

Year of the Cats

From a fleet laden with catamarans of every persuasion, the 2017 Boat of the Year contest crowned a slew of worthy winners — multihulls and monohulls — in 10 dedicated size- and purpose-related categories. **Leading the pack as the year's top domestic and import choices were a pair of champions that evened the scales between the Northern and Southern hemispheres: the wholesome Catalina 425, built in Florida, and a sublime South African-born catamaran, the Balance 526.**

Story by Herb McCormick, Photos by Billy Black



Import Boat of the Year



Domestic Boat of the Year

Catamarans, catamarans, catamarans: Never in the 22-year history of our annual Boat of the Year competition have we seen so many catamarans. In fact, of the two dozen nominees in the 2017 contest, fully half of the entries sailed in on two hulls; there were so many cats that it took three separate divisions to categorize them.

It reminded us of an old story. A music critic who caught a young New Jersey singer's act before he was a huge star famously said, "I saw rock 'n' roll's future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen." As cats are now firmly established as the fastest-growing segment in the sailboat industry, we may now be able to say much the same thing: We've seen the future of boatbuilding, and its name is multihulls.

To underscore the point, for 2017, our independent panel of judges (see page 88) named one of several cats built in South Africa, the fast and elegant Balance 526, as the year's top import. **Heck, even the Domestic Boat of the Year invoked the letters "c-a-t" in its name; of course, we're talking about a fully found cruising monohull manufactured in Florida, the Catalina 425.**

The Balance 526 is a performance-oriented couple's cruising boat (opposite top). The wholesome Catalina 425 is the company's second take on a popular design (opposite bottom).

The Year of the Cats, however, was definitely the theme of the 2017 fleet. They came in a dizzying, dazzling array of stripes. There were full-fledged South African voyaging cats (St. Francis 50 MK II, Royal Cape Majestic 530); versatile cruising cats from France (Lagoon 42 and 450 S, Fountaine Pajot Lucia 40); cats aimed directly at the charter trade (Bali 4.0 Lounge, Bavaria Nautitech 46 Fly, Leopard 45); a cat with looks that one nautical writer likened to a "running shoe" (Xquisite X5); an incredibly sporty cat constructed in Vietnam (Seawind 1190); and another Florida product with an open floor plan for day charters (Gemini Freestyle).

Cats weren't the whole story, however; in fact, they were far from it. Of the dozen yachts on the monohull side of the fleet, production cruising boats continued to get bigger and bigger (Beneteau Oceanis 62, Jeanneau 58). Along with those French products, the international field included yachts from Denmark (X-Yachts X4), Germany (Dehler 34), Italy (Solaris 50), Sweden (Hallberg-Rassy 40 MK II) and even Slovenia (Elan Impression 45). And it was a great year for aficionados of performance cruisers, with the Alerion Sport 30, Elan E4 and J/112E joining the Dehler in one of the most competitive divisions in the contest.

As always, the judging consisted of separate dockside inspections and sea trials, and took place during and

after the annual U.S. Sailboat Show in Annapolis, Maryland, in October. Over the next 16 pages, we'll delve deep into the individual classes, announce the winners, and explore what separated them from their competition. Then, on pages 88 and 89, you'll find specs and stats on the entire fleet, contact information for the respective manufacturers, judges' credentials and more.

Like every Boat of the Year competition, the 2017 edition took on its own unique personality. It might have been a season for the cats, but when all was said and done, the champions represented a diverse blend of well-found cruising boats in all manner of shapes, sizes and styles. Step right up and check them out.

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Everybody's All-American



Not every naval architect gets the chance to take a second swing at a popular design a couple of decades after the splash of the original. But that is precisely the opportunity that presented itself to Catalina Yachts designer Gerry Douglas with his Catalina 425. The company's original 42-footer debuted 23 years ago, and before all was said and done, Catalina produced more than 1,000 units of the highly successful production boat. Now Douglas has taken all he learned in the intervening years and amalgamated that knowledge in the new 425. And he knocked it out of the park (see "Born in the USA," December 2016). That's why we've awarded the 2017 Domestic Boat of the Year award to the Catalina 425.

"With his history with the previous 42-footer, and the fact that he owned one himself, Douglas had an amazing feedback loop when he tackled the 425," said judge Tim Murphy. "So he had a great list of things he wanted to change along the way, and boy, I felt this wasn't



The Catalina 425 is designer Gerry Douglas' second 42-footer for Catalina; the first iteration, introduced 23 years ago, was a wildly popular model, of which more than 1,000 units were built. Among the changes on the new version (above) are twin steering wheels and a completely revamped, comfortable saloon and interior (below).

like you were aboard a production boat, frankly. It has a very warm-feeling interior, and the fit and finish was emphatically good. With detail after detail, there's a lot of value in this boat, which comes in at \$315,000."

"It had a higher level of finish than some of the more expensive boats in its category," noted Ed Sherman. "One of the things Douglas said when discussing his personal design brief was that he wanted to have excellent service access to all the systems. He achieved that goal and did a nice job with it. Everything was easy to get to, labeled properly and quite good in that respect."

"It's one of the few boats we sailed this year with a shaft drive, compared to saildrives," he continued. "So it's more of a traditional cruising boat in that respect. Overall, this is a great redesign. His old 42 had a center-mounted steering pedestal with an abnormally large steering wheel. Now he's gone to twin wheels. It's really opened up the cockpit nicely.

