



Matthew Sheahan

## The 'C' word

Cheap. A filthy, banned word in sales speak to the point that it has almost been removed from the English language. But how else do you describe a 42ft cruiser that costs just £75,000?

We all like a bargain, but how many concessions are we prepared to make in the name of cost? Does quality really matter, or is it the experience that counts? For many traditional sailors the two go hand in hand, but some of the big players in the boatbuilding scene now say that newcomers to sailing see their boats simply as tools to get afloat.

They're not bothered about the kind of detail that has traditional sailors glancing back over their shoulder to admire their baby, or proudly showing off their own specific touches to their friends.

It's not until these new sailors get well and truly hooked on the experience that they want to move upmarket and then it's brand loyalty that counts.

According to one builder, an owner who can tell his friend that he picked the right boat first time is more likely to stay with you for many years to come. To this company, entry level boats and brand loyalty are closely linked.

Yet to others, the new boats and their shocking price tags mark the start of a tough price war in which there are bound to be casualties.

London and Düsseldorf boat shows are two perfect venues to make up your own mind and see whether the salesmen flinch when you say the 'C' word.

# Euro builders in price war



## BARGAIN BOATS

January sales have hit European boat shows with some incredible deals on new boats, as big players Bénéteau launch a budget range and Poncin and Bavaria respond. Matthew Sheahan visits the bargain basement

**F**or a shade over £75,000 you could have a brand new 42-footer. In fact, if your budget stretches to £90,000 there are at least four new 40-footers on the market from well-known builders.

OK, so the prices are for the most basic of specs and don't include delivery or the taxman's slice, but even so, price tags like these seem astonishing value for money.

As French builders Bénéteau and Poncin Yachts both launch entirely new bargain basement ranges, the kings of the low price tag, Bavaria, are limbo dancing even further under the price bar, leaving many to see the latest developments as a full-on price war.

Rumours have been doing the rounds for some time that Bénéteau were planning an assault on their German

opposition, something the French deny. Yet the truth of the matter is that whether Bénéteau were aiming purely at price or not, they do concede that the entry level end of the market was one that they had neglected.

"Over the years our Oceanis range has been stretched in several different directions," explains Bénéteau's marketing director Serge Paillard. "From the needs of demanding



available later in 2005. But the announcement marks more than just a new set of brochures; the French giants have invested heavily in a new purpose-built factory capable of pumping out 1,200 boats a year, around 200 boats per model.

These are big numbers for most builders, but they are familiar quantities to Bénéteau. Their most successful boat in the sailing range last year was the Oceanis 473 with around 250 built. The cost savings come in the way the new boats are produced. The Cyclades 43 starts at around £90,000.

"Out of 250 Oceanis 473s built last year, only around 70 were the same spec when they were finished," says Paillard. "The Cyclades range will be around 15-20 per cent cheaper than the same-sized boats in the Oceanis range by simplifying the options available. With the Cyclades there is one interior, one keel, one rig and no teak decks.

"These boats need to be simple, easy to maintain and economic. We've also taken a close look at our building techniques and while we haven't changed the basic structure, we have spent a great deal of time looking at areas such as the hull to deck join, the inner moulding structure and how we make holes in the hull for windows and through-deck fittings."

But have they skimped on the gear to save money?

Apparently not.

"We still use good quality brand names for the deck gear," Paillard maintains. "We won't be the cheapest, but we have fought to make sure that our quality to price and equipment to price ratios are good."

Poncin Yachts have also looked to building techniques in the development of their new



Some of the new boats on offer. Clockwise from top left: the Bavaria 42; Poncin Yachts' Harmony 42; first of Bénéteau's Cyclades range, the 43; interior of the show boat; another Harmony, this time the 38

Harmony range and they too have built a new factory. But on top of this the La Rochelle-based company seem hell bent on winning the price war. Their new 42-footer enters the fray at an astonishing €108,650 or £75,451.

"The new boats will utilise robotics to build the boats," says Shane Rowe, who runs Group Poncin in the UK. "The new factory was designed using the same robotic engineers that developed the BMW and Peugeot factories." A factory that, according to Rowe, could be producing as many as 1,000 boats a year by 2006/7.

In the meantime, Poncin's new range consists of two additional models, a 38-footer starting at €82,770 (£57,480) and a 47 coming in at €133,750

(£92,880), both ex VAT, ex works.

All of which spells trouble for yards such as Bavaria whose brand new 42 will have a starting price of £82,894. Dufour aren't out of the ruck either with their 385, a boat that's barely a year old and smaller, but with a price tag of £78,950.

### So where's the catch?

Clearly all this assumes that quality remains the same across the board and can be compared directly, which is far from certain. We will be looking more closely at the design and presentation of these boats in a future issue.

But the bottom line is that whether it is described as a move to satisfy a new market, or the development of a new style, a war on price has been declared.

private owners at one end of the scale to the requirements of charter companies at the other, it was becoming too difficult to satisfy this wide range of needs with one model.

"The Oceanis range has gradually gone upmarket as well, so we felt it was time to develop an entirely new range aimed at charter business and owners for whom the boat was more of a tool to get afloat, rather than their pride and joy."

Unveiled at the Paris boat show, the new Cyclades range kicks off with a 43-footer – 39 and 50ft versions will be