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Grand Soleil Blue Boat Test: The New Slick Performance Dayboat

The Grand Soleil Blue is a return to basics for the Italian marque. Yet this 33-footer is a sophisticated machine as Sam Fortescue discovers

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Grand Soleil Blue | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi



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There's something of history repeating itself as I make my way to the test sail of [Grand Soleil](#)'s radical new Blue on the shores of Lake Garda in Italy. Five hundred years earlier, the Venetians dragged dozens of boats through the mountains on tree-trunk rollers to confront the Duke of Milan on the lake. Today, the shipyard has driven its 33-footer (9.99m) from Forli near the east coast to the town of Malcesine, clinging to the skirts of the 2,000m high mountains. Given the difficulty of reaching the place even with modern transport solutions, it is an eye-opener.

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But the journey is undoubtedly worth it, bringing me eye-to-eye with the first of a new concept for the Italian yard. Where the well-established long cruise (LC) and performance lines stretch from 40ft to 80ft and are exquisitely designed for comfortable living on board, Blue is a day-sailer – created for afternoon blasts and the odd overnighter. It has a simple interior, but it is really all about bursts of inshore or inland sailing punctuated by a swim, or a picnic or lounging in the capacious cockpit.

Grand Soleil Blue | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi

“The Grand Soleil Blue was born from the desire to redefine the sailing experience in a contemporary key, with an elegant, fast, and extremely easy-to-handle yacht,” says Grand Soleil product manager Gigi Servidati. “It is therefore the answer to a new generation of owners: design enthusiasts, lovers of essential comfort, and those who seek the freedom of the sea – even just for an afternoon.”

Fine Design

Long-term Grand Soleil collaborators [Nauta Design](#) and [Matteo Polli](#) are behind the sharp looks of the new boat. Blue features pure, clean lines with an uncluttered deck and low coachroof – no mean feat on such a small boat. Massimo Gino of Nauta describes the most contemporary of any Grand Soleil to date that conveys the “youthful baby appeal” expected of the smallest in the range. “It is a look that is instantly likeable and easy to recognise and to fall in love with,” he says.

A 1.3m fixed bowsprit defines one end of the boat, with a broad, flat V-shaped stern at the other. The purpose here becomes clear as soon as we get some sail up and the boat heels over to lay her wide quarter on the water. “The shape is based on the fact you want to make the boat fun in any conditions – whether upwind or downwind, light or strong,” says Polli, who is responsible for the naval architecture. “It’s trying to reduce the wetted surface when the boat is upright, so making the waterline as narrow as possible with overhangs to make it as dry as possible for light wind conditions or for downwind.

“When the boat heels, you have wind, so you don't care much about wetted surface, and you can allow the boat to be wider and have more power to resist the force of the wind.” It's a proven approach to design in larger boats and the only potential flaw that I can see is that the boat rocks a little more on her mooring than some of her heavier, beamier neighbours.

Grand Soleil Blue | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi

Pushing upwind into about 15kts and a light Garda chop, we hit our 20-degree heel angle and stay there, powering along at 7-8kts. It's easy, an effortless performance, with the boat still light on the helm. With no inclining foot-rest, the best helming position is sitting hooked over the shallow coaming, looking ahead over your shoulder and holding the wheel with one hand.

The sail plan features a 38sqm (409sqft) fat-head main and a self-tacking jib of 26sqm (280sqft). The sheeting angle is reasonably tight, but there are also fairleads for genoa sheets if the conditions warrant a larger headsail. For long reaching passages, the Code Zero is undoubtedly a good option, and it keeps the boat speed up at 5-6kts in the light airs that prevail at the start of our test. Later, with the 100sqm (1,076sqft) gennaker flying from the tip of the bowsprit, we hit 10.6kts gybing downwind at around 140 degrees. The handling is still excellent as deep as 160 degrees, with good speed.

We finally snuff the gennaker when the wind hits 20kts – not because the boat is beginning to feel overpowered, but because there is no backstay and the spar maker advised caution. “It's probably fine up to 30kts,” says Polli. “But they told us not to use the gennaker above 20kts.”

If that raises your eyebrows, there are a number of solutions. First, you could opt for a smaller pin-head main and backstay. Or to preserve the performance of the bigger main, though, you could always use the topping lift to give the masthead extra support. Alternatively, take the boat with the optional mainsheet traveller (this should really be in the standard spec), so you can ease the traveller right down to a broad reaching position and keep the sheet relatively tight. You lose a bit of sail shape, perhaps, but it keeps the forestay tight.

“When we decided to remove the backstay, for me as a racer, this was a big step because the backstay is the most important control you have on the boat,” says Polli. “But we are not looking at racing boats – this is a boat for everybody. Once I tried it, I thought it worked pretty well.”

As with all Grand Soleil boats, the design uses a deep central rudder rather than twin smaller ones. There are arguments for and against both approaches – manoeuvrability versus wetted surface, but in the end it comes down to a question of preference. In any case, the rudder looks modest compared to the 2.2m draught of the bulb keel, although this latter is also available in a shallow 1.8m option. Polli admits that the low-draught version adds a little weight and marginally chips away at performance.

Grand Soleil Blue | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi

A Green Yacht?