Behind the scenes, the electrical panel, glasswork and so forth are all super clean."

"Catalina did an excellent job with this boat," said Carol Hasse. "There was a concerted focus on safety features. The target market is an experienced sailing couple in their 50s with plans for retirement cruising. This will be an excellent vehicle for that."

"I like the fact that all the lights were LEDs with dimmers," she added. "It also has some cool, fun lights in the cockpit console that were kind of sweet. There was a beautiful saloon table, really awesome. The opening ports were good. The engine access was great. Overall, I was very impressed."

So too were Hasse's fellow panelists, which is why the Catalina 425 took home one of the two major awards for 2017.



A Wondrous Balancing Act



It was a match made in multihull heaven. On the one hand, you had American Phil Berman, a world-class competitive Hobie sailor in his youth, who parlayed his knowledge, talent and passion into a decades-long career conceptualizing, sailing and selling cruising catamarans. On the other hand, you had designer Anton du Toit and the Paarman brothers, a trio of South African surfing legends who began their careers shaping and building surfing surfboards and later applied that experience — along with their deep understanding of the wild waves, winds and currents that surge along the coast of their homeland — to the lamination, construction and marketing of long-range cruising cats.

The ensuing collaboration between Berman, du Toit, the Paarman bros and their company, Nexus Yachts, led to a balancing act in creating a light, fast cruising boat — one that two people could truly sail well — that nonetheless could carry a cruiser's payload and offer complete, comfortable accommodations. The end result was the **Balance 526**, *Cruising World's* **Import Boat of the Year** and Best Full-Size Multihull Over 50 Feet (see page 76) for 2017.

"Phil has entered other boats in the contest, including a Dolphin cat built in Brazil and an earlier Balance model built in China," said Tim Murphy. "I think he's nailed it with this one. In fact, I think the Balance 526 represents an important moment in the history of multihull design

and evolution. We've been watching catamaran development for 20 years now. In the beginning, there were big, fat boats that at first weren't designed for the loads that people put on them. But there was something missing in the marketplace that Phil recognized: a high-performance voyaging cat that an experienced couple could take anywhere. Then Gunboat came in with their 62-footer, a real thoroughbred boat, but it was more than most couples could handle; you needed a professional crew. Finally, we have that performance cruiser that a couple can actually sail well (see "In a Sweet Spot," June 2016).

"The lamination work is very nice," he continued. "This is a vacuum-bagged epoxy boat. A lot of the structure has carbon in it. It's an E-glass boat for the most part, but where there are any high-load areas, they're using carbon. So it's a good, light structure."

"The Balance we sailed had a high-end owner who decided to go full-on with a lithium-ion power plant, so we're playing in the state-of-the-art arena here," said Ed Sherman. "On the shore-power side, he was also very mindful of migrating around the world, so he set that up in such a way that he



A collaboration between Phil Berman, naval architect Anton du Toit and South African surfing legends the Paarman brothers, the Balance 526 boasts deep performance roots (above). From the main saloon, the view of the surroundings is vast and compelling (below).

has a lot of options that are essentially switchable with the change of an adaptor. But there are also 1,200 watts'

worth of solar panels. To save weight, they went to a 24-volt DC system instead of 12 volts; this enables them to cut their wire gauge and such in half, which on a boat like this can add up to a lot of weight in just copper. It speaks to the whole concept of the boat."

"The delivery crew that had brought the boat from South Africa were so enthusiastic about how the boat sailed and how functional it was," said Carol Hasse. "They were sailors, like us, and they were all in sync with the boat in neat ways that made us all feel like 'OK, this thing is totally happening. It's well designed and seaworthy.'" Indeed it was. And it was also a big winner.



No Dogs Among These Cats



The first of three dedicated catamaran classes for 2017 was a decidedly French affair, with three of the four contestants hailing from the sailing-crazed nation, which has been one of the hotbeds of cat design and construction for decades now. So it's no surprise that the competition for **Best Full-Size Multihull Under 50 Feet** came down to a battle between a trio of boats from two longtime BOTY adversaries and competitors: the **Fountaine Pajot Lucia 40** and the **Lagoon 42** and **450 S**.

Before diving into the category analysis, we'd be remiss not to mention the fourth boat in the class, a sharp 39-footer built in Vietnam, the **Seawind 1190 Sport**. While the minimalist, performance-oriented Seawind was an outlier in the battle of more traditional cats waged between Fountaine Pajot and Lagoon, the judges believed it was a critical success and honored it as such with a special award (see page 87).

That left the French cats, beginning with the Lucia 40. "Fountaine Pajot has been in business for 40 years, during which time they've built some 3,000 boats, all cats," said Tim Murphy. "The Lucia 40 replaces the Lipari 41 in the builder's line. Over a six-year span, they built 200 units.

"The Lucia can come in four different layouts with as many as four cabins," he added. "It's an infused hull: They do a vinylester skin

coat, and then the rest is resin-infused. The decks are injection-molded. It's worth noting that Fountaine Pajot builds the largest injected part of any industry in the world: the decks on some of their larger models. It's impressive.

