



David Harding

The Dehler story

Dehler db1: from around £15,000 second-hand

In the year of its 50th anniversary, Peter K Poland traces Dehler's origins and development, and looks at some of the boats that made the company's name

The first time I visited Dehler's original all-singing, all-dancing factory at Meschede-Freienohl in Sauerland in the mid-1980s, I soon realised that the company's founding father, Willi Dehler, was much more than just a highly accomplished engineer: he also had a zany sense of humour.

The first thing I saw when van de Stadt's chief designer Cees van Tongeren drove me into the ultra-modern factory complex was the front of a full-size Dehler Optima 92 crashing through a huge hole in the factory wall. Just Willi's little joke, of course: it had been firmly wedged and cemented there since 1976, but as a way-out artistic installation it would have done credit to any exponent of fringe modern art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter K Poland crossed the Atlantic in a 7.6m (25ft) Wind Elf in 1968 and later spent 30 years as co-owner of Hunter Boats. He is now a freelance journalist.

However, the mighty Dehler empire came from very humble beginnings. 'My father was born in 1929 in Dortmund,' says Willi Dehler's son Karl, who works for the company to this day. 'After the war he became qualified as an electrician; then in 1955 he married, and in 1956 I was born as their only child. In 1958 my parents had their own shop selling TVs, radios and all electric parts, then they started sailing as a hobby in a van de Stadt-designed Stern dinghy. From that time on, my father had contact with Mr van de Stadt and a lifetime friendship began. I had my first sail in this family



Van de Stadt designer Cees van Tongeren (left) and boatbuilder Willi Dehler



Willi Dehler's joke: an Optima 92 crashing through the factory wall!

Dehler

Stern dinghy in 1959 – unfortunately, the boat capsized!

It's interesting to compare how the big players of modern European boatbuilding first got involved in the game. While the Bénéteau business was well established as a commercial builder of fishing vessels before it turned its hand to GRP sailing boats in the 1960s, Willi Dehler owned the aforementioned electrical shop and Henri Jeanneau started off in a family hardware store, taking over part of his father's workshop to build speedboats. Having got these hairy little rocket ships out of his system, Jeanneau turned his attention to GRP sailing yachts in 1964. He first approached van de Stadt to design these cruising models – just as Willi Dehler did at almost exactly the same time when he swapped electrical retailing for boatbuilding.

The first boat Dehler built was actually inspired by the Stern he had



so enjoyed sailing in his time off from the shop. In 1963 he put pen to paper and designed the Winnetou, a 3m dinghy, and went on to sell almost 400. It was a happy start to a long and successful career as one of Europe's premier boatbuilders.

However, as Cees van Tongeren of van de Stadt Design told me, Dehler then turned to his friend and produced his first van de Stadt cruiser – and he never looked back. Cees explains: 'Dehler wanted to build a GRP caravan and went to Ricus van de Stadt for information. Before then he had bought one of the first GRP Stern dinghies from van de Stadt, but Ricus persuaded him to build boats instead of caravans.... In 1965 Dehler asked van de Stadt to design a keel centreboarder in two variants; one with a cabin top as a cabin cruiser and one without a cabin top as a day-sailer.'

An all-time top-seller

The resulting yacht – named the **Varianta** – went on to become not just the most successful Dehler cruiser ever, but also one of the all-time top-selling European yachts. What a way to launch a new cruiser range. It's true to say the market was not exactly awash with versatile GRP family yachts in the mid-1960s, so there was plenty of pent-up demand for such a boat, but Dehler hit the jackpot with his very first throw of the dice and went on to sell around 4,500 Variantas in its various incarnations between 1966 and 1982. This truly amazing achievement gave Dehler the foundation on which to set up a state-of-the-art manufacturing process – a process that was to stand the company in good stead for the ensuing decades.

Unfortunately, you're unlikely to see many Variantas in the UK, primarily because Dehler preferred to sell direct to the client in those days. That way there was no commission for a dealer so the client got a fantastic deal.

This jaunty and attractive little 6.5m cruiser has four berths (two in the saloon and two in a separate forepeak) and adequate galley facilities amidships. The



The Varianta was Dehler's first proper cruising yacht: price second-hand from £1,900

stub keel plus centreplate arrangement provides a 43% ballast ratio and a displacement-length ratio (DLR) of 115. It draws 1.3m with the plate down and 0.7m with it raised, for easy trailing or creek-crawling. The irony is that this versatile little package would appeal as much to today's sailors as it did to their predecessors in the '60s and '70s. Sadly, however, there's nothing much like it on the market: today's typical 'starter boat' is around 30ft (9.1m).

