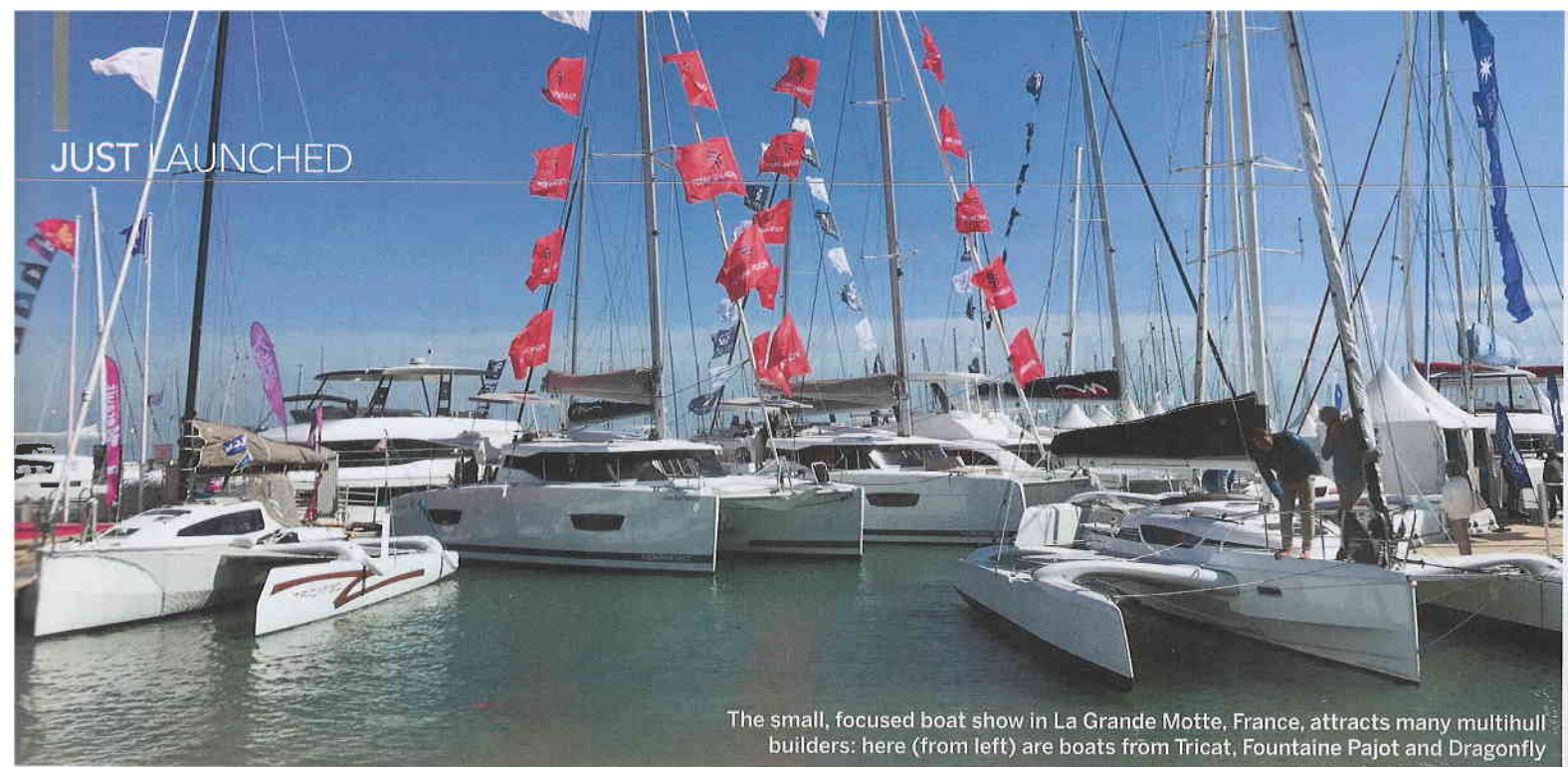


JUST LAUNCHED



The small, focused boat show in La Grande Motte, France, attracts many multihull builders: here (from left) are boats from Tricat, Fountaine Pajot and Dragonfly

