

ON TEST: JEANNEAU 54

THIS STURDY CRUISER MIGHT LOOK LIKE A SUN WORSHIPPER'S PARADISE, BUT SHE HAS HIDDEN DEPTHS, SAYS TOBY HODGES

Powerful gusts dispersed plumes of spray from the bow, making the whitewater explosions appear even more dramatic as the Jeanneau 54 positively ripped through the seas off Cannes in March.

As we dialled downwind into the comparatively flatter water of the bay, as if on a wild fairground ride slowing to a halt, I gradually came to my senses, arms aching from gripping the wheel, ears ringing, rinsed out by the wind.

The teak on the side decks glistened after its intense saltwater dousing, and calm was temporarily restored.

The large motorboat chasing us finally caught up. Photographer Paul Wyeth was on the flybridge signalling us to go about, to head back out to sea – he wanted another

chance at a great photograph with the fortified monastery as a backdrop.

Back upwind into a gale to repeat the whole thing again? I glanced at my two somewhat damp crewmembers, but met looks of unwavering enthusiasm. No problem, let's go!

The Jeanneau 54 is a smaller sister to the 64 that launched two years ago and she shares many of the flagship's features as she was drawn by the same superyacht design team of Philippe Briand and Andrew Winch.

One look at the deck configuration would lead most people to presume she is a hedonists' yacht, one for the sun worshippers anchored in placid seas and warm climes. Indeed my first thought on arriving at the port that morning was that,



FACTS

Test Editor **TOBY HODGE**

- ▶ **Where we tested:** Cannes, South of France.
- ▶ **Wind:** average of 25-35 knots over short sharp seas.
- ▶ **Model:** hull number 7, the first example with an aft galley.



Photos by **PAUL WYETH**





with sunbeds on the swim platform and foredeck, this Jeanneau would quickly be out of her depth outside the harbour, where the waves were being shredded to white caps.

If ever there was a yacht that invites the proverb 'never judge a book by its cover', this is it. While the fleet of motorboats assembled for Jeanneau's global press trials all remained moored stern-to in the sanctuary of the old port, the company's sailboat product director Erik Stromberg simply shrugged and said: "Ready when you are."

His relaxed manner helped instil me with confidence in the boat. He has put enough miles in on large Jeanneaus to know they are deceptively manageable in a blow.

Into the teeth of a gale

I was surprised to note that none of those cushions were removed, nor in fact did any of them really move during our windy trial sail. And with furling sails, transformation time from at rest to full sailing mode is minimal.

With the equivalent of a deep reef in the in-mast mainsail and three rolls in the 106 per cent genoa, we power-reached around the Bay of Cannes, regularly at double-figure speeds. And it was really howling when we headed out to sea later that afternoon, where we met 35 knots and sharp seas round the back of the Lerin islands.

As conditions got a little spicy off the monastery, we spun the 54 around to return with the 1.5m waves – and bang, she absolutely powered up.

On one downhill run, we raised full main to sail full bore on a broad reach with the swell. At 12 knots this 17-tonne yacht starts to plane. When we slid onto a wave we could clock up to 14 knots. Not the sort of family cruising she is intended for, granted, but as a prospective owner I would be a lot happier knowing she could handle the rough stuff well, even when pressed.

It is a testament to Briand's modern hull shape that she remains in her comfort zone



Above: Toby looking rather windswept and damp, but revelling in the action on the helm in the breezy conditions



and is fun to sail. Although over-canvassed for the benefit of the photos, the 54 still demonstrated respectable behaviour and stability. There was quite a load on the wheel, but her hefty spade rudder gave reassuring purchase. I should have taken all this for granted perhaps, having tested the larger 64 during two days of Mistral.

Shelter for cruising

Then comes the *pièce de résistance*: when sailing the 54 in a stiff breeze, move forward from the helm to a sheltered spot under the sprayhood, take a seat on the comfortable chaise longue and it's quite a different story. It's like putting noise-cancelling headphones on during take-off. Peace and tranquillity is restored in an instant.

You could be fighting biting wind-against-tide conditions and still find comfort and protection within the calming embrace of this sprayhood. It has 6ft 1in clearance and, with, large clear panels, it's a practical option

that more than makes up for the relatively low cockpit coamings. And as the sprayhood extends far aft, you can leave the companionway open without fear of drenching the interior.

The winch configuration will certainly not suit everyone. From the helm you can reach the manual primaries, but not the mainsheet winches – and winches both sides are too close together and too far outboard to use comfortably manually.

Jeanneau looked at siting the primaries inboard, but chose this set-up because of its developments with Assisted Sail Trim (AST), a new system that automatically tacks sheets using electric reversible winches – so keeping winches out of the cockpit made sense. Electric winches and an autopilot might also ease the issues, but it's a pity to have to rely on push button power.

