

21st-century GRP CRUISER

New boat-builder Banks-Martin has produced an ultra-modern, luxury-spec GRP cruiser, designed for UK and European waterways. **Mark Langley** puts it to the test on the Thames

Banks-Martin may be a new name in boat-building but the company's two directors have a background in iconic British boat brands, such as Sealine. Now based in Kidderminster, the business is looking to build on the traditions of the past while introducing a higher standard of craft to the inland industry. The Beaulieu 30 is the first of its range of boats

aimed at river cruising in the UK and on the wider waterways of Europe, with the potential for limited coastal cruising.

The Beaulieu takes its name from the alternative spelling of nearby Bewdley on the River Severn. Although the boat debuted at this year's London Boat Show, we took the opportunity to visit it on the Thames at Penton Hook Marina shortly after its launch. At first glance the boat

appears much bigger than its just-under 30ft length would suggest, and it certainly looks far more refined and modern than many of the surrounding GRP cruisers on the river – most of which are based on designs produced 30 years or more ago.

The Beaulieu has a low-wash semi-displacement hull, unlike many comparative cruisers that have a planing hull, which isn't ideal for low-speed cruising.



The boat is well designed to get on, off and around.

FACT FILE

Length 29ft 1in
Beam 9ft 11in
Engine Volvo 75hp D250
Berths 2+2+1
Price From £139,000
Banks-Martin Boats
01299 832187
banksmartin.com



Layout 1



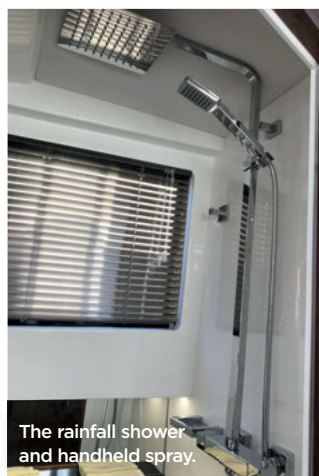
Layout 2



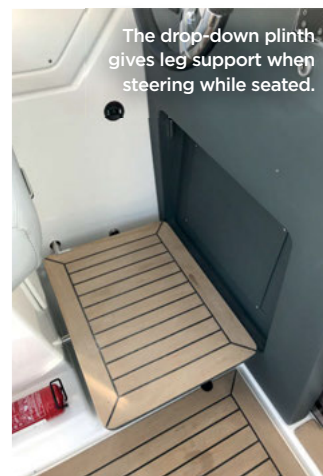
The Beaulieu 30 has plenty of head-turning potential when out on the water.



The shower/wet room feels surprisingly spacious.



The rainfall shower and handheld spray.



The drop-down plinth gives leg support when steering while seated.

the room is very bright without turning on the standard lighting.

The engine has, like most GRP boats, freshwater cooling, where raw water, taken from the river through an easily accessed filter, is pumped through a heat exchanger where it cools the antifreeze solution in the engine, before being dumped into the exhaust. This has the advantage of making the engine much quieter than a dry exhaust – the big silencer and water lock ensure good mixing of the raw water and exhaust – as the lower the temperature, the less sound. Also, the water feed cools the oil-operated gearbox (so that it runs at a lower temperature) and a small amount is pushed into the water-lubricated stern tube to give proper cooling and lubrication.

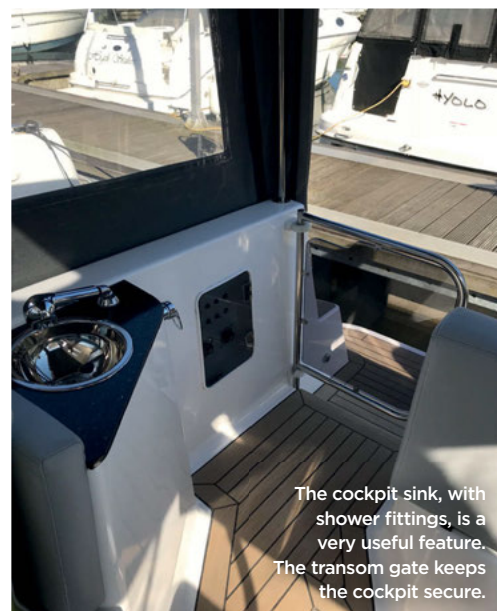
There is also the calorifier, heated by the engine or mains immersion heater, as well as the three domestic 110Ah batteries for the domestic side. There is plenty of space for the cocooned 4kVA generator fitted to this boat, which has its own small raw-water inlet and filter next to the main engine's one. Sensibly, there is an automatic extinguisher fitted to the bulkhead, which floods the compartment with fire-suppressing gas in the event of fire – and warns the helm via an alarm. This is ideal in any boat and a much cleaner way of tackling fire than using powder in an engine space.