The French Connection

Peter Nielsen walks the docks at France's annual multihull show

If a boat show could be described as intimate, the annual Salon International du Multicoque in La Grande Motte, on France's Mediterranean coast, is it. Held in the latter part of April, the multihulls-only in-water show is a boon for builders, because the people who attend come with the express aim of shopping for a multi, unlike the fender-kickers at regular shows. Walking the docks, you hear conversations in too many languages to count; indeed, the show attracts more foreigners than locals. Even with around 14,000 visitors over five days, the docks never felt crowded, and

you never had to wait too long to check out a boat or talk to a builder.

La Grande Motte is the home of performance cat builder **Outremer**, which in addition to showing off its entire line at the show was shuttling interested visitors to its nearby factory to see hulls #2 and #3 of the Gunboat 68 under construction. Americans will be able to see hull #1 of this spectacular boat at the Newport International Boat show in September.

Beyond that, all the other heavy hitters of the multi world were there too, some with their full lineups among the 60 boats in the water.

Fountaine Pajot, for example, is delaying the first public showing of its yet-to-be-named 45-footer till later in the year—it will make its American debut in Annapolis in October—but there was still lots of traffic on board the recently introduced Lucia 40, Saba 50 and Astrea 42.

Likewise, the new **Lagoon 46** was the star attraction for the Bordeaux-based builder, which also had its new 42 and 50-footers on show. The recent news that charter company Sunsail is adding Lagoon cats to its fleet has buoyed the company, which as part of the Beneteau group, will soon start producing Beneteau's new Excess line of cats as well. These, as shown by the models on display shoreside at La Grande Motte, owe much to Lagoon DNA but have edgier styling and a promise of better performance.

South African builder **Robertson & Caine's** bulging order books have led to some hiccups in production as its plants struggle to keep up with demand for its **Leopard** models, but it's a good problem to have. At La Grande Motte there were no new boats on display that haven't been seen Stateside, although the recently introduced Leopard 45 and 50 are still flying off the shelves, figuratively speaking, and the 40 is getting a major overhaul.

A near neighbor to Fountaine Pajot in La Rochelle, on France's Biscay coast, **Bali Catamarans** has come from a glint in the eye of visionary boatbuilder Olivier Poncin to a solidly established catamaran brand in just a few years. Its latest model, the 54ft Bali 5.4, made its public debut at the show. Its large forward cock-



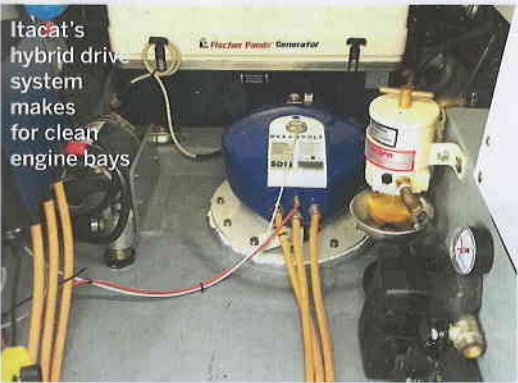
Bali's biggest cat to date, the 5.4 (left); the cabins can be accessed directly from on deck (above)



Guests on the sporty Neel 47 tri (above) get their own hull (right)



There's plenty of luxury aboard the Sunreef 60: check out the helm station (right)



Itacat's hybrid drive system makes for clean engine bays



Quart in a pint pot: Broadblue's little 346 is deceptively roomy



Big and bold: the Neel 65

pit, open-plan bridgedeck and capacious hulls represent the same features found in the smaller Balis, on a much grander scale. A choice of layouts includes one with half a dozen cabins for the charter trade. Private owners will find that with its vast diesel and water tankage, the 5.4 will make a good long-term cruising boat.

