

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2026

# CRUISING WORLD

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BOAT OF THE YEAR PREVIEW

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## Editor's Letter

*Even if some sailors find the latest boats out of reach, these designs show us all what's coming, and what to look for in the used market.*

BY ANDREW PARKINSON



## EYEING *What's* POSSIBLE

**T**he week after the Annapolis Sailboat Show, I found myself at the helm of a brand spanking new Balance 580 with a stiff northerly breeze pumping the sails full on a glimmering Chesapeake Bay. I had a feeling that never gets old: that surge of excitement when everything aboard is new, clean and working exactly as it should. After years of sailing older, well-worn boats, it reminded me why our *Cruising World* team does what we do, continuing our Boat of the Year program every year.

I know what you're thinking. *Nice, buddy. But that boat costs more than a house.* And you're right. For most of us, new boats, especially some of the million-dollar stratosphere models in this year's contest, aren't exactly practical purchases. They're aspirational, and maybe a little intimidating.

But that doesn't mean they're irrelevant. Far from it.

Here's the thing: Watching and sailing these boats gives every boat owner a yardstick. Whether we're buying used or dreaming of someday upgrading, we can see what's working in design. We can tell which innovations are genuinely improving life aboard. We can identify the systems that will eventually filter down to the wider market. When you see a hybrid drive quietly charging batteries while under sail, or a well-planned deck layout that makes single-handing a breeze, it's a glimpse into the future of cruising.

During our week of sea trials with the Boat of the Year judges, including sailing and systems experts Herb McCormick, Tim Murphy and Ralph Naranjo, we sailed a fleet built all over the world: France, Denmark, Slovenia, South Africa, Thailand. And yes, the prices made me blink more than once. The least-expensive new boat in the fleet was a spry Beneteau First 30 at \$200,000. At the other extreme,

the Balance 580 came in at \$3.6 million. Yet even within that diversity of sizes, rigs and designs, there were lessons for everyone.

I learned a lot about myself too. Sitting at the helm of the Dragonfly 36 trimaran, zipping along in low teens of wind, I couldn't help but grin as the boat's designer, Jens Quorning, leaned in with that infectious energy sailors know well. He shouted: "You feel alive on this boat!" He spoke for all of us.



For the rest of the week, I toggled between 14 nominee boats, from the minimalist, tiller-driven thrill of the Beneteau First 30 planing under a screecher, to the sprawling, technically sophisticated Pegasus 50's tandem keel, triple-headsail rig and twin rudders. Each boat, in its own way, reminded me that cruising is about choices: sometimes subtle, sometimes monumental. Design matters as much as the dream.

The best new designs do more than dazzle. They influence everything we buy tomorrow. Builders are competing with used boats more than ever. Systems, ergonomics, hull shapes, sail-handling

innovations—they start here, and over time, they appear on brokerage docks around the country. In a practical sense, knowing what's coming lets you evaluate older boats with a sharper eye. You start to see why a certain rig choice matters, or how a particular electrical arrangement can save headaches down the line.

But beyond the tech and the specs, there's another reason to celebrate new boats: inspiration. You don't have to write a million-dollar check to appreciate ingenuity. The thrill of seeing what's possible is contagious. Even a small tweak, a smarter layout or a cleaner power system can transform life aboard.

And then there's the communal aspect. How many dockside friendships have started with, "Hey, I noticed your solar panel setup..." or "How are you liking that mast furling so far?" Whether it's sharing knowledge, lending a hand or swapping stories over sundowners, the community we love is built on curiosity and collaboration. And seeing the next generation of designs keeps that conversation alive.

So yes, I spent a week sailing some of the priciest, flashiest boats on the market. And yes, it was exhilarating. But here's the takeaway for every *Cruising World* reader: You don't need a million-dollar yacht to get something out of this. You can look, you can learn, you can be inspired. And when you return to your own boat, you'll do so with fresh eyes and maybe a few ideas to make your time aboard even better.

So step aboard and take the helm, and save the math for another day. ☼

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Testing tomorrow's boats is the best kind of homework. We may call it a sea trial, but really, it's a front-row seat to the future of cruising.