"Once we were underway, I was pretty happy," he concluded. "I felt the boat would be a strong contender before we sailed it, and that was only confirmed once we hoisted the sails. The builder claims it's a performance boat, and our test sail confirmed that, making 7.7 knots on a beam reach in 10 knots of true wind. She felt fine and spritely. It was definitely easier to handle and keep track of all the lines compared to some of the other catamarans we've tested."

Next up was the first of the two Lagoons, the **450 S**. "The 'S' stands for 'sport top,'" said Murphy. "They introduced the Lagoon 450, which was a flybridge model, six years ago, and in the time since have sold some 650 of them. The sport top is all about the steering; the Lucia 40 had a similar configuration. It's really a hybrid between traditional bulkhead steering and a flybridge. You step halfway up and sort of look over the cabin top, so you have good visibility but not a true flybridge. There have been many tweaks along the edges to go with the new steering station, but this is a marginally new design."

On the other hand, the **Lagoon 42** was a completely fresh model that replaced the previous 421 in the company's quiver (see "Categorically Cool," June 2016). "There were 280 of those built, so this is likely to be a high-production boat," said Murphy.



Clockwise from above left: In a highly competitive class, the Lagoon 42 triumphed over a trio of well-executed designs. The Seawind 1190 Sport put the priority on performance. Fountaine Pajot's Lucia 40 hauled the mail once the spinnaker was set and drawing. The "S" in Lagoon's 450 S stands for "sport top."

With the 42, Lagoon made a deliberate effort to consolidate the floor plan and living areas, making it a much more intuitive space by eliminating long ladders and compartments. But they didn't stop there.

"One of the major things they did was move the mast aft, which had big structural implications," said Murphy. "Lagoon feels there's a big advantage there."

THE JUDGES RECKONED THAT THE LAGOON 42 REPRESENTED A TRUE EVOLUTION.

"One of the positives of moving the mast aft was that you expand the foretriangle, and in addition to any spinnakers you might fly, there's now a self-tacking jib," said Carol Hasse, our resident sailmaker. "It's a bigger headsail, so you have a little more power in there now, and it means the boat's a little less mainsail-driven, so the main is less of a handful when you want to reef it or you're under sail."

All that left the judges with a difficult decision to make, one that ultimately came down to the Lucia 40 and the Lagoon 42, both of which came in at basically the same \$18 per pound. "It's a tough call, a really tough call," said Hasse. "The Lagoon toerails and big cleats felt a bit more substantial to me. The bow pulpit seats were comfortable, and I liked the lifelines between the hulls forward. The Harken hardware is also excellent."

With two boats so similar, the little things stand out. Furthermore, when the votes were cast, the **Lagoon 42** felt like a real departure and evolution, which is why the judges named it 2017's **Best Full-Size Multihull Under 50 Feet**.

North from South Africa



When it comes to cruising catamarans, there are two nations above all others that have become the world leaders in the design and construction of new models: France and South Africa. Yet in a still-surprising twist, in the Full-Size Multihull Over 50 Feet category in the 2017 BOTY contest, all four nominees — the Balance 526, Royal Cape Catamarans Majestic 530, St. Francis 50 MK II and Xquisite X5 — were South African products. Perhaps not so surprisingly, they represented the strongest division in the entire fleet.

The most unusual cat in the quartet was the Majestic 530, built in Durban and originally designed as a 40-footer, but one that over time evolved into ever-larger siblings, including 42-, 45-, 50- and finally 53-foot versions. The company billed the boat as “safe, stable, [and set up for] singlehanded sailing with superior specifications and long-range capabilities.” For the most part, the judging panel agreed with this summation.

“They had stainless-steel handholds all the way around the perimeter of the yacht — better handholds than all the other cats, probably,” said Carol Hasse, always mindful of the safety features among the nominees. “The layout of the deck and cabin top was very functional. And there was good nonskid throughout.”

“The model we sailed had five cabins and five heads,” noted Tim Murphy, while acknowledging that other

layouts were available. “The fit and finish of the interior was very good. As you’re living in those cabins, it’s clear that a lot of man-hours went into their execution.”

Some members of the panel were familiar with the St. Francis 50 MK II; an earlier iteration of the Angelo Lavranos design was named the Best Cruising Multihull in 2006. Murphy was effusive in his praise for company founder and owner Duncan Lethbridge. “He’s kind of the godfather of South African catamaran boatbuilding,” he said. “He’s definitely a legend. His firm builds four boats a year, so it’s not a high-output yard. But they’ve made some interesting innovations with this boat along the way. Lethbridge was one of the first catamaran builders to start infusing hulls, which he did with the MK II version. And the boat really sails well. We were sailing in about 7 to 8 knots of true wind and still making nearly 7 knots. Lethbridge said the boat would sail the same speed as the breeze in up to 10 knots of wind, and after sailing the boat, I believe him.”

“There’s a lot to like about this boat,” seconded Hasse. “The cockpit lockers are arranged so you can fit in five scuba tanks. There’s a paddleboard storage locker in the aft coaming, and a really nice swim ladder. They didn’t lead all the running rigging aft, like so many cats. You could actually deal with things at the mast — there’s a winch, rope clutches, mast steps, handholds — that I prefer to deal with there, like the spinnaker halyard. Compared to some of the other cats, I found this very seaworthy.”

“Systemwise, it has some pretty neat engineering,” said Ed Sherman. “And they did a really nice job creating laminates for all the cabinetry.

There was a high degree of workmanship visible that we didn’t see with all the nominees.”