Handling and underway

The helm has a comfortable chair, which can be slid back if you want to stand to handle the boat in confined quarters. When seated, the cockpit floor is quite a way down, so a fold-down panel acts as a useful step. The steering wheel is comfortable



The helm is well designed with all switches and dials being logically laid out, and the upper section lifting for more storage.



The cockpit sink, with shower fittings, is a very useful feature. The transom gate keeps the cockpit secure.



Inside the well-ordered engine bay.

and links hydraulically to the large rudder, giving easy control. A full array of engine dials are set into the proper dashboard in front of the helm, and this usefully lifts up to provide a compartment to store guides etc. There is a similar one to starboard for other items.

The Volvo diesel is very quiet, aided by the wet exhaust and sound insulation, and the

whole boat is rattle free. At tickover, it moves sedately, giving confidence in marinas, aided by the standard Sidepower bow-thruster, with the boat stopping easily and in a straight line, with very little hint of prop walk. The decent hull-shape and keel give the boat directional stability, despite the relatively shallow 2ft 4in draught.

WW'S VERDICT

The Beaulieu 30 is a superb river-boat. In this configuration, it's a great, social weekend craft, but with the separate double cabin it becomes a serious long-distance cruiser, ideal not just for the Thames or Trent, but European waterways, where it provides far more practical cruising than a long, wide steel craft or a narrowboat.

It handles superbly, is exceptionally well thought out and has a level of opulence that is hard to find elsewhere. Shortly after our visit, the boat was heading down the Thames and up the coast to Great Yarmouth to a local event, before travelling to the Crick Boat Show. For prospective boat-buyers looking for a different kind of craft with genuine long-term UK and European waterway cruising capability, then Banks-Martin is definitely worth a visit.



The drawer fridge is ideal for weekends away, but a normal-sized fridge is a standard feature.

cabin, conveniently close to the galley. Under the lower step are the controls and isolator for the optional generator.

At the very end of the galley, there is a half-height wardrobe and shelving, which goes under the deep side decks and has more hanging space than you might think. There is also a door in the bulkhead to starboard of the steps, which opens to a big quarter berth. A huge single bed can be left made up, and there is shelving at the very back for more storage. There are two opening portholes – one in the hull side and the other to the cockpit, plus good lighting, so it's not a claustrophobic space. This could be ideal for one (or two small) kids to have as their own den, though I suspect many owners will mainly use this as an extra storage space for bags and other bulky items. The electrical control panel is by the aft steps behind a plexiglass cover – and has been kept simple.

Toilet and shower

To port is a bathroom which is, once again, spacious for a boat of this size, with full standing headroom and plenty of elbow room. A macerator toilet on the aft bulkhead pumps to a remote waste tank. A deep, black washbasin sits in a matching worktop to the galley and has cupboard space

underneath. Mirrors under the gunwale, along with carefully positioned LED lights, enhance the feeling of space. The whole compartment is a wet room, with teak inlays set into the fully moulded interior, and is drained by an automatic pump. As well as a handheld spray on the thermostatic shower, there is a rainfall shower head.

The space is well thought out, with several towel rails and even a bulkhead-mounted chrome loo brush holder.

Engine room

Two big, soundproofed access panels allow easy entry into the exceptionally neat and well-ordered engine bay. The standard 50hp Volvo diesel has

been upgraded to a 75hp version by the owner, though the smaller engine is perfectly fine for most waterways and estuaries. However, for a channel crossing, the larger unit might be sensible. Even this bigger engine has plenty of space around it and, as a result of the white GRP and foil surface of the extensive sound insulation,

APPLIANCES

A combi oven/grill/microwave is integrated into the galley.

HARDWEARING

The cast resin worktop has the feel of granite.

EXTRA SLEEPING

The side sofa can convert to a single or double bed.



A 230V plinth heater and combined UK and European plug sockets.



The deep galley sink.



Useful drawers are illuminated by LED lights.



HIDDEN SHELF

A useful shelf is hidden behind the backrests.

OPEN AIR

The two massive sunroof panels open at the touch of a button.

MIRROR, MIRROR

The mirror adds depth, when sitting around the very comfortable table.

