



RAIL

REDEMPTION AT SEA

Returning to the
ocean after loss



Grand Soleil Blue

Known for its racer-cruisers, Grand Soleil builds a sleek daysailer with sustainability driving its brief.

BY SAM FORTESCUE

Not for the first time this trip, I find myself wondering why the folk at Grand Soleil have opted for a boat test on an inaccessible stretch of fresh water hemmed in with 6,000-foot-high alpine peaks. It is early spring, and there is a dusting of fresh snow up there. Down on the shores of Lake Garda, where a succession of trains, buses, and taxis have delivered me to the ancient olive town of Malcesine, the water has a glacial blue tinge to it and the bite of winter still.

The boat I've travelled across Europe to see is an innovative 33-footer called the Blue and, in a departure from Grand Soleil's famous cruiser-racer lines, it is billed as a daysailer. Built with sustainability in mind, here is a boat in the Black Pepper or Leonardo Yachts mold with a simple but elegant interior, a sparse galley, and minimal tankage.

But to characterize the Blue as "a bit spartan" is to miss the point entirely, as Grand Soleil product manager Gigi Servidati points out before we even step aboard.

"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," he says. "It is 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."

I meet the yacht as she rocks gently in the marina at Fraglia Vela Malcesine—a busy little yacht club that was actually built on land reclaimed from the lake as local people disposed of their scrap. From these humble beginnings, the club now hosts some of the world's top foiling sailors lured by the promise of reliable winds. And the first thing to note is that the Blue looks very much at home in this rarified environment.

That is thanks to her rather sharp looks, which come courtesy of long-term Grand Soleil collaborator Nauta Design and naval architect Matteo Polli. Blue has pure, clean lines with an undisturbed deck and sleek, low coachroof.

"It conveys that typically youthful, 'baby' appeal expected from the smallest in the range—a look that is instantly likeable and easy to recognize and to fall in love with," says Massimo Gino of Nauta.

A 4-foot, 4-inch fixed bowsprit defines one end of the boat, with a broad, flat V-shaped stern at the other. There's a generously long cockpit which continues past the twin helm stations to a kind of aft deck sunpad, and for much of our test sail, Matteo Polli lounges here, trimming the mainsheet traveler. But it can also serve as what Nauta calls a "further cockpit" facing aft, by swinging open the bathing platform that forms the transom of the boat.

Initial impressions are certainly beguiling, but as we stand at the dock, it is clear that the conditions aren't playing ball. The waters of Lake Garda are barely troubled by the faintest zephyr. The famous northerly Pelèr wind which usually enlivens the mornings is a no-show, so sailing must wait instead for the southerly Ora to kick in after midday.

It gives us an opportunity to take the boat out using

its electric powertrain: a 6kW electric pod drive from ePropulsion, supplied by an 8kWh lithium battery bank (extra 8kWh upgrade also available) that has a reported range of 30 miles at 5 knots. In power terms, that's generally considered equivalent to a 12- to 15-hp diesel engine, although with much better torque at low speeds. If that doesn't seem much for a 33-foot yacht, remember that she is built to be light and fast, displacing just 7,716 pounds for an upwind sail area of 689 square feet.

What's more, Polli's underwater hull design also plays to the electric equation. The bulb keel is balanced on the end of a long foil that gives the boat most of its 7-foot, 3-inch draft (a 5-foot, 11-inch shallow option is also available), while the rudder is a balanced spade. It is designed with steep overhangs on the quarter with a narrow waterline beam that reduces wetted surface when the boat isn't heeling.

And when you are sailing, you can flick a switch to get the pod drive regenerating electricity and pumping it back into the battery. At 6 knots of boat speed—which is easily managed in even moderate winds—this will generate 240 watts of power. Maxed out at 10 knots, the pod generates a cool kilowatt. There is a modest cost in terms of boat speed, but you would be unlikely to notice it. Solar panels

All of the helm is a unique bonus area that serves as a lounge space or "further cockpit."

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inlaid on the coachroof provide a further 340 watts.

The anticipated Ora wind starts to fill in at last after lunch, ruffling the lake into impatient little crests. Gusts hurry round the massive rock bulwarks and funnel down the valleys that scar the mountains on either hand. Things are suddenly looking up.

We get the main up in a flash and unfurl the jib—our test boat features no fewer than four electric Harken winches, which feels like an excessive luxury to me. As we fall off to catch the wind, the boat heels over to lay her wide quarter on the water. And there she holds, at an angle of around 20 degrees, Polli tells me later.

"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. "It's trying to reduce the wetted surface when the boat is upright. When she 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."