Going forward there is no obvious way to access the side decks from the cockpit – it's either aft over the primary lead, or a large

Above: when reefed we reached double figures, and 14 knots under full canvas downwind

- 1 Helmsman's seats that lift on gas struts are optional, but a third aft transom guardwire would give peace of mind.
- 2 The sprayhood offers complete protection at the forward end of the cockpit. It's rated to 40 knots and has panels that unzip for ventilation or stowage.
- 3 All about the deck comfort – the foredeck cushions can stay in place permanently and were strapped down well enough to survive our test conditions.
- 4 The sail locker is spacious enough for a crew cabin.



step over the coaming from a cockpit bench. I was surprised to find how far forward on the boom the mainsheet attachment is. However, I was assured the boom has an appropriately over-sized section to cope with stress loads.

Jeanneau uses a bridle mainsheet system with a block on each side of the coachroof, which is sheeted back to the aft cockpit winches, an increasingly common method on large cruising yachts. "A traveller doesn't have too much function on a large cruising boat," reasons Stromberg. "What you do need to have is a very good boom vang to keep the boom down, though."

Home from home comfort

Many of the design features of the Jeanneau 54 centre on providing home comfort. She really is an incredibly comfortable boat at rest. The decision not to have a tender garage means there are multiple areas to relax in, starting with a proper aft terrace.

I have 'tested' this terrace with a drink in the sun in flat seas in Italy and can report that its position so close to the water, with unimpeded sea views, is second to none.

This platform folds inboard at the push of a button with integrated space for the cushions to store neatly inside. The retractable davits are a smart solution that takes care of a tender up to 120kg, but it is an option that needs to be built into the hull structure because of the depth and reinforcement required.

The cockpit benches are among the longest you will find on a production yacht – a whopping 3.4m – complete with luxurious aft-facing chaise longue with drinks holders. Factor in the double sunbed on the foredeck, with its own bimini, and you'll see a healthy nod to motorboat-style deck comfort.

The cockpit table is large, suitable for six or eight guests, with an optional coolbox in the forward end. And I like the way that,

Above: when the conditions turn bad be assured that this powerful Jeanneau can cope admirably

rather than waste the space underneath table, Jeanneau has designed the liferaft stowage into the after end – an easy place to access and launch it from.

Options for the masses

Beware the optional extras – all those fancy cushions and home comforts come at a cost. The 54's exceedingly alluring base price of €340,700 rose to over €500,000 (ex VAT) for both versions I sailed. The Cannes test boat had a Code 0, teak decks, electric bathing platform, sun loungers, cushions, sprayhose and bimini, plus instruments, wine fridge, washer-dryer, dishwasher, genset, aircon, flatscreen TV etc – more modcons than in most family homes, in fact.

There is a good reason behind this. Jeanneau wanted to make a simple, but smart base boat for charter purposes, but one that could be dressed up with optional private owners. One third of the 50 54s



Above: the winch set up outboard won't suit all – it's designed for powered reversible winches or Jeanneau's AST system.

Right: aft terrace – the cushions store neatly within the platform when it folds



already sold have gone into the charter market, above the 20 per cent expected.

"This is basically the last size segment for charter," Stromberg explains. "This kitted up is €500,000 – you can't get a catamaran below that – but over that everyone moves to cats." He tells me that the 54 has the dual task of seducing private owners too with a luxury feel. "There were cycles of boats [of various brands] built for charter in the past that had no spark."

The interior of the 54 is light, spacious and inviting, especially compared with the 53, which has fizzled out of the range now. The high cockpit helps create generous aft cabin space and room for a deep sump and bilge – more akin to a raised saloon.

The layout is particularly versatile with options for two, three, four or even five cabins, the latter to suit the charter market. The forward cabin can be split in half lengthways with a soft bulkhead, and a



Above: ideal for those Mediterranean anchorages, with plenty of places to relax



An aft galley

Jeanneau has taken many of the ideas used in the 64 and extended them to suit a smaller size. "We decided not to have an owner's aft cabin option, but a VIP solution," Stromberg explains. Jeanneau was attempting to make it 54 less multi-layered by doing away with a bridgedeck.

Before you think how spacious the saloon looks, remember it's not sharing the central space with the galley on the test boat. This is the seventh hull built and the first with the aft galley layout, designed to suit requests from couples for two cabins.

The resultant galley, complete with all the stowage and white goods you could wish or budget for, is typically for thinking of Jeanneau. It's light and airy, with a large hull portlight, 6ft 3in headroom and plenty of worksurface. An it's different – I've never seen an aft galley instead of an aft cabin on a production yacht before.

Unfortunately the step into the galley is a little too far – presenting a sharp corner on which to bang your head on entering. Angles and tight cabin entrances are some of the few negatives in the interior – I'd also like to see larger engine access panels on a yacht of this size.

