lightness (hull just 890kg) lets the boat skip over chop, while together with the hull's modest vee ensuring that any pounding from re-entry is mild and quiet. Straight-line performance is exhilarating, while through the turns the hull grips.

On transferring to the Bahama 20 it immediately felt like a different boat. The utility boat roots are far more apparent in its less stable hull. Smaller, lighter and more nimble, the 20 is much more of a runabout than its larger, heavier sister – it will be interesting to see if Bruno can maintain his Spartan principles if he gets to build the even larger models – 26, 33 and 40-footers – that he has plans for.

With prices starting at £24,256 and £34,136 (plus VAT, extras, engine and delivery) respectively for the basic 20 and 23ft models these boats appear more than reasonable value for money, though as they're sold in euros these prices are subject to exchange rate fluctuations. For those who wish to use them on the inland waterways there is also the option of purchasing a dual, Torqeedo and outboard, propulsion package giving the silent blessings of an electric motor when tooling along the rivers and the more robust thrills of a large outboard for coastal use.

Bahamas represent small boats, easily driven and cheap to use, that can be tailored – so long as you can persuade Bruno that it's necessary – to suit individual needs. 🌀

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