Perhaps this helps explain why the Varianta Owners' Association is still so active: just look at the films on YouTube of large fleets of Variantas racing at places like Travemünde and the Mönnesee. It's a real eye-opener. Smart new sails and sponsors' names painted on several hulls prove that 21st century Varianta sailing is still a big deal and a load of fun. Better still, it doesn't break the bank.

Ahead of its time

Next up came the **Optima 830**, launched in 1969. Again, it's archetypal '60s van de Stadt. Looking a bit like a mini Pioneer 9, it was well ahead of its time with its jaunty sheer, elegant fin keel and separate spade rudder under a pretty retrousseé counter. An LOA of 8.27m,

LWL of 6.7m and beam of 2.48m meant that the first Dehler to carry the Optima name could offer a forepeak, amidships heads compartment, linear galley with dinette opposite and a quarter berth aft of a compact navigation area. Once again, the Dehler plus Van de Stadt team had come up with a desirable and attractive fast cruiser.

Dehler continued its emphasis on performance with its next offering: the **Delanta 76**, introduced in 1972. Nevertheless, cruising comfort was not neglected as the 76 later evolved into the **Delanta 78** and 80 versions. Willi Dehler was always ready to modify length, cockpit and accommodation plans in order to get maximum life (and sales) out of each model. This Delanta, for example, offered a choice of layouts – separate aft cabin with centre cockpit or conventional accommodation plan with aft cockpit – and different keel options. But whichever version a client bought, he got a sleek little yacht with elegant overhangs, a fairly deep 'short chord' fin keel and a spade rudder.

Cees van Tongeren recalls: 'My first design for Dehler was the Delanta. As we were a good team, Willi Dehler and CvT, I continued designing all Dehler yachts for 25 years, until 1995.'

By now, Dehler had another trick up his sleeve – Ton Cup racing. The van de Stadt design office once wrote: 'Around 1971, Dehler came to the conclusion that speed would become a major selling argument for cruising yachts. That is why the Delanta had a hull that also fitted the Quarter Ton Class very well. The German



Optima 830: from £10,000 second-hand



Optima 92: second-hand from £13,500

van de Stadt
Peter Oort/ www.Oort2.nl



Delanta 76: from £5,500 second-hand



van de Stadt

Optima 98: second-hand from £18,500



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Delanta 78: from £10,000 second-hand



van de Stadt

Dehler db2: around £24,000 second-hand



Sprinta Sport: around £6,500 second-hand

sailor Georg Nissen completed a Delanta hull as a racing yacht, the *Timschal*. He finished third in the Quarter Ton Cup in 1973 and 1974, while van de Stadt designers Paul Pasman and Hans Korner won a top Dutch regatta in 1975 in a Delanta racing version.'

Pursuing the racing market, Dehler also became a licensed builder of the Olympic 470 dinghy class in 1974. This was perhaps a strange move for a production builder of cruising yachts, and I wonder whether it ever contributed to the bottom line. However, it certainly bought valuable publicity for the company. According to Karl Dehler, 'I started racing in a dinghy and had my first success in a Dehler 470. I was 1975 German youth champion, 1976 German champion and second in Olympic selection of that year. Hübner/Bode won the gold medal in a Dehler 470!'

Airy and comfortable

The 1974 Optima 92 was 'Dehler mainstream', being its first fast cruiser to burst through the 30ft/9.1m barrier and appeal to long-distance, deep-sea sailors. It was also extremely innovative in many aspects. It was one of the first cruisers to offer a heads area relocated from amidships to a spacious compartment adjacent to the aft companionway. Its airy and comfortable saloon was one of the first to benefit from hull ports set into the topsides, while its large L-shaped galley (to starboard) and navigator's chart table and quarter berth area (to port) were well suited to offshore cruising.

If that lot did not appeal, there was a later aft cabin version with a central cockpit – the 1979 **Optima 98**. To top it all off, the Optima came with a fractional rig as opposed to the then almost universal masthead, and it had wheel steering. All these features were highly unusual in a 1970s 30-footer – and even more so in a top-quality 30-footer sold at

such a competitive price. No wonder Dehler was now riding the crest of a wave, bearing in mind that Bénéteau did not build its first fast cruiser – the First 30 – until 1976. At this stage of play, Dehler was well ahead of the game.

At the same time, Dehler was stretching its lead on its competitors by fine-tuning its production methods and unique 'in-house' supply system. It bought aluminium extrusions to manufacture its own masts and booms, and had its own riggers who made standing and running rigging. Its steel fabrication division made pulpits, pushpits, shroud plates and all the other custom steelwork items that go

Dehler was stretching its lead on competitors by fine-tuning its production methods

into or onto a production yacht, and it built an ABS forming machine so that under-deck locker units, small hatches and other non-structural parts were also made in-house.