Next was the Xquisite X5. The cat did not win this category, but it proved to be an award-winning design just the same (see page 86). “It’s a little bit of a strange-looking boat,” said Murphy. “Sailing blogger Charles Doane wrote that it’s the boat that looks the most like a running shoe, and I think that’s sort of accurate.”

Yet there is beauty in utility and comfort, as Murphy discovered when he stepped aboard. “It’s lovelier on board than it is at a distance,” he said. “When you’re in the space in the main saloon or down in the hulls, it’s really nice. They’ve created volume in the hulls for all the berths to be fore-and-aft; they didn’t make the concession to performance and speed that, for instance, the Balance 526 did. The Balance designers chose hull forms that would deliver particular speeds and then developed the interior around those forms. The Xquisite is the other way around, I think. There’s just detail after detail after detail. The number of seagoing details that are built into this boat is really, really impressive.”

The remaining boat in the running was the aforementioned Balance 526. Murphy expanded on his previous thoughts about the cat: “I think this is a performance cat that a couple can sail well. There are many details I like about it. One of them is that there are no gimmicks or quirks about the hull form — no bumps or chines. The builder decided from the beginning that he wanted a boat that can consistently sail between 10 and 12 knots. To do that, you have to have a hull form that wasn’t going to get too voluminous or too splashy in different kinds of



seaways, and stay true to it.

“There are compromises in it,” he continued. “It means you can’t have the spacious island queen berths facing fore-and-aft like many other cats do. But I think that’s an honest and honorable choice. Not everybody’s going to love it, but it started with the hull form and then went to the interior, and I’m very glad that the choice exists in the marketplace. I think the hulls are beautiful. Under sail, we sat on the forward trampolines and just watched the boat moving through the water, and it was really lovely.”

Murphy’s colleagues agreed. Not only did the Balance 526 take the Import Boat of the Year award (see page 73), but it also walked away with the title of Best Full-Size Multihull Over 50 Feet for 2017. Clearly, a boat with two hulls this pretty deserved not one but a pair of prizes.



Clockwise from above: Here comes the sleek and powerful Balance 526, the biggest winner of the 2017 BOTY contest. The Balance drew strict competition from the Xquisite X5; one sailing blogger likened its looks to a running shoe. The St. Francis 50 MK II is a complete cruising multihull from South African legend Duncan Lethbridge. The Majestic 530 was developed from a range of smaller cruising cats.

The Ideal Vacation Ride



Quick and level sailing. Comfortable and spacious staterooms. Plenty of space for lounging and sunbathing. An all-around terrific party platform. These are just a few of the reasons that contemporary catamarans have become the vehicle of choice for so many bareboat charterers. So it's little wonder that for 2017, the quartet of nominees vying for the designation of **Best Charter Boat** were all cats: the **Bali Lounge 4.0**, **Bavaria Nautitech 46 Fly**, **Leopard 45** and **Gemini Freestyle**.

"A boat built for the charter market comes with its own set of design puzzles," observed

Tim Murphy. "While a boat aimed at private ownership may give priority to one person or couple in the boat by devoting more volume and amenities to one stateroom over all others, a successful charter boat is different. A charter boat should provide equivalent amenities to three or four couples or more. And in recent designs, the best charter boats also offer multiple separate social spaces around the boat, both in and out of the sun and wind."

In this year's contest, we sailed three catamarans that developed these themes for the overnight charter market — plus a day-charter boat, the **Gemini Freestyle**, which promises fun gatherings at resorts around the coasts.

Because the Gemini Freestyle is built in the same facility that manufactures Catalina yachts, at first the judges had a challenging time

getting their collective mind around the concept of an open-deck layout — not unlike a pontoon boat, but much more spacious and inviting — that can be configured in countless ways. "The Gemini is a great platform for anything you'd like to do in the way of entertaining on the water or sharing an open space in some creative way," said Carol Hasse.

The **Bali 4.0 Lounge** features an open floor plan with an indoor/outdoor gathering space on the bridgedeck. A garage-door-style enclosure at the aft end of the cabin house either opens or closes the bridgedeck saloon to weather.

"The Bali is a new brand developed by the French yard Catana within the last two years," said Murphy. "The company felt they needed boats they could bring into the charter market. They came in with that open floor plan, something we've seen strongly represented by boats like the Leopard from South Africa's Robertson and Caine yard."

The **Bavaria Nautitech 46 Fly** provides a helm and lounging area on a flybridge that separates the lower aft "social cockpit" from the upper "working cockpit."

"This 46-footer is built by another French builder,



Clockwise from far left: Perhaps the most interesting and unusual boat in this year's fleet was the Gemini Freestyle, a 37-foot cat with an open floor plan that can be configured in countless ways. The Bavaria Nautitech 46 Fly provides a helm and lounging area on a dedicated flybridge. The Leopard 45 is another winner from the South African Robertson and Caine yard. The Bali 4.0 Lounge is Catana's answer to a dedicated charter boat.

Nautitech," said Murphy. "A couple of years ago, it was purchased by the German firm Bavaria Yachts, which wanted to expand the charter component in their boatbuilding operation and needed cats to make that happen."

"I was impressed with what they've done to appeal to the U.S. market, with larger

air-conditioning units and a lot of the systems they put in," said Ed Sherman. "In terms of fit and finish, I was very pleasantly surprised."