One of the most impressive boats at the show was the **Neel 65** trimaran, not a new boat but on display here for the first time. Featuring vast amounts of space both topside and belowdecks, the 65 is a serious head-turner, although it's also massive and I sure would hate to dock it. By contrast the new Neel 47, on show for the first time, looks a much more manageable boat. Aimed at cruising couples who like to get places quickly and only have guests occasionally, the 47 features a big owners' suite on the main deck and a smaller cabin with an en-suite head in each hull. These cabins are accessible only from the side decks to ensure the owners' privacy. It's a novel concept, and the Neel folks were signing enough contracts to prove their point.

Speaking of big boats, Polish builder **Sunreef** is known for large, luxurious catamarans, and the first of its new "Sailing" range—smaller,

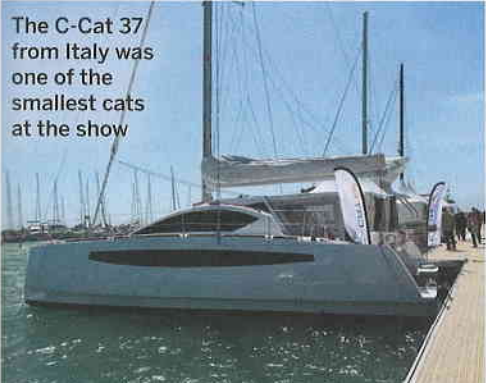
lighter boats with better sailing chops than their bigger sisters—made its debut here. The Sunreef 60 is probably the biggest 60ft cat I've ever been aboard, and the builders certainly haven't diluted the luxury quotient. From the opulent staterooms with their queen-sized beds to the jacuzzi on the flybridge, this cat simply exudes class. Soon to follow will be 50ft, 70ft and 80ft versions.

I also had a close look at the **Itacat 14.99**, a sporty, well-built new 50-footer from Italy. In line with a developing trend among boatbuilders, the Itacat comes with a hybrid propulsion system built around a pair of Oceanvolt drives and a generator that provides a boost to charge the batteries for extended running. Another boat that took my fancy was the TS5 from **Marsaudon Composites**, a respected multihull builder known for its quick and tough oceangoing cats in the vein of **Outremer**, **Balance** and **Catana**. Its lean and mean styling fits in well with that performance ethos.

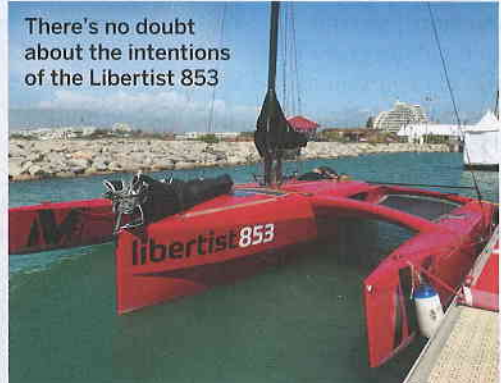
At the smaller end of the spectrum, there was not much around below 40ft. However, Italy's **C-Catamarans** showed its C-Cat 37, a compact cruiser that is well worth a look. Similarly, from England, **Broadblue**

Catamarans brought its smallest model, the 346, a deceptively spacious boat that would make an ideal ICW cruiser. The Danes from **Dragonfly** also brought two of their folding-wing trimarans, the 32 Evolution and the 28 Performance, and French builder **Tricat** had its Tricat 30 on show.

Finally, to me the boat that looked the most fun of all was the **Libertist 853**, a no-holds-barred sport trimaran built in Poland. It does have basic accommodations below, but what this boat is really all about is spray-in-your-face high-speed thrills. And that's a great thing, at least once in a while. **S**



The C-Cat 37 from Italy was one of the smallest cats at the show



There's no doubt about the intentions of the Libertist 853