One of the really interesting elements of the Blue is its sustainability potential. Grand Soleil has built the first hull using recyclable Elium thermoplastic resin, which allows the whole

structure to be heated at end of life to recover the PEI foam, glassfibre and resin for reuse. Just like in the automotive industry, parts are fitted for easy disassembly using screws or special glues. It can also have a 6kW electric pod drive from [ePropulsion](#), recyclable sails from One Sails and synthetic teak decks. Together, these features slash the carbon footprint of building and using the boat

“As sailors, the sea is our passion and our home,” explains Servidati. “With the GS Blue, we wanted to demonstrate that design, performance and sustainability can coexist harmoniously to create a carefully considered boat for future generations.”

However, owners can also opt for a boat built in vinyl ester with a 20hp diesel engine, normal sails and teak decking. I struggle with this on two counts. First that there are owners out there who would actively choose the less sustainable option, even though it costs no less. And second, that Grand Soleil is tacitly questioning the Elium solution by offering traditional lay-up as an alternative. The fact of the matter is that, without the electric propulsion and the recyclability, this is not a sustainable yacht, bringing the ‘Blue’ moniker into question.

Not unreasonably, the yard pleads commercial pressures for this. “We have to listen to what our clients want,” explains a spokesperson for the yard. “We have spent a lot of resources developing Blue, but we must also sell boats.” In other words, the ball is in the client’s court. The good news is that two have already chosen the sustainable version, while the other two are in discussions still.

Elium is by now a well-tested resin system appearing in [Beneteau’s Sunfast 30](#) and Oceanis Yacht 60, as well as a couple of race boats. If it has a vulnerability, it is to heat, beginning to soften slightly from around 70 degrees Centigrade. The only practical limitation this imposes is that coloured hulls are not possible because they absorb too much heat.

Below Deck

The interior of the Blue is simple, as you’d expect for a yacht designed for occasional overnighting. Down the companionway, you arrive in a space that is open as far as the forepeak. Bench seats line the hull and there’s a fold-down carbonfibre table built

around the stainless-steel mast support on the centreline. The forepeak is filled with upholstery and makes a comfortable double berth. The two side benches could serve as additional singles at a pinch – delivering the boat overnight, for instance, or for children.

Grand Soleil Blue interior | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi

There's a shower, heads and basin in a nicely designed separate compartment. And a functional galley is positioned opposite to port, offering the option of a hob, oven, fridge and plenty of storage. Unsurprisingly, you can't stand down here, but sitting headroom is good throughout. Nauta worked hard to achieve a space that feels bright, with a combination of natural and indirect electric light. Light colours also help.

Grand Soleil Blue interior | Photo credit: Gianluca Naphtalina Camporesi

Under Power

As a day-sailer, the Blue is not designed for lengthy performance under power. By and large, the message is that if the wind's not blowing then go out another day. That said, its 6kW pod drive is

surprisingly efficient. The stated range is 30nm at 5kts, although this is clearly in flat conditions. Factor in head winds or seas and that would drop. You can also spec a second battery bank to double the electric range.

As with all electric drives, the Evo 6.0 is delightfully silent and provides powerful torque at low revs. The kicker is that it can also operate 'backwards', using the propeller to generate power to charge the batteries under sail. At 6kt of boat speed – which is easily managed in even moderate winds – it will generate 240W of power. There is a modest cost in terms of boat speed, but you would be unlikely to notice more than 0.5kts of penalty. Solar panels inlaid on the coachroof provide a further 340W.

What's it for?

This is a boat that will reconnect you with the pleasure of sailing again. Responsive and stable, it achieves good speeds up to 12kts on a flat-water reach – we topped out at 10.6kts on a deep gennaker course under the towering cliffs of Lake Garda. The [B&G electronics](#) recorded a really weatherly performance, too. During the test we managed around 35 degrees of true wind angle and at 45 degrees, we still made 7kts. Leeway was slight with that deep keel.

As with all Grand Soleil boats, it was conceived for sunny Mediterranean sailing on relatively flat water. The hull does a good job of deflecting the wavelets of Lake Garda, but there's little coaming to keep spray out of the cockpit otherwise. A smartly designed aft bathing platform folds out without disturbing the cushions of the lounging area. But Grand Soleil's Servidati says its appeal runs far wider than the Med. "The yacht can be adapted with minor technical variations, but its conceptual essence – a true weekender, emotional design, and fun at the helm – remains perfectly relevant in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, or along the Atlantic coasts."

Sam's Verdict on the Grand Soleil Blue

So, if you view the Grand Soleil Blue as a super well-equipped dayboat with a performance rig, then it's clear that a few hours fun sailing to a favourite bay or harbour for lunch is the promise she offers. With a basic galley and heads an option, you can extend it into a weekend for four or even a short cruise if the forecast allows.

forecast arrows.

Pros:

Slick Grand Soleil styling

Good performance up/downwind

Ambitious sustainability options

Cons:

Expensive for a day-sailer

Only reaches Class B at sea

No backstay

Grand Soleil Blue layout | Photo credit: Grand Soleil

The Grand Soleil Blue Spec

LOA: 37ft 1in (11.3m) inc bowsprit

Beam: 12ft 1in (3.7m)

Draught: 5ft 11in - 7ft 3in (1.8m-2.2m)

Displacement: 3,500kg

Power: 6kw / 20hp

Sail area upwind: 64sqm (689sqft)

Sail area gennaker: 100sqm (1,076sqft)

Builder: Cantiere del Pardo

Designers: Matteo Polli / Nauta Design

UK dealer: Key Yachting, [keyyachting.com](https://www.keyyachting.com)

From £199,130 ex-VAT