Pushing upwind into about 15 knots and a light Garda chop, we hit an easy 7 to 8 knots with the boat still light on the helm. There's no inclining footrest, so the best helming position is sitting hooked over the shallow coaming, looking ahead over your shoulder and holding the wheel with one hand.

At 35 degrees, she is close winded even with the self-tacking jib, which makes things easy for solo sailors. There are also fairleads for genoa sheets if the conditions warrant a larger headsail. For long reaching passages, the code zero is a good option, and it keeps boat speed up at

5-6 knots in the light airs that prevail at the start of our test. Later, with the 1,076-square-foot gennaker flying from the tip of the bowsprit, we hit 10.6 knots jibing 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 rises again—not because the boat is beginning to feel overpowered, but because there is no backstay fitted and the spar maker advised caution. "It's probably fine up to 30 knots," says Polli. "But they told us not to use the gennaker above 20 knots."

Removing the backstay without installing runners is all about keeping the boat easy to sail shorthanded. But if you don't like relying on the aft rake of the spreaders to support the mast, there are options. Most obviously, you could go for a smaller pin-head main with a standard backstay. Or, to preserve the performance of the bigger main and that nice open transom, you could use the topping lift as a runner. Polli's favored solution is to take the boat with the optional mainsheet traveler, so you can ease the traveler right down to a broad reaching position and keep the sheet relatively tight. You lose a bit of sail shape, perhaps, but it supports the mast.

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 PET foam, fiberglass, and resin for reuse. Just like in the automotive industry, parts and trim are fitted for easy disassembly using screws or special glues. The

boat can also have recyclable Forte sails from One Sails and synthetic teak decks.

Together with the electric propulsion, these features slash the carbon footprint of building and using the boat.

"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," explains Servidati.

That's not the full story, however, because owners can also opt for a boat built in virgin vinyl ester with a 20hp diesel engine, standard 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 layup as an alternative. The fact of the matter is that, without the electric propulsion and the recyclability, this is not a sustainable yacht.

Not unreasonably, the yard pleads commercial pressures, and the need to play to the market. In other words the ball is in the client's court. The good news is that two have already chosen the sustainable version (including hull No. 2, which is coming to the U.S.), while the other two are considering it.

As you'd expect in a yacht designed for only occasional overnighting, the interior is fairly simple and open to the forepeak. Bench seats line the hull and there's a fold-down carbon table built around the stainless steel mast support on the centerline. The forepeak is filled with upholstery and makes a comfortable double V-berth. The two side benches can also serve as additional singles—delivering the boat overnight, for instance, or sailing with children.

There's a shower, heads, and basin in a nicely designed separate compartment, while the boat has pressurized water with heating if you want it. A basic galley is positioned opposite to port, offering a sink and optional fridge, plus plenty of storage. There's no cooktop or oven,



however, for whipping up a hot meal. The expectation is that you'll go home or ashore.

Unsurprisingly, it's sitting height only down here, but Nasta worked hard to create a comfortable space. "There is ample headroom to comfortably use the dinette, galley, bathroom, and accommodation, which can host up to four," explains Gino. "A key element of the interior design is the light scheme, which ensures that even with lower ceiling heights, the yacht feels spacious and welcoming for guests."

The finish is impeccably Italian, with a contemporary palette of natural tones—grained wood, woven upholstery for the seating and for panels fitted to the inside of the hull. Otherwise, it's clean white for locker fronts, work surfaces, and the table with a hint of sporty laminate sail cloth providing lightweight storage under the table and under the foredeck.

It has to be said that the Blue has the heart of a sun-seeking, warm-weather boat, so there is little surprise that hull No. 2 is heading for Puerto Rico. 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. The smartly designed aft bathing platform means there is little in the way of transom. And the deck has sockets for a bimini rather than poles for a sprayhood.

But the boat can be easily fitted with better protection from the elements to adapt it for northern climes—the Great Lakes or sheltered waters of Maine. And perhaps it doesn't matter so much, either. As a fair-weather boat, you just need to pick the right moment to go sailing. Or as Servidati puts it more lyrically: "Its conceptual essence—a true weekender, emotional design, and fun at the helm—remains perfectly relevant in Scandinavia or along the Atlantic coasts."

LOA	37'1" (inc bowsprit)
Beam	12'1"
Draft	7'3" (standard) 5'11" (shallow)
Displacement	7,716 lbs
Sail Area	689 sq ft (upwind)
Sail Area	1,076 sq ft (gennaker)
Power	6kw/20hp
Designers	Milano Polli/Nasta Design
Builder	Candiere del Pardo
	gsboats.it/en



Sightlines forward from both helms are clean and clear.

Helmsides, the styling is simple and neat, with a U-shaped seating booth all the way around the helm table.

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