

Beneteau First 210

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Sea Trials

by Herb McCormick

If there is any area of the new boat market that seems to get short shrift from America's major manufacturers, it's the slice that addresses the needs of the entry-level sailing family. This is ironic, because solid reasoning suggests that owners of a small cruising sailboat could become so enamored of the sport that someday they might purchase — as the kids grow and skills accumulate — a large cruising sailboat. Nice logic, but where are the good small boats?

The past fall has seen the introduction of several, including boats from the West Coast, from Florida, and particularly from Beneteau in France. They are conceived under similar parameters — trailerable, with simple accommodations for weekending a young family (or a set

of very friendly couples), and with exciting day sailing capability — but they represent remarkably different executions. The **Beneteau First 210** combines exciting performance with handling and sailing characteristics geared to the novice.

The First 210 is the smallest (at 21 feet overall) and newest member of the Beneteau fleet. Designed by the Groupe Finot team in France, the profile is very clean and racy: With a high-aspect fractional rig, plumb bow, straight sheerline and *twin rudders*, the boat looks like a miniature BOC contender.

Looks, however, are deceiving. The Beneteau folks insist this is a pocket cruiser through and through. The simple sail plan underscores that definition: Its wide spreader base precludes the use of an overlapping headsail. The standard 110-percent roller-furling jib provides plenty of punch, but the boat would still be at a competitive disadvantage in light air without a 150-percent genoa. This alone is refreshing; the 210 is not attempting to be all boats to all sailors.

The royal-blue hull is accented with white boot and cove stripes, and a varnished mahogany toe rail sets off the sheer handsomely. Single circular portholes in the topsides amidship shed natural light below and complete the aesthetic package. This boat would look at home trailered behind a late-model BMW or Infiniti. At a base price of under \$14,000 (with its trailer), it would cost much less than the car, too.

We sailed the 210 on a crystal-clear September day in southerly breezes of eight to 10 knots off Newport, Rhode Island. On all points of sail the boat was exceptionally maneuverable, but especially so hard on the wind. The 210 is not nearly as tender as other popular boats in this size range, and this turned out to be



a pleasant surprise somewhat unexpected considering that the boat employs a lifting/swing keel with only about 770 pounds of ballast. In fact, the reassuring "stiffness" was evident from the moment we stepped on board; there was no sense of "tippiness" when taking that first shroud-grabbing step from dock to deck.

The twin rudders provide terrific control. When the boat is in the groove it is possible to walk away from the tiller for long stretches and the boat will track as if Dennis Conner were driving. Steering is the most comfortable and telltales still clearly visible when driving from the windward cockpit coaming with a tiller extension. A slight angle on the coaming provides level seating when the boat is heeled. The 210 points well and is not restrictively weight sensitive, though speed and overall performance definitely increase with the crew's weight on the windward rail.

The single-spreader rig uses a split backstay controlled through a magic box for backstay tension. The tackle for the single 3:1 mainsheet is mounted on a small pedestal in the center of the cockpit. In the interest of keep-

ing the space open there is no traveler. This is perhaps the only major sail-handling control one would expect to find on a bigger boat that isn't there. Full spinnaker gear is standard.

What this means is that a beginning sailor who learns the ins and outs of a 210 could "graduate" to a larger boat without being intimidated by foreguys and topping lifts or, for that matter, roller-furling headsails and aft-reefing lines. The 210 is a small boat with a big boat mentality in terms of its ability to teach.

Downwind the boat handles well, and in our test the rudders had the tendency to "load up" and hum in the puffs without transmitting any strain to the tiller. Again, a credit to the control offered by pairing the blades. Acceleration in those same gusts was immediate; a little burst of speed in a small boat can feel like a lot, and the slippery hull reveled in the mini-blasts.

The First 210 is a nifty entry into the new-boat market, one that encourages safe sailing and provides the correct impression that this is a proper number for lake hopping and coastal cruising.



Beneteau's First 210 is a lively, stable learning platform on all points of sail.

Up Close

by Quentin Warren

Beneteau's open-minded approach to the sailboat market is a driving force behind the First 210, a user-friendly pocket cruiser that addresses the safety requirements of the entry-level sailor with the same degree of focus that it does the sporting requirements of the more active veteran. Stable but



LOA	21'0" (6.4 m.)
LWL	19'8" (6.0 m.)
Beam	8'2" (2.5 m.)
Draft (keel up)	2'4" (0.71 m.)
(keel dn)	5'10" (1.78 m.)
Ballast	770 lbs. (349.3 kgs.)
Displacement	2,200 lbs. (998 kgs.)
Sail area (100%)	243 sq.ft. (22.6 sq.m.)
Disp/Length	129
SA/Disp	22.9
Designer	Groupe Finot
Base price	\$13,900 (with trailer)

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quick, simple but thorough, trailerable but salty — the boat jumps through a lot of hoops, and in the end you come away with two very positive, very vital impressions: It is unimimidating and it is fun.

Construction. The hull is built using solid, single-skin polyester and glass protected by Beneteau's patented bisphe-nolic intra-laminate water shield immediately behind the gel coat to ward off water penetration and the threat of osmosis. A rigid hull liner is bonded to the lower portion of the hull from stem to stern, and between the two elements foam is injected to stiffen the bond and to provide positive flotation for added safety. Single skin topsides offer bulletproof resistance to the point loading associated with collisions. The deck is balsa cored, with a rigid headliner actually vacuum-bonded to it from beneath. The result is a unified and inherently stiffened hull/deck assembly with a 10-year limited warranty.