Put simply, Dehler majored on saving costs and gaining efficiency, yet it did not cut corners: its boats were well made and extremely competitively priced, thanks to its 'direct to the client' selling methods.

Multi-role

It was around this time that Willi Dehler and his team caught the racing bug in a big way. After *Timschal* had finished third in successive World Quarter Ton Cup championships, Dehler commissioned the van de Stadt office in 1976 to design a multi-role 7m yacht that could excel in IOR racing events, become a popular One Design class yet still sell as a performance cruiser. The young Cees van Tongeren – who had only recently joined the van de Stadt office – sharpened his pencil and designed the Sprinta and its **Sprinta Sport** derivative.

The basic Sprinta has a short and attractive coachroof above a sleek hull with moderate freeboard. The rudder lives

beneath a short counter while the 2.4m beam provides practical four-berth accommodation, with a WC under the forepeak double berth. The Sprinta Sport version is a very different beast, with reduced freeboard and a low-level wedge-shaped roof. Its rig, complete with running backstays, is bigger, while the overall weight is lower. This all resulted in a very rapid little boat that hovered up silverware all around the world. I got to know the Sprinta Sport well – indeed, rather too well – because it became seriously hot competition for our hitherto all-conquering Hunter Sonata.

If the Sprinta Sport was a big success, the next Dehler race boat – the **db1** production Three-Quarter Tonner – took the world by storm.

As Karl Dehler remembers: 'The db1 story started in 1979 with the development of this successful van de Stadt design, drawn by Cees van Tongeren. In 1980, '81, '82, and '83 we had much success at the world championships – I took part every time.

'Then we decided to modify the boat radically to produce the 1984 **db2** version. The Three-Quarter Ton Cup was in Kiel, and I won it with the db2 *Positron*: db2 *Flurschaden* was second and db2 *Right On* was third – a big success. This was the starting point for Dehler's international business.'

The db1 and db2 were unstoppable and sold all around the globe, putting the Dehler name firmly on the world map.

One area of Dehler's 'international business' to receive a db1-driven boost was the UK, where accomplished sailor Alan Bourdon – previously of Southern Ocean Shipyards and a long-standing fan of van de Stadt designs – became an agent in the late 1970s. Alan exhibited a db1 in the pool at the Earls Court Boat Show, then campaigned it with great success. As a result, the Dehler name in the UK shot from obscurity to prominence in double-quick time. Orders flowed in. ➔



van de Stadt

Dehler 38: around £44,000 second-hand

Performance and stability

Amid all this high-profile racing publicity, Dehler had not forgotten its 'bread and butter' cruising range. As any boatbuilder will tell you, sound family cruisers make up most of the market and good ones breed brand loyalty, so existing clients come back for more of the same when they want a bigger boat.

The **Duetta 86**, introduced in the late '70s, was just such a boat – perfect for Varianta or Delanta owners looking to go larger. Once again, van Tongeren drew a fast cruiser that looked (and was) a cut above the norm. With its sleek coachroof, well-defined overhangs and moderate freeboard the Duetta was a class act, and its



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Dehler 25: second-hand price around £10,000



www.boatshop24.com

Dehler 37: around £40,000 second-hand



PBO archive

Dehler 31: around £24,000 second-hand

2.95m beam, 43% ballast ratio, 19.88 sail area/displacement ratio and 160 DLR added up to an appealing mix of performance and stability. Like other Dehler cruisers, it came with either an aft or centre cockpit – the latter in conjunction with a separate stern cabin – and all in just 8m overall. Headroom, space and standard of finish in all versions were excellent. Needless to say, the Duetta flew off the slick Dehler production lines and provided a sound foundation to the business.

In similar – albeit considerably bigger – vein were the 1981 **Dehler 37** and 1985 372 upgrade. This was a real Tardis of a cruiser, offering three double-berth sleeping cabins, an enormous central



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Dehler 28: from £22,500 second-hand

saloon, a big U-shaped galley and a proper navigation area. With its chunky good looks, it is a real 'go anywhere, any time' cruiser. At around the same time, Dehler showed that it had not forgotten the small boat market, introducing the very pretty **Dehler 22** and **25** models. Both offered an unusual mix of water ballast and vertically lifting keel, showing Willi Dehler's ability to think laterally. This format was revolutionary at the time and went a long way towards providing larger trailer-sailers that were stable and fast under sail, yet could shed weight for towing on the roads.

On the larger cruiser front, Dehler then reverted to the db1 genes. In its flat-out Three-Quarter Ton guise this boat displayed great handling characteristics and speed, but its accommodation could hardly be called 'cruiser-friendly.' Therefore, Willi and Cees van Tongeren decided to use the same successful hull lines but to put an all-new coachroof and deck layout on top and insert proper cruising accommodation down below. At the same time, the fractional rig was detuned and reduced in size and less extreme keel options were offered. The resulting **Optima 101** (1983) and **Dehler 34** (1984) were huge successes and sold in prodigious quantities. The principal difference between the two being that the 101 had a large heads compartment amidships, while the upgraded 34 went for the now de rigueur aft heads compartment.



