



No Kitten: One Serious Cat

New Boat: The Saba 50, the latest in a long line of catamarans from French builder Fountaine Pajot, showcases the evolution of cruising multihulls over three decades.

By Herb McCormick

In 1976, a skinny young French Olympic sailor with the mane of a werewolf, named Jean-François Fountaine, returned home to La Rochelle after the Montreal Games and launched a boatbuilding concern with some fellow sailing fanatics. It was called Fountaine Pajot. They started with dinghies but soon moved on to a giant racing catamaran, *Charente-Maritime*. In 1983, cribbing liberally from the lines of that fast, spindly race boat, FP launched its first pioneering cruising cat, the *Louisiane 37*, which was an instant success. Now, over three decades later — having produced nearly 30 distinct models — it's safe to say they never looked back.

I was reminded of all this last fall at the U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, while thumbing through

an old FP brochure at the debut of the builder's latest offering, the Saba 50. We often talk about how much monohulls have evolved over the years, but it doesn't seem multihulls receive the same scrutiny, which is an oversight. If you compare the rather lean, spare *Louisiane 37* with the multitiered, expansive Saba 50, the advancement is downright startling. The boats don't just look like they came from different eras; they might as well have been beamed down from separate galaxies.

By any measure, the Saba 50 is an incredible sailboat. It's almost too

much to comprehend in one viewing. In fact, during our Boat of the Year (BOTY) contest, it didn't occur to me until my second visit aboard — during sea trials, after our dockside evaluation — that there are actually four spacious lounging areas: an outdoor front porch forward of the cabin, the main saloon, a covered aft cockpit and a topside sundeck planted atop the coach roof. An FP rep said initial sales were split pretty evenly between charter companies and private owners. Seriously, if you chartered this boat with your brother, and there was a family fight,

IF YOU COMPARE FP'S ORIGINAL LOUISIANE 37 WITH ITS NEW SABA 50, THE DIFFERENCES ARE STARTLING. THE BOATS LOOK LIKE THEY WERE BEAMED DOWN FROM SEPARATE GALAXIES.

you could retreat to dispersed stations and avoid one another for the rest of the week.

Not an option on the Louisiane 37.

The clever use of space carries through the accommodations plan. For the charter fleets, the “Quintet” version sports five double guest cabins (all with sea views, thanks to hull windows) and even has separate quarters for a skipper if you opt for a crewed vacation. The “Maestro” layout, on the other hand, has a dedicated owner’s suite to port with an office and other amenities, as well as a trio of double cabins. Either way, the saloon, with an open floor plan that incorporates the cockpit when the cabin doors are slid wide, is the yacht’s centerpiece. The galley, especially, is fabulous. “Lots of work space and stainless-steel appliances, a stove and oven better than you’d find in most houses, just completely over the top,” marveled BOTY judge Mark Schrader.

The construction of the Saba 50 is a straightforward sandwich laminate in massive molds employing balsa core in the hull, and a combination of foam and balsa in the deck to maintain a strong but light structure; FP offers a five-year structural warranty on the boat. A pair of shoal keels (draft is 4 feet) provide lateral resistance and insurance should you touch bottom.

The Berret-Racoupeau design team, well known for seeking alternative energy solutions, has incorporated solar panels in the overhead cockpit bimini (integrated wind and hydro generators are optional). Underway, the twin Volvo diesels were among the quietest in the entire BOTY fleet (decibel readings registered in the low 80s), a testament to the integrity of the build. And while the engine compartments were enormous, judge Schrader noted that a ladder or step would be useful to avoid stepping somewhere on the auxiliaries when descending into them for service work.

We sailed the boat on a moderately breezy Chesapeake Bay day and, with its fully battened, square-top mainsail — which takes complete advantage of the air pressure aloft, where it’s windier — the Saba 50 was a spirited performer, knocking off double-digit boat speeds on a close reach.

To starboard, the raised helm seat



Under sail, the Saba 50 is a spirited performer capable of double-digit boat speeds (opposite). The steering station, to starboard, is situated between the cockpit and the topside sundeck (top). The main saloon is spacious, with the galley to port and a dedicated navigation station forward (center). There are terrific lounging areas all over the boat, including this “front porch” aft of the trampolines (above).

and compact pit for handling all sheets and halyards, separated by the steering pedestal, is a truly clever arrangement. A solo operator could put the boat on autopilot, take a quick step forward and have ready access to everything required to sail the boat efficiently. Or a fellow crewmember could tackle those tasks while the driver watched comfort-

FONTAINE PAJOT SABA 50

LOA	49' 1"	(14.96 m.)
LWL	46' 8"	(14.26 m.)
Beam	26' 21"	(7.99 m.)
Draft	4' 0"	(1.15 m.)
Sail Area (100%)	1,122 sq. ft.	(104.2 sq.m.)
Displacement	34,612 lb.	(15,700 kg.)
D/L	151	
SA/D	22.9	
Water	185 gal.	(700 l.)
Fuel	248 gal.	(940 l.)
Mast Height	72' 1"	(22.00 m.)
Engine	Twin Volvo 55 hp diesels	
Designer	Berret-Racoupeau	
Price	\$820,000	

Fountaine Pajot

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SEA TRIAL

Wind speed	12 to 14 knots
Sea state	1 to 2 feet
Sailing	
Closehauled	8.1 knots
Reaching	11.2 knots
Motoring	
Cruise (2,500 rpm)	8.2 knots
Fast (3,000 rpm)	9.0 knots

ably. The color-coded traveler — and a big cat needs a good traveler — was particularly cool. One quick aside: Our BOTY judging panel gave the Saba 50 very high marks across the board with one exception, that being the limited visibility to port from the starboard wheel, especially on starboard tack when the genoa was unfurled. And the topsides lounging area, below the boom, could be a hazardous place in an uncontrolled jibe; if I owned or chartered the boat, that space would be off limits under sail.

These days, company namesake Jean-François Fountaine is no longer a long-haired boatbuilder — other members of his family have taken over some of his former duties — he’s the clean-cut, buttoned-down mayor of La Rochelle. Just like the cats he used to craft, nothing ever stays the same.

Herb McCormick, CW’s executive editor, also directs the BOTY contest.