Underbody. The bilges are relatively flat, and the hull configuration features a modern fine entry forward with eight feet of beam brought well aft to a wide stern. This encourages both tracking and stability, and provides a logical platform for the twin canted rudders hung off the open transom. The swing



(Far left): Twin rudders may look ultra-tech, but sensible dividends include stability and control. (Left): Forward of the mast are a convenient opening hatch and cambered flush decks.

keel represents 770 pounds of ballast as low as you can get it, and ships against the bottom of the hull by means of a finely calibrated mechanical worm drive actuated down below with a winch handle arrangement.

Rig. The 7/8 anodized spar is deck-stepped in a conveniently hinged tabernacle, and it features a quick-disconnect head stay with a flexible one-piece Furler jib extrusion to facilitate rocking the whole rig aft for disassembly. The sail plan includes a mainsail with two reefs, the furling jib and a spinnaker flown from a conventional pole. Stepping the mast or taking it down involves resting it on a convertible gallows at the stern, attaching the spinnaker pole forward to serve as a righting fulcrum, and using the winch on the trailer for muscle.

Interior. The interior is basic but adequate for a boat of this size. It is molded white and accented with wood trim. Two traditional fixed round portlights port and starboard provide light below, along with what one observer has called a shippy "Jules Verne look." A fiberglass sliding companionway hatch hinges up aft to provide added headroom at the center of the accommodation plan. The saloon features two single berths with stowage, while a

double berth and chemical toilet reside forward. Aft near the companionway are a single-burner stove, non-plumbed basin and storage lockers.

Systems. Given the modest program of the boat, systems generally are scaled back. There are no thru-hulls except for the bilge-pump discharge, which occurs above the waterline; this is as much a nod in the direction of safety as it is in the direction of simplicity. A battery is provided, along with a four-to-five-function distribution panel for navigation and house lights. A bracket is provided for an auxiliary outboard, and a conveniently vented locker in the cockpit under the seats aft offers safe, out-of-the-way stowage for a portable fuel canister.

Deck. The cockpit is large and the working deck is straight-forward and uncluttered. Two Lewmar #8C winches on the cabin top aft handle jib and spinnaker trimming loads as well as aft-led halyard tails. The stemhead includes a built-in fairlead for mooring or anchoring; one cleat resides on the bow while two are provided at the stern. Jammers, deck stoppers and cam cleats are placed in strategic locations for simple line tending under sail. An opening hatch on the foredeck encourages ventilation when camping out and unencumbered deployment of fenders, dock lines and sails while under way. Jib tracks on the cabin top allow for shifting gears and adjusting trim.

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 BAL.....770 lbs.
 SA.....243 sq. ft.
 DSPL/length.....127.50
 SA/DSPL.....22.95
 Base price.....\$13,900

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In terms of purpose, the Daysailer/Weekender label seems a simple description, and you might expect to find almost identical boats in such a category, but this certainly was far from true. After considering six boats ranging in length from 12 feet to 25, the panel chose to decorate Bénétteau's latest offering, the First 210 from the design firm Groupe Finot.

A derivative of the mini-transat designs from Finot, the 210 offers several innovations including twin rudders, improved non-skid decks, and circular bow hatch and portlights. But beyond any outward feature, the panelists felt that the 210 would be a good performer. Said Carl Schumacher, "I think it's the best sailing boat of its group." The double rudders help to maintain control at severe angles of heel, and its long waterline helps make it competitive with somewhat larger boats.

Fitting the implied parameters of this category perfectly, the 210 is a fun daysailing vessel that you could easily rely upon for the occasional weekend cruise. The panelists noted that the 210 offers a comfortable if spartan interior, and due to its ring-frame main bulkhead, it certainly presented the most interior volume per foot of LOA in its category.

Though the group was not unanimously taken with the novel aesthetics of the design, and questioned how well this aspect would be received in the U.S. market, they nonetheless applauded the French/American company for its attempt to breath new life into a range of boat where much of the same is often the case.

Said Schumacher, "I thought the Bénétteau 210 was a nice little boat. It looked well built, and I thought it was kind of cool." On the technical side, he complimented the use of a worm-gear lifting system for the 770-lb. swing keel. Logan approved of the positive flotation chambers fore and aft, and pointed out that the twin-rudder linkage to a single tiller reflected "simple and reliable engineering; it was easily accessible — just the way such things should be done."



Billy Black photo

Bénétteau First 210

The Best of the Rest

Runner up — Expo Dinghy: As a trainer, it does sail easily — you sit in it, you pull the sail out, you reef it — that works perfectly. I think this boat does well what it sets out to do. — **SM** There's nothing else in this category that comes close to the scintillation that this boat brings; I think you have to applaud this effort to revitalize the sport of sailing in America. — **RR 3. Hunter 23.5:** Of all the water-ballasted boats, this one is the most nicely wrought. — **DL** Having the

table move from down below to the cockpit is a nice touch. — **CS 4. Yankee Classic:** I like this design; it's simple and it doesn't make any concessions, and I thought it would sail pretty well. — **DL** Using lapstrake construction with fiberglass adds to the structural integrity, which is a good way to go if you're not going to have a cored hull. — **CS** The other nominees: **Santana 2023, Skimmer 25.**