



Fun, rediscovered

As the first link in the chain of the new range launched by Bénéteau, the Excess 12 doesn't revolutionize the world of catamarans, but it does revive the pleasure of sailing, offering so much comfort and simplicity.

TEST CONDITIONS: Mallorca, NW 15 to 18 knots, sea state slight to moderate.

Only fools don't change their minds. When we first saw one at the Cannes show, the Excess 12 had disappointed us a little. Her pretty hull decoration (signed by Isabelle Keller), her elegantly crafted topsides and her young sporty look, accentuated by the orange color of the upholstery, didn't help us forget how much it looked like a Lagoon. After a year of teasing and the odd sketch seen here and there, we had been hoping for a cleaner break with this new catamaran brand launched by the Bénéteau group. But we had to give them a second chance, and our test in Mallorca gave us the opportunity to do so. Helped, it should be pointed out, by perfect weather - 15 to 18 knots of wind - the Excess 12 managed to surprise us the second time. And for the better.

Let's start by clarifying one thing: the similarity of this VPLP design with a Lagoon is no coincidence. Okay, so the windows are no longer completely vertical, the outer topsides and the bows have been redesigned, as well as the profile of the coachroof, but the inboard topsides and the underside of the nacelle - the "gullwing" - are indeed from the Lagoon 40. So, there you go! However, our test shows that sometimes it only takes a few little things to change the character of a boat.

FUN UNDER SAIL

By launching this new range (after the 12 and 15 released this fall, there's to be an Excess 11, which will be entirely new, then a 14 and a 13), the Bénéteau group isn't seeking to get into the field of fast catamarans or to raise prices in the vein of luxury that all the other builders have rushed into. They're betting that there's a place for catamarans that falls on the mid-line between performance and comfort. With less luxury, but more pleasure under sail. The efforts of VPLP first focused on the rig and this is reflected in a square-topped mainsail as standard, a higher mast, a short but lowered boom. The mast remains very far back, as on the Lagoons, which makes it possible to offer a good-sized self-tacking jib. Ultimately, the sailplan is only barely more generous (more, by 70 square centimeters or 11 square inches!) but it is sleeker, so more efficient. You can gain a little more power and another 5m² (54 sq ft) of canvas with the "Pulse" version, which is what our test yacht is. The nacelle has been slightly shortened and the use of wood in the interior reduced to save weight, but the difference with a Lagoon isn't that significant (about 500 kg / 1,100 lbs less than the 40).

A real change is the twin wheel steering on the hulls. This idea of moving the helm stations aft to get closer to the water and closer to the feeling of the monohull, has already been done before – we're thinking of Nautitech, of course, and Outremer and Catana - and even Lagoon had adopted it on its early models. The difficulty of the exercise is to give the helmsman a good view of the bow, but this 40-footer manages quite well: the nacelle's windows are untinted and their height has been calculated in such a way that you can see everything over a 350-degree angle. There's still a little bit of a blind spot (at the 11 o'clock or 1 o'clock positions) on the edge of the nacelle that might bother us a little when we maneuvering out of harbor, but then will be totally forgotten. And on the other hand, it's much more convenient moving on and off the dock, while from a mid-height helm station, the bimini

hides the opposite sugarscoop. With the mainsail hoisted, effortlessly, thanks to the electric winch fitted as standard, we didn't unfurl the self-tacking jib but opted for the code zero on the furler, secured on the bowsprit. And having folded back the central part of the bimini, the view over the sail plan is almost as clear as it would be on a monohull. With the sea starting to pick up and a nice 15 to 18 knot breeze, the Excess 12's speed oscillates between 7.5 and 8.5 knots, both with the wind on the beam and on a close reach, and she moves along without slamming or stalling in the waves. At the helm, the direct transmission, in Dyneema, is firm and the boat, with just the right enthusiasm, reacts to every variation in wind or heading. We immediately found sensation, vivacity, responsiveness: in short, now we're sailing!

COMFORT AND SIMPLICITY

The cockpit layout is traditional, with a large table, four long benches and an outdoor refrigerator. In the saloon, there are the essentials: a table for eating, a galley that communicates with the cockpit and a chart table. The comfort and volume are essentially the same as on a Lagoon, but the Excess has everything superfluous has been redacted, offerings a very refreshing simplicity compared to the luxury of her cousins. For once, we won't be afraid to mess up the cushions! This spirit is also reflected in the cabins, whose sober and modern decor, combining grays and whites with only a few touches of wood, gives a beautiful feeling of space and light. On the other hand, the storage space, due to the need to pare down the weight, is limited, especially in the starboard aft cabin, whose only cupboard is a locker beneath the bed. But all in all, the Excess 12 seems to us to have achieved her objective of reconnecting with a simpler way of living at sea and one more in touch with the elements. We're certainly not going to complain about that.

Text and photos Delphine Fleury.

WHAT WE LIKED

The opening bimini and the helm position restore the pleasure of sailing in the center and the crew in contact with the elements.

- Ease of movement around the deck.
- Very lively and reactive helm.
- The simplicity and brightness of the interior.
- Ergonomics of the helm stations and deck layout.

WHAT WE DIDN'T LIKE

The too close proximity to the Lagoon catamaran range for a so-called new brand.

- The absence of the mainsheet to port.
- The lack of storage space.

- Articulated helm seats, unsightly and a little rudimentary with prominent fixings.

Simpler on the inside and more sporty on the outside than a Lagoon, the Excess 12 stands out especially for the aft-set helm stations and the opening bimini, two elements that really make the difference. By changing the view over the environment and the position on board, they totally change the perception you get when under way, allowing you to rediscover the pleasure of sailing. And that's more than welcome.