"I was taken with the joinery, the lovely teak grates and the nicely done interior," said Hasse. "There was great visibility from the main saloon; you could see everywhere. And

even in light air, it sailed way better than I thought it would."

But among the nominees we inspected this year, the **Leopard 45** stood out for its exemplary execution of the aforementioned charter-cat themes. The boat offered the category's best forward gathering space, connected to the saloon through a translucent

door of 1/2-inch-thick Lexan. The layout of the main saloon is flipped 180 degrees, unlike on traditional cats, so that people sitting at the dinette can focus their attention forward instead of aft. Visibility through the Leopard is terrific (topped only by the Balance 526 in the Multihulls Over 50 Feet category). Designer Alex

IN SOME CASES, CREATING A GREAT CHARTER BOAT CREATES A FINE PRIVATE OWNER'S BOAT.

Simonis described the structural challenge of creating so much openness, pointing out the network of structural stringers crossing the bridge-deck and around the insides of the hulls. In earlier designs, a solid transverse bulkhead would have carried those loads. For sailing performance, Simonis moved the mast aft, balancing the aspect ratios of the main and jib. For sailors, that means simpler sailhandling. As on other boats in the category, all running rigging comes to a single work station at the helm, but the organization around two power winches worked best in this boat.

In some cases, creating a good charter boat also creates a good private owner's boat. That's certainly the case with the Leopard 45. With 60 percent of this model's units destined for charter — branded as the Moorings 4500 and the Sunsail 454 — all service items are easy to maintain. They need to be; the parent company, Tui Marine, is responsible for servicing 450 boats at any given time.

With detail after detail executed to an extremely high standard, the **Leopard 45** earned the top spot as **Best Charter Cat** in the BOTY 2017 fleet.

Crafted for the Joy of Sailing



It's not every year that the Boat of the Year fleet includes a group of performance-oriented sailboats that are competitive on the racecourse, laid out for vacation cruises, and ideally suited to pleasant daysails. But the class of '17 produced a bumper crop of four very different vessels, ranging between 30 and 36 feet, that tick all the boxes for fast, fun, compact boats that were crafted for the purest of reasons: the simple joy of sailing. It was also an international collection of nifty coastal cruisers, with nominees built in France (J/112E), Germany (Dehler 34), Slovenia (Elan E4) and the United States (Alerion Sport 30).

We'll begin with the Alerion Sport 30, which caught the judges' collective eye for several reasons. "I have always been in love with the lines of this brand," said Carol Hasse. "[The Alerion has] a performance hull and keel. I think it's an aesthetic gem."

"It's powered with an Oceanvolt electric engine that's relatively new to the U.S. market, with lithium-ion batteries providing the juice," noted Ed Sherman. "I give it kudos because the package works very well."

"This is an infused vinyl-ester hull all the way through, so they paid close attention to the weight in it," said Tim Murphy. "It's offered with a carbon rig and swept-back spreaders. The emphasis on this boat is the sailing, and it's a delightful boat to sail. So that's the focus here; it's not really about long-term

cruising. They call it a weekender, which is an apt description. That said, the experience of sailing this boat is very pleasurable."

Unlike the Alerion, the Elan E4 has twin rudders and comes complete with a full cruising interior. Murphy summarized the boat from its historical perspective. "Elan has been in business for 70 years. They build skis and they build boats," he said. "They had a big presence in the United States until the economic downturn. But they're coming back, and I think we're going

IN TERMS OF FINDING A MIX BETWEEN RACER AND CRUISER, THE DEHLER 34 TRIUMPHED.

to see a lot more of them. John Peterson is their director. He's a legendary guy in the production boatbuilding world who ran Hunter Marine for many years. He's living in Europe now and is running Elan. I think this is the beginning of a line we're going to see a whole lot of in the States going forward."

"I found the cockpit seating quite comfortable," said Hasse. "It had a nice backrest. The teak cockpit felt warm and had good nonskid on it, as did the decks. The handholds on the companionway ladder made it very secure when going down below."

The Elan sailed well, as did the next boat in the category, the J/112E (the "E," says the manufacturer, stands for "elegance"). "This was a sweet boat to sail," said Murphy. "It looks beautiful on the water

and makes you go 'Ah!' when you see it."

Murphy also put the J/Boat in context with the rest of the class. "At \$300,000, it's the most expensive boat in the category and the most expensive per pound. It's also the lightest boat and has the lightest displacement-to-length ratio in the class. The helm was really nice. I like the ergonomics of how it's set up. It's got a big wheel, and when you're steering, you can sit outboard on the coamings and drive the boat with fingertip control."

Last but far from least was the Dehler 34. Once again, Murphy considered the boat with respect to the other nominees in the Performance Cruiser category. "This entire class has boats that give you real sail controls, with the traveler aft and end-boom sheeting anchored on the cockpit sole so you can really shape the mainsail," he said.

"Within this category, the Dehler, which costs \$215,000, breaks down at \$17.09 per pound in relation to its displacement," he added. "Compare that to the J/112E, which is \$26.55 per pound. So it's much less expensive for its size and also in real dollars. And it has a great accommodation plan. There's a nice interior, and once underway,

the helm was delightful. So I think it does what the builder said it would do, and it does so at the best value in the category. That was impressive."