Judging the 2026 Boats of the Year involved literal and figurative changes on Chesapeake Bay. First came weather. Second was a new, wide range of choices for cruising sailors.

By Herb McCormick

# Boat of the Year 2026: Changes in the Weather

Smart German design meets bluewater toughness in the Sirius 35 DS, a compact cruiser built for every forecast.

WALTER COOPER



## Editorial:

# The Nominees: Meet the Fleet

This year's lineup spans 27 cutting-edge cruisers, performance machines and liveaboard passagemakers.

From high-latitude voyagers to fast-cruising multihulls and versatile coastal pocket cruisers, the 2026 Boat of the Year field reflects the most exciting design trends and innovations in sailing today. While most of this year's models debuted at Annapolis, some launched internationally and will see full testing in early 2026, so stay tuned. \$ Below is a first look at the contenders setting the pace for tomorrow's cruising sailor.

Learn more about each of these nominees at [cruisingworld.com/boatoftheyear](https://cruisingworld.com/boatoftheyear).

## Monohulls

### Arey's Pond Caracal 19

This elegant daysailer channels classic lines and wooden craftsmanship in a refined, small-boat package that's built for pure, simple sailing enjoyment close to home.

### Beneteau First 30

A compact performance cruiser that honors Beneteau's racing heritage while offering modern comfort, the First 30 delivers big-boat feel and responsive handling in a nimble, 30-foot planing hull.

### Beneteau Oceanis 47

The Oceanis 47 combines smooth Biscontini lines and Nauta's smart interior with accessible elegance, making it an ideal choice for sailors who want to stretch their cruising range in style.

### Beneteau Oceanis 52

With a refined hull by Biscontini and a light, plush interior from Nauta Design, the Oceanis 52 sets a new benchmark for comfort, precision and ease of cruising under sail.

### Contest 50CS

Dutch pedigree meets offshore confidence in the Contest 50CS. This semi-custom bluewater cruiser blends traditional craftsmanship with modern innovation for sailors who value quality and seaworthiness.

### Dufour 48

A lively, sleek design that pairs generous sail area with signature Dufour comfort, the 48 is built for sailors who crave performance and liveaboard luxury in equal measure.

### Dufour 54

Spacious, powerful and refined, the Dufour 54 delivers

long-legged cruising comfort with a bright, contemporary interior and a deck plan designed for effortless control.

### Ha'Penny 20

Compact, handsome and full of charm, the Ha'Penny 20 brings traditional craftsmanship to the pocket-cruiser category, delivering simplicity and joy on the water.

### Island Packet 42 Motor Sailer

Blending comfort and practicality with range, the 42 Motor Sailer offers the best of both worlds: steady passagemaking under power or sail, with Island Packet's hallmark livability.

### Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 415

Smart, sexy and sailor-friendly, the new Sun Odyssey 415 combines Marc Lombard's performance design with Jeanneau's focus on comfort, control and easy cruising versatility.

### Pegasus 50

Designed by sailors for sailors, the Pegasus 50 is a world voyager's dream: efficient, ergonomic and engineered for effortless, short-handed passages across any ocean.

### Sirius 35 DS

The Sirius 35 Deck Saloon redefines all-weather cruising with a rich, panoramic interior and thoughtful German engineering tailored to serious voyagers and liveaboards.

## Multihulls

### Balance 580

A light, fast and seaworthy bluewater catamaran built in South Africa, the Balance 580 merges comfort and performance for sailors who demand both luxury at anchor and confident speed under sail.

### Comar C-Cat 48

This Italian-built cat pairs modern style with a performance-oriented design, offering sailors a refined balance between spirited sailing and contemporary comfort.

### Dragonfly 36

A high-performance folding trimaran that packs thrilling speed and versatility into a trailerable platform, ideal for adventurous sailors who want it all.

### Excess 13

Sporty, bright and built for sailors who crave connection to the sea, the Excess 13 combines youthful design energy with dependable cruising capability.

### Fountaine Pajot 41

Compact yet spacious, this 41-footer from Fountaine Pajot is designed for families and couples seeking easy handling, modern amenities and efficient cruising comfort.

### Fountaine Pajot 44

A fresh new design that blends open living spaces with strong sailing performance, the 44 brings new energy and innovation to mid-size cruising cats.