LIGHT & BRIGHT

The massive sunroof and large windows, plus integrated LED lighting in the roof.

solid American walnut trim. There are several cupboards and low-level drawers, which all have positive catches to keep them closed. Below the TV unit is a mains-operated plinth fan heater, as the owner believes that most evenings will be spent in marinas with a shore power connection. For more ambitious cruising owners, a full gas- or diesel-fired warm air heating system can be specified.

An Alexa voice-controlled assistant is fitted, which is set to work not just with the digital TV, but any combination of electrical items the owner wants, such as lighting, heating or even the oven. Being able to say, "Alexa, turn down the lights" or, "Alexa, turn the heating on" while comfortably laid out under a duvet is an excellent idea. The company works with owners to integrate their own devices into the system.

Galley

From the TV sideboard, the galley seamlessly follows. This boat has an induction hob with

two 'burners'. This can run from shore power or the 4kVA diesel generator the owner has added as an option. A combination oven/grill/microwave is integrated into the galley units. Gas hob and oven options are available and might be more practical for those cruising away from marinas or not wanting the generator. There is also a single deep sink, with a removable cover made from the same cast resin worktop as the rest of the galley and sideboard. This was produced by Samsung and has the feel of granite, but is far more hardwearing.

The owner decided not to have the usual size of fridge, which would take up one of the galley cupboards, but has gone for an Isotherm drawer unit that slides out from underneath the sofa to port. This is surprisingly spacious and has enough room for day and weekend cruising, and the drawer part can easily be taken out and cleaned. Unlike many boats, there are dedicated bins for waste and recycling under the top step up from the



A quarter-berth cabin would make a good children's den or general storage room.

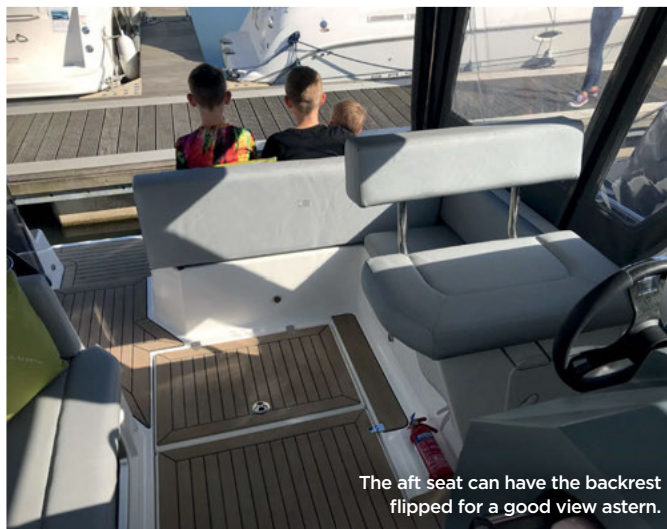


Substantial ground tackle includes a stainless steel plough anchor and a chain and electric winch operated by foot switches.

Moving around the deck is easy with plenty of handholds – though an extra one atop the cockpit roof would be useful. Forward, there is a chain locker and electric winch, with foot-operated controls to raise and lower the rode for the substantial stainless steel plough anchor, which stows in the bow roller fitting. There are multiple large cleats for handling the lines – including proper mid cleats for springs, which are unfortunately missing from many river-boats.

Main cabin

The Beaulieu 30 has a single cabin, though as it is a semi-bespoke craft, there are a number of different layouts available. The owner of the boat we tested had opted for a sociable layout, aimed at day and weekend cruising, so chose an open-plan version. A sliding plexiglass combined door and hatch give access into the cabin via a couple



The aft seat can have the backrest flipped for a good view astern.

of wide steps. It is at this point you realise that the fitting of the interior is quite unlike any other inland cruiser. There is a real sense of spaciousness – again, it is difficult to believe that it's only a 30ft boat with a 9ft beam. The headroom inside is well over 6ft 3in.

Large windows allow light to flood in, with attractive horizontal blinds in aluminium rather than curtains, to dim the interior. There are also two massive sunroof panels, which open at the touch of a button, with a further glazed emergency escape hatch in the forward part of the roof. The sunroof has a concertina fabric blind for use at night, while a thin mirror, under deck level across the bow, adds to the apparent depth. The combined effect of all the glazing is a very bright interior without being stark. This is helped by the choice of cream carpet, which goes well with

the dark colour of the cabinetry.

The cabin sides and roof are lined with padded cream vinyl, which is soft to the touch and adds a layer of insulation, muting sound as well as acting as a thermal barrier. The owner has chosen some very attractive wall lights that give great indirect illumination, in addition to the high-level integrated LED strips and low-level lighting. Unusually, the multiple mains electric sockets throughout have both UK and Euro sockets at the owner's request – a pragmatic choice for a boat that may cruise overseas.