"This boat really lit up for me when we had a chance to sail it," said Sherman. "And during our motoring tests, it was quiet down below. There wasn't a lot of vibration or rattling parts or weird harmonics going on, and that's always a good thing. To me, that's really an indicator of the quality of the assembly."

"I really enjoyed sailing that boat," said Hasse. "The twin wheels were just effortless; they were like butter. Oh my goodness! And I like the fact that they focused on performance both in their sail package and with the carbon-fiber mast."

When all was said and done, Murphy spoke for the entire judging team when he summarized the Dehler: "I think in terms of the category trying to find a nice crossover between cruising accommodations and a boat that you can take sailing, it just hit its mark." With that, the panel named the Dehler 34 the year's Best Performance Cruiser. With great value (at a sailaway price of \$215,000, it was 2017's least expensive entrant) and terrific execution, you might call it a win-win situation.



Clockwise from above: At a cost of \$215,000, the Dehler 34 was the fleet's least expensive boat. The Elan E4 boasts twin rudders and a complete cruising interior. It's hard to find prettier lines than those that comprise the Alerion Sport 30. Like all J/Boats, the J/112E is a superb sailing vessel with plenty of get-up-and-go.



X Marks the Winning Spot



Many sailors believe that sizewise, the sweet spot for cruising boats lies somewhere between 40 and 50 feet. That was certainly the case in the 2017 Boat of the Year contest, where five strong competitors — the Catalina 425, Dufour 460 Grand Large, Elan Impression 45, Hallberg-Rassy 40 MK II and X-Yachts X4 — constituted the fleet's single biggest class. When it came to deciding which was the best, the judges certainly had their work cut out for them.

As previously noted, the

panel was duly smitten by the Catalina 425 (see page 72). The French builder Dufour has also found much success in the BOTY competition; its 382 was named Best Midsize Cruiser for 2016. This year the company entered a larger yacht, the Dufour 460, which also drew praise from the judging team.

Tim Murphy said: "The boat is part of a series that includes the Dufour 500 and 560, and there's a definite theme among all of them. The design writ called for a boat intended for coastal cruising and social cruising, with the ability to make passages but not for long-term living aboard. And there are some interesting innovations. They have a pop-up galley in the stern with a grill, sink and fish-cleaning platform. They're

aiming at a whole lifestyle, I think. Down below, they've inverted the traditional layout of a cruising boat by putting the galley all the way forward. It was unusual, but it really worked. And it was pretty darn nice to sail. It's kind of the middle boat in this grouping; some of the others have extreme features off to the sides. There are a lot of good things going on here."

Good things were also happening aboard the 45-foot Elan Impression. "Elan's E and S lines are performance-oriented, while the Impressions are dedicated cruising boats," said Murphy. "There are four boats in this line, all designed by the renowned British designer Rob Humphreys. They're different from the performance lines, with a single rudder, not twin rudders; a keel-stepped mast, while the others are deck-stepped; and with the mainsheet controls up on the coachroof, not in the cockpit, so you can have a proper bimini. It's a fairly good value compared to its competitors, too."

Speaking of the competition, Carol Hasse was enamored of the Hallberg-Rassy 40 MK II. "The joinery down below is exquisite," she said. "The handholds and fiddles are exactly where they should be. There's an amazing amount of standard safety gear. There's no boat in the fleet that is more highly attuned to what is really seaworthy."

Murphy concurred with that assessment. "As far as the fit and finish down below, this is bar none the one that I would most like to live in," he said. If there was a strike against the Swedish-built yacht, it was that the MK II version was really an updated version of a popular 40-footer that's been in production for nearly a decade, with more



than 150 units already built.

The 41-foot X-Yachts X4, manufactured in Denmark, was the final boat in the class. "It's in between the company's Xp series, which is very directly performance-oriented, and their Xc series, which is cruising-oriented," said Murphy.

"It has, I believe, the best structure of all the boats in this category," he continued. "It's a galvanized steel grid frame in the bilge of the boat. It gives the boat incredible stiffness. It's also built with epoxy, which is the best resin you can build boats out of. They paid strict attention to the weight of the boat. I think they've largely hit their mark of providing more cruising comfort than their full-on performance boats do. And yet during our sea trials, it was clear they'd kept it a really nice sailing boat."

Hasse agreed: "It was a lovely boat to sail, an effortless helm."

Ed Sherman dug a little deeper. "It's a quiet boat," he said. "The construction level is very high. I loved the steel grid concept, and the fact that the boat could be lifted by

Clockwise from right: Made in Denmark, the 41-foot X-Yachts X4 features a galvanized steel grid frame in the bilge that provides incredible stiffness. The Dufour 460 Grand Large is another fine craft from the longtime French builder. Built in Slovenia, the Elan Impression is a full-fledged 45-foot cruiser. So too is the Hallberg-Rassy 40 MK II, another fine sailer.

one single eye that's actually part of the frame and is pretty much an X-Yachts signature trademark. It speaks to the integrity of the build and the weight balance, because they literally just hook that one eye and yank it up.

"The thing we need to balance out," he added, "is which side of the fence does it lean on? More toward the racer or the cruiser? In my opinion, it's more toward the racer, but I also like it as a cruiser/racer. It's a very versatile boat."

When the final votes were tallied, Sherman's colleagues readily agreed by naming the X-Yachts X4 the year's Best Full-Size Cruiser Under 50 Feet.



