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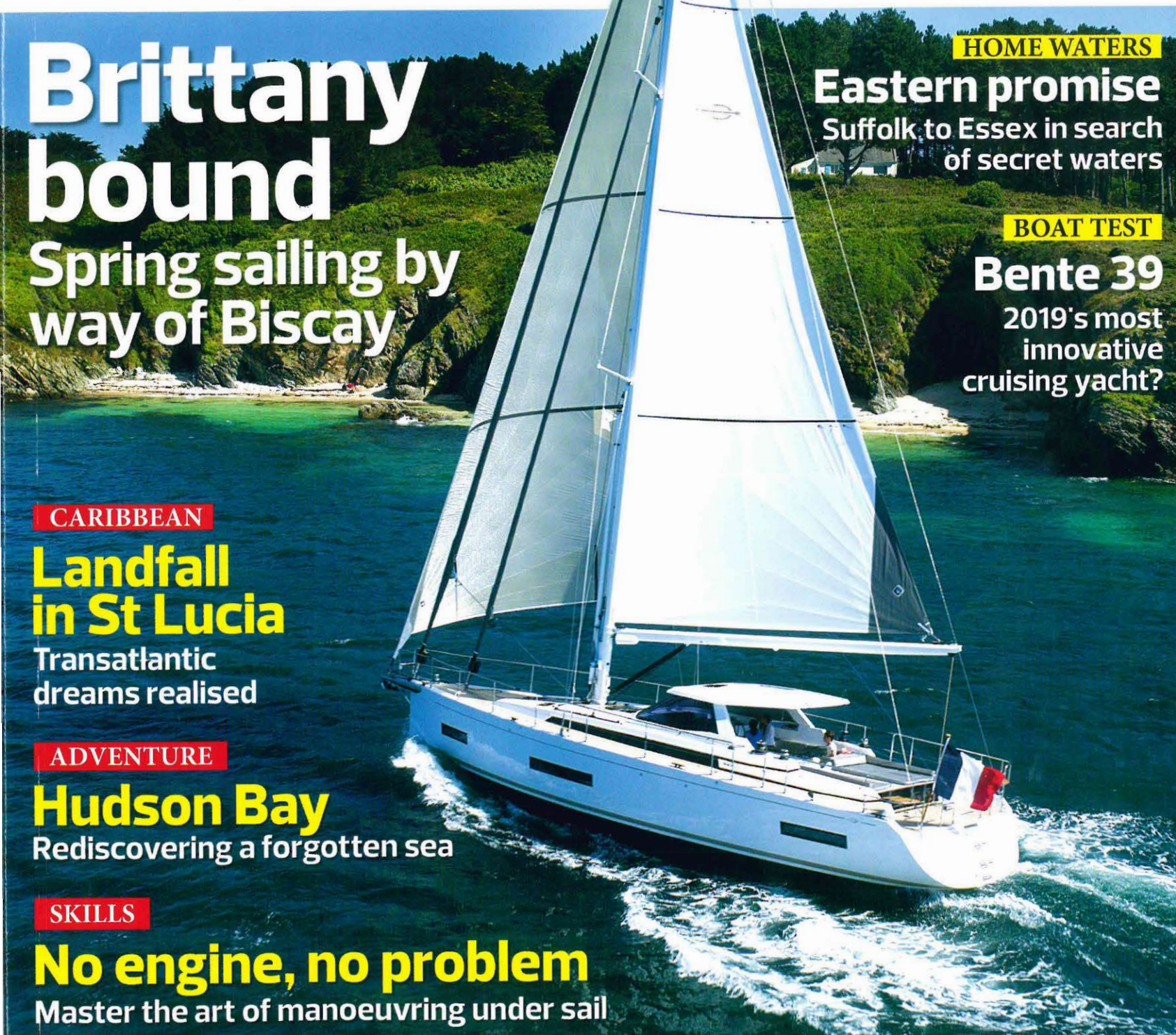

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Sam Fortescue finds out what makes the world's second-biggest boatbuilder tick

Hanse down a winner

ABOVE (L-R) Hanse's factory at Greifswald; Hanse's 