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Optima 101:
second-hand from
around £20,000

Slickly-finished

In the UK, meanwhile, Hunter joined Alan Bourdon to become the second Dehler distributor. We wanted larger sporty cruisers to sell to Hunter clients when they had fallen off the end of our range, which stopped at around 31ft (9.4m). The plan worked, and these highly attractive yachts sold well. The only problem was that Dehler still tended to operate on a 'direct to the client' basis, so the dealer only got a very small commission and had to add a bit to the retail price to cover costs and make a return. The UK retail price was still extremely competitive, so much so that some clients wondered where the catch was, but I always reckoned that this unusual pricing policy was a mistake that could eventually lead Dehler into trouble...

The Dehler 34 was followed by the smaller but equally attractive **Dehler 31** in 1984 and the larger **Dehler 38** in 1985.

All three models were indisputably 'sporty' and very competitively priced. As usual, Cees van Tongeren drew beautiful-looking boats and Willi Dehler produced slickly-finished interiors that made the most of the space available. The Dehler 31 was very much a mini 34, while the 38 offered high performance combined with a three-double-cabin layout. I once had a great time sailing one of these around Antibes in the South of France; a welcome change from mud-hopping on the east and south coasts in a small bilge-keeler. I hasten to add, this Dehler 38 belonged to a client, not to me. More's the pity.

Moving back down the size scale, Dehler produced another cracking fast cruiser in 1987, the **Dehler 28** – not to be confused with a later Judel/Vrolijk-designed 28 – with fully battened main, self tacking jib

and Dehler's 'main-drop' system all as standard. I contacted fellow Royal Southern Yacht Club member George Gerwitz to ask how he had got on with his Dehler 28, and he replied: 'Aquila was amazing. We raced JOG and had a good number of wins over 10 years. I also sailed most weekends throughout the season, mainly single-handed. Crossing to France was not a problem. I sold Aquila for Amigos, a Dehler 34... we can race double-handed and I can sail her single-handed. It's like growing up. The extra room, the additional speed.'

Elegant fast cruisers

As a distributor in the '80s, I began to wonder whether Dehler was missing a trick. The yacht market was developing at huge speed in the late '80s and early '90s, and the French builders were realigning their model ranges accordingly. Up until 1985, Bénéteau had majored on its racy

the performance end of the market.

After the launch of the 28, Dehler continued on its familiar course. More elegant fast cruisers from the van de Stadt office followed, then design teams Judel/Vrolijk and Simonis Voogd joined in, finally displacing the prolific and successful Cees van Tongeren: more about these latest Dehlers in PBO next month.

Meanwhile, the firm's popular camper van, the Dehler Profi (based on the Volkswagen T3 then T4 chassis), continued its successful run with around 5,000 units sold before the plug was finally pulled in 1997 after 16 years of production. At its peak, the Profi camper van had accounted for around 15% of Dehler's turnover, and the skilled use of lightweight ABS mouldings and other features in its interior probably had a beneficial influence on some aspects of the yacht designs.

Then, after more than 30 successful years, founder Willi Dehler left the company in 1994.

Meanwhile, Karl – who had studied production engineering management – worked for the company from 1986 to 1997 then left to join luxury caravan and camping van builders Hymer before joining Hanse in 2004. When Hanse bought Dehler in 2009 Karl found himself once again developing Dehler yachts.

So, although many changes and developments unfolded as Dehler moved into the 21st century and celebrated its 50th anniversary, there's still a prominent member of the Dehler family on board. This means that the tradition of quality build and high performance should remain synonymous with the Dehler name. **PBO**

The UK price was extremely competitive – so much so clients wondered if there was a catch

First range that competed head-on with Dehler: but the French twigged that the fast-growing charter market and less sporty leisure sailors now wanted boats with maximum space and comfort, even if this came at the expense of ultimate performance. Accordingly, Bénéteau introduced a whole new range of cruisers in 1985 under the Océanis brand while developing its First range for the speed merchants. Jeanneau did likewise as it started splitting its sailboat output between Sun Odyssey (cruising) and Sun Fast (cruiser-racing) models. Océanis and Sun Odyssey models proceeded to sell like hot cakes to charter operators and family cruisers but Dehler didn't go to the party, preferring to continue concentrating on

NEXT MONTH

Spotlight on the more recent Dehler models



van de Stadt

Dehler 22: around £7,000 second-hand



van de Stadt

Duetta 86: from £14,000 second-hand



Dehler 34: from around £26,000 second-hand

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