Maximum Length, Utmost Style



For 2017, the big-boat category on the monohull side of the equation featured three worthy contenders, two of which were offered by a pair of major French players in production boatbuilding — the Beneteau Yacht 62 and the Jeanneau 58, whose builders are both subsidiaries of Group Beneteau — with a third built in Italy, the Solaris 50, which was a first-time nominee in the BOTY program. Given the size of the yachts and their respective nations of origin, there was no question that the matters of style and luxury would play key roles in determining the winner, and so it came to pass.

Unfortunately, due to scheduling issues with the crew tasked to sail the boat to New York to deliver it to its new owner, for the first time in the history of the event, the judges were unable to conduct sea trials on the new flagship

from Beneteau. Their deliberations, then, were based on their extensive dock-side inspections during the Annapolis boat show. “We compared it to the Jeanneau, which cost \$750,000, and the Solaris, at \$1.2 million,” said Tim Murphy. “The Beneteau comes in at \$1.3 million, though in cost per pound (\$24) it’s about in the middle between the Jeanneau (\$16 per pound) and the Solaris (\$38 per pound). This 62-footer is part of Beneteau’s Yacht line, which they’ve been revamping over the last couple of years.

“There’s a lot of splash and style to this boat,” he continued. “We came aboard from the stern, so the first thing we noticed was the ‘dinghy garage’ aft, which many boats this size are starting to incorporate. This is a truly well-designed space. As with the Dufour 460, there’s a barbecue in the cockpit aft, so you open up a cover and there’s the grill, a sink and a cutting board. There’s a big cockpit table that’s on a telescoping leg that drops down into a daybed, though it would also be comfortable for overnight

sleeping. Down below there’s a very big, very long — maybe the longest I’ve seen — in-line galley to starboard. The forward cabin is very spacious and well laid out.”

With five different interior options, the Jeanneau 58 offers something for all cruisers, whether they’re sailing as a couple with friends or with a large extended family. “There was a lot to like about this boat,” said Carol Hasse. “It had my favorite toerail in the fleet, and one of my top chart tables. There are great fiddles down below. They had a big double bow roller standard, where other boats had that as an option. You step down into the galley, which I liked because once you were in it, you felt very secure. In the cockpit, the table is beautiful, and the ample lounging seats are great. Under sail, it moved along nicely, too.”

“They did some good things electrically,” added Ed Sherman. “If you are indeed going to sail around the world, you’ve got both 12- and 24-volt service, as well as 110 and 230 AC converted with an inverter and generator.”

The newcomer to the fleet was the Solaris 50, and

especially under sail, it left quite an impression. “It was one of the most delightful sailing experiences I’ve ever had just in terms of how it moved through the water, how powerful it was and yet how easy it was to drive,” said Hasse — quite a statement considering her years of voyaging and sailmaking. “It answered the helm like a dinghy, and it was just absolutely fantastic.”

“This is a boat that just exudes style, both static and dynamic,” said Murphy. “At the dock there was a real wow factor. This boat just jumped out. There was the design itself and also the paint job; together they contributed to this sort of sparkling, really outstanding look. It’s a performance boat, and it feels like a worthy expression of Mediterranean luxury on the Riviera. When we were sailing the boat, the helm was gorgeous, just beautiful. Being on board, moving through the water so effortlessly, was an absolutely lovely feeling.”

“The boat sailed great. I mean, there’s no question about that,” said Sherman. “There was no boat in the fleet that sailed closer to the wind. It was right there.”

As the judges deliberated over this trio of fully found yachts, the discussion drifted to lifestyles and the inherent differences between the French and Italian nominees.

There was no question that the Beneteau and Jeanneau would be ideal platforms for traditional cruising, with both passagemaking and lounging at anchor being pastimes at which both yachts would excel. The Solaris, on the other hand, would be an ideal ride to sail to the Caribbean for the winter racing circuit, with an equal measure of competitive sailing and island-hopping on the docket.

“I think the Beneteau offers the most real luxury in the strict definition of the word, certainly in the interior and I think in the cockpit, too,” said



Clockwise from above: Built in Italy, the Solaris 50 was a newcomer to the BOTY fleet and, with its terrific sailing ability, acquitted itself admirably. Jeanneau’s latest model is the 58, another yacht that delivered sparkling sailing performance. As far as luxury sailing experiences go, one would have to search widely to find a ride as smooth as the Beneteau 62.

Murphy. “That said, I don’t think we had a better pure sailing experience in the whole fleet than with the Solaris. The luxury there was the sensation of the boat moving through the water.”

In the end, with a team of sailing-mad judges, that was enough to tip the scales, which is why they awarded the Solaris 50 the banner for Best Full-Size Cruiser Over 50 Feet.



COURTESY OF BENETEAU/GUIDO CANTINI (LEFT)

An Intriguing X Factor



The story of how the Xquisite X5, the most fascinating and technically advanced yacht in the 2017 BOTY contest, came to be (and how it arrived at the Annapolis boat show) is at least as interesting as this special, intriguing catamaran. It's a tale of chasing dreams, of youthful sailors and entrepreneurs, of translating lessons learned circumnavigating aboard their own cat into a vision of what modern multihulls can and should be. It's also a tale with a happy ending, with the Xquisite X5 unanimously earning the prize as the **Most Innovative Boat** for 2017.