### Fountaine Pajot 55

Expansive, luxurious and effortlessly stylish, the Fountaine Pajot 55 is a flagship cat designed for long-range adventures with friends and family in comfort.

### HH52

With its advanced carbon construction and cutting-edge design, the HH52 delivers high-performance cruising without compromise, an ideal platform for sailors who love to push limits.

### Island Spirit 525e

Built in Thailand and fully powered by electric propulsion, the Island Spirit 525e reflects a new era of sustainable multihull cruising with space, comfort and clean technology.

### Knysna 550

As a versatile platform for cruising and charter, the Knysna 550 blends high-performance sailing with modern luxury in a bluewater catamaran built for style, safety and easy handling.

### Lagoon 38

Compact, comfortable and classic, the Lagoon 38 remains a beloved choice for cruisers seeking reliability, simplicity and timeless Lagoon design DNA.

### Lagoon 60

Bold, luxurious and modern, the Lagoon 60 elevates the brand's signature living space and style, making it a standout for sailors ready to go bigger and farther.

### Leopard 52

Built for passagemaking comfort and ease of operation, the Leopard 52 continues the brand's tradition of robust, reliable catamarans with smart livability and efficient systems.

### Majestic 530 Hybrid

The Majestic 530 Hybrid combines long-range cruising capability with hybrid-electric propulsion for a quiet, efficient and forward-thinking multihull experience.

### St. Francis 500

Strong, elegant and South African-built, the St. Francis 500 offers ocean-tested performance, smart ergonomics and the confidence of a proven bluewater platform.



COURTESY LEOPARD, DUFOUR, ISLAND SPIRIT (OPPOSITE FROM TOP)

The smallest boat in the fleet, the Beneteau First 30 (one of those two Slovenian-built craft, the other being the Pegasus 50) punched way above its weight with performance chops, and justified its nickname as a "planing cruiser." I've always been a sucker for a tiller-steered boat, where I'm more or less linked directly to the rudder, and every small adjustment elicits an immediate response. This is a minimalistic boat, something I really relate to, and is an absolute blast to sail. Once we cracked off and unfurled the screecher, the "joy of planing" wasn't just a slogan, but reality.

The Slovenian cousin, the 50-foot Pegasus, is the polar opposite of the Beneteau, and there's nothing minimal about it: The yacht is a true all-oceans cruiser with a "tandem keel" that is basically a pair of deep fins connected by a substantial lead bulb. I loved just about everything on this boat, from the triple-headsail rig and twin rudders to the innovative, spacious, protected cockpit to the well-thought-out technical locker below. The fact that the boat sailed like a witch—8.5 knots to weather under jib, nearly 10 knots on a tight reach with the code zero deployed—was icing on the cake. This was my first exposure to the Pegasus brand, and I sincerely hope it wasn't the last.

Finally, I'd be remiss without a shout-out to a quartet of boats that also left me with positive and lasting impressions.

When it comes to production-sailboat performance, I've always been especially fond of the Jeanneau line, and we had a wonderful sail on the Sun Odyssey 415. It was so good, in fact, that I couldn't help myself and tacked right under the Severn River Bridge, much to the dismay of the company's reps. (Sorry, guys!)

The Sirius 35 DS was a remarkable little yacht in every way, an innovative testament to German engineering with true bluewater capability.

It's always fun testing the latest Excess offering with the builder's enthusiastic French team, and the 42-foot Excess 13 continues their legacy: a sailboat by and for sailors.

And taking command of the tiller of the fast, light HH52 cat in the aft, outboard bucket seat—creaming along at double-digit speeds with the water ripping past—is an experience I wish every true sailor could enjoy.

The prizes for the 2026 Boat of the Year contest are yet to be determined, but I came away from the latest competition with one surefire impression. After several days of sailing on this gleaming collection of new boats, I was a bona fide winner. ☼

Herb McCormick is a CW editor-at-large.

From the reliable, comfortable Leopard 52 (top) to the elegant, performance-oriented Dufour 48 (middle) and the sustainably powered Island Spirit 525e (bottom), these exciting new models showcase the full spectrum of modern cruising sailboat innovation.