Seating and sleeping

The owner has selected a layout that means six or more people could easily sprawl out in the cabin and all manage to dine around the large central table contained between the V-berths forward. The table is on a single, height-adjustable pedestal and is incredibly sturdy. The



Wide decks with guard rails and good handrails make moving around the boat easy.

seating is superbly comfortable with carefully shaped firm upholstery and backrests, plus matching scatter cushions.

Lifting the backrest gives space to store berth infill and scatter cushions at night, rather than having to place them on the floor when the seating converts to beds. The main seating gives two big singles or a huge double berth. Underneath are lined lockers for storage, as well as the freshwater tank. The forward part of the boat uses internal GRP mouldings for the seat bases, which also adds to the structural strength of the hull.

There is an option to provide a full bulkhead and door across the boat to give a permanent offset double-berth in a separate cabin, which would work very well for a long-term cruising couple. This would also provide an additional wardrobe and shelf area, but still with floor space to stand inside the cabin.

Further aft, there is a settee to port, which has a pull-out section and an additional cushion to effectively make it a chaise longue, as well as giving an occasional single or double berth. If the separate forward cabin was chosen, this would then become the combined seating and dining area, with an L-shaped dinette, converting to a second double bed.

Entertainment

Opposite the seating is a large, low-level cupboard designed to accommodate a sizeable TV facing the sofa – though the very big TV chosen by the owner was one of a number of requested items that pushed up the price of the boat substantially. The units themselves have their ply carcasses and doors wrapped in the most superb laminate, with



The big TV on the sideboard, and the wrap laminates on the cupboards.



The half-height wardrobe and internal shelving in the cabin.



However, its good design means that a top speed of around 10 knots is achievable with the right engine, making it useful for estuary trips.

The glass fibre reinforced plastic hull is superbly smooth, with the internal framing hidden away but giving great strength to the hull and structure, rather than relying on the sheer mass of glass matting and resin. Four frames, three of which are full ring frames, plus two longitudinal stringers, ensure the boat is strong – there is no flexing of the deck when you walk on it, and it will also help reduce delamination effects in the distant future.

Cockpit

This is a social river-boat, with the cockpit at its heart. A full-width bathing platform gives very easy access from a pontoon when moored stern on and, as it is deep, also provides the easiest way to board from a bank. The hull sides themselves are quite high, which adds to the visible bulk of the boat. The bathing platform has a moulded step each side to get up onto the side decks. There is a shallow single step up into the cockpit, to starboard of a large bench seat.

The cockpit feels massive, given the compact overall size of the boat. The aft bench seat has a large locker underneath, and its back can swiftly be reversed so that you can sit facing aft – with the broad expanse of the bathing platform before you, plus good handholds to give a sense of security. There

Great visibility through the windscreen, with the roof panels and LED lights making the cockpit useful in all weathers.



is a second settee to starboard, opposite the raised helm to port.

The cockpit of this model has a fixed wheelhouse with a roof that slides forward, with a rollable/removable aft canopy covering the rear part. This gives the boat an air draught of around 8ft but options are available, including a folding wheelhouse or more conventional full vinyl canopy

However, the broad wheelhouse roof, with full standing headroom under, has two fixed, tinted sunroofs, which keep the space bright. At night, excellent integrated strips of LED give broad, bright illumination. On the outside, two integrated solar panels ensure the domestic and engine batteries are kept topped up when the boat is not in use.

As you enter the cockpit from the aft platform, there is, very sensibly, a plexiglass and stainless steel gate that closes off the cockpit, making it safe for young children and dogs. Housed in a small locker right by the gate are the battery master switches, so on boarding you can activate

the systems without having to fumble around in an engine bay. Also, there is a small stainless steel sink complete with pull-out shower faucet, so you can easily wash your hands – and rinse off the dog (or maybe even shower after you have gone for a swim on some of the more appealing European waterways). The teak decking inlay is hardwearing and very attractive, while the whole area can be hosed down to keep the white gloss GRP clean, as even the cushions are waterproof.

Deck

As the side decks are far higher than typical steel wide-beam craft, you are more likely to reach them from the bathing platform than trying a direct climb from the bank. There are guardrails to help keep you safe, especially for deck work in choppy waters. They also provide useful points to hang fenders from, rather than fixed cleats, so you can position them exactly where they are needed – as with any GRP boat, careful use of fenders is essential for mooring and locks.



The rear cockpit and bathing platform provide an excellent place to cruise and socialise.