By moving the galley aft, plenty of stowage space is gained in the saloon. There is also a full-size dedicated navstation to starboard on all layout options.

Left: all layouts, from two to five cabins, keep the dedicated navstation





Pullman cabin can be chosen instead of the aft heads. The owner versions with two or three cabins work well, by providing generous cabins and a good-sized galley.

A choice of teak or oak finish is offered, although all but one of the 40 owners of the 64 has chosen oak. Like the 64, the 54 carries many of Andrew Winch's intricate styling details, including the use of leather with smart stitching, linen and solid wood.

The 54 has to stand out in a more competitive market place, however. "The goal was to do something on the level of the 64, but at one-third the price," says Stromberg. The 17-tonne 54 is half the weight of the 64.

It is the largest Jeanneau to have an injection deck, which both saves weight and, together with a cored hull, makes for a noticeably quiet interior with little movement when under way.

"At this size owners are looking for overall value for money," says Stromberg realistically. "It needs to be reflected in the product or they'll go elsewhere."



Above: a light, spacious and inviting interior with a number of options to suit owners and charter-operators

Forward cabin

A properly luxurious cabin, the forward cabin has a big entrance with an island berth. A linen headboard, leather lining, carpets, leather panels on doors and dual blinds create a distinctive look.

Andrew Winch wanted to be able to sit on the berth against the forward bulkhead and be able to see out of the hull portlight – though it was a challenge for Briand in terms of structure to place hull windows so far forward.

But it does mean this cabin is a real selling point for the boat.



Aft cabin

Jeanneau describes it as a 'VIP cabin', a term which sounds a little grand. It's a good aft double cabin with en-suite access, a hull port and some extra headroom created by having no cockpit locker above.

It's inviting, but marred by an entrance that feels too constrictive for this size of boat.

DATA JEANNEAU 54

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	16.16m	53ft 0in
LWL	14.25m	46ft 9in
Beam (max)	4.92m	16ft 2in
Draught	2.24m	7ft 4in
Disp (lightship)	17,164kg	37,840lb
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	126m ²	1,362ft ²
Berths	6-12	
Engine	75hp Yanmar Saildrive	
Water	724lt	159gal
Fuel	240lt	53gal
Sail area:disp	19.3	
Disp:LWL	165	
Price ex VAT:	€340,700 (£263,630)	
Design:	Philippe Briand Yacht Design	
www.jeanneau.com		

Conclusion

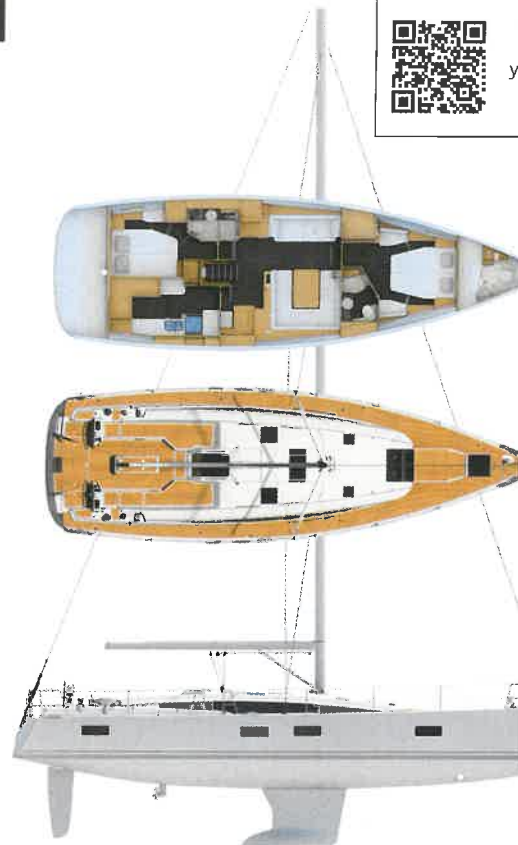
Jeanneau is the all-rounder of the production yacht market. Over the last decade its models have consistently offered tasteful styling, good performance, high build quality and value for money. It's the benchmark against which other production builders can be compared.

And once again Jeanneau has set the bar high with a yacht that combines practicality, affordability and a touch of elegance. I have never found so many comfortable positions to sit on one boat before – making a boat comfortable helps keep a happy crew.

Some might argue she is a little over-engineered, complicated and heavy. But in my opinion that does not unduly affect her sailing performance. I won't pretend the 54's performance is electric, nor need it be. A modern Jeanneau is versatile, with the ability to continue sailing in as little as five knots of wind with the help of a code sail and to keep punching with a kindly motion through the heavy stuff.

The Jeanneau 54 has plenty of power, yet delivers in the full range of conditions. And with 30 knots of wind over the deck, it was great to come in under the shelter of that sprayhood and be totally protected.

So if being comfortable whatever the weather is at the top of your list, then so should this latest yacht from Jeanneau.



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