Having just beaten the deadline for completion at Phoenix Marine in South Africa, the X5 arrived in the Port of Baltimore aboard a freighter three short days before the start of the show. Over the next 72 hours, Xquisite's Tamas Hamor, his wife, Sara, and their team delivered the boat to Annapolis, commissioned and re-rigged it, and amazingly had it ready for inspection just in time for the show's opening.

The Hamors, having circled the globe aboard a twin-hulled Leopard, know a thing or two about cruising cats. They applied much of that knowledge in launching and marketing the Xquisite brand, built by Phoenix, a firm composed of many former employees of Dean Catamarans, which went out of business several years ago. If the finished product is any proof (and it is), the relationship between the couple and Phoenix is highly simpatico.

Ed Sherman sang the boat's praises: "The fit and finish

is just exceptional, without question. Considering the background of the company, it's unbelievable to me that they were able to gather some of the best craftsmen in South Africa. The boat is further enhanced by the couple who showed it to us, who have a lot of practical experience. They've taken everything they've learned and said, 'OK, we can make this better and

instruments, everything. It's just wonderful.

"If there's a failure, there's a wired interface via the Garmin navigation equipment that's installed on the boat. If that fails, the CZone system has manual overrides that are readily accessible in the staterooms, so you can just switch the whole thing over to a fused, manually controlled setup. That's unlike

some of the other boats I've seen with digital switching, where the backups are set up to take over mission-critical circuitry only. On this boat, they did it for all the circuits, which adds considerable cost to the system. But it's really worth it. On top of that, once underway, she went through the water very well."

A fine sailing vessel with state-of-the-art systems is something to admire.

And that's the final chapter on the book of the Xquisite X5, a model — and marvel — of innovation.



that better.' And they've tried — and succeeded — to apply all that real-world experience to the design of this boat.

"In terms of the systems," he continued, "they've got one of the best applications of digital technology, with triple redundancy, which for all intents and purposes is aircraft-grade quality. They're using the CZone system, which is a BEP/Mastervolt/Power Products line that was originally created in New Zealand and has evolved over the last five or 10 years. They've applied it so you've got a wireless control on an iPad on which you can monitor everything ... tanks, air conditioning, lights, sailing

Founded by a couple who had already circumnavigated aboard a catamaran, the Xquisite X5 benefited from their hard-earned knowledge and experience (above). With the boat's ample, voluminous hull forms, the staterooms offer extra-wide, extra-cozy fore-and-aft berths (below).



Too Cool to Be Forgotten



During every BOTY contest, the judges find themselves critiquing boats that defy easy characterization. It's a contest, of course, and as such, every boat must be categorized, even if it means sometimes attempting to put round pegs in square holes. Yet some of these outliers are so clever, unusual and well conceived that the panelists, during their deliberations, find themselves returning to them again and again. This year there were three such nominees, including two boats built in the United States: the **Alerion Sport 30**, a stylish daysailer with an electric engine and camping accommodations in the Performance Cruiser class, and the **Gemini Freestyle**, which boasts a floor plan unlike any other, in the

Charter Boat division.

But it was a third boat — a catamaran, naturally, in this Year of the Cats — that truly drew the judges' attention and rendered them smitten. In fact, the jury was so taken with the interesting 39-foot **Seawind 1190 Sport**, a high-performance cruiser powered by twin retractable outboard motors, that

"I LIKED THE BOAT IMMEDIATELY," SAID ONE JUDGE. "IT'S SIMPLE BUT SINCERE."

they unanimously decided to honor it with the **Judge's Special Prize** for 2017.

"Built in Vietnam, it's a development of the company's 1160. They've used carbon to make it considerably lighter," said Tim Murphy. "So the design brief began with performance (the boat has a light displacement-to-length

ratio of 136 and a powerful sail area-to-displacement ratio of 23.2). We sailed this boat in less than 3 knots of breeze but still made far better than 2 knots of boat speed. So it's a boat that really moves. It has daggerboards, the rudders are in cartridges, and it has a pair

think it's definitely a boat that would live well in the tropics. Under sail, I particularly liked the ease of movement. The cockpit, by multihull standards, was not the focal point. The focal point was making the boat go fast. It would really be a joy to



The 1190 Sport's raised cockpit door is a signature feature of the Seawind line (above). Even in light airs, the 39-foot cat delivered unexpected sailing performance (below).

of outboards that tip up, so it's easily beachable. I think it's going to be a very fun boat for people who love to sail."

"I really like the Seawind conceptually, with a unique raised cockpit door/bulkhead that opens up the whole boat," said Carol Hasse. "I

have for coastal cruising."

Ed Sherman said: "I liked the boat immediately. If I were considering a multihull, this is one of the boats I'd be seriously looking at. It's simple, but it's sincere. It's real. And I think Carol nailed it: It would be a fast, awesome coastal cruiser.

"They did a nice job fitting it out," he continued. "There were no extra bells or whistles, but access to everything was good. I loved the fact that it's powered by outboard engines that you can raise and lower out of corrosive seawater, unlike a sail-drive configuration. They're so easy to service and maintain. The dual helms were great, as was that convertible bulkhead."

All that aside, Sherman got to the very heart of the matter when summing up the quick, compact cruiser. "This boat," he said, "would just be a lot of fun."

Herb McCormick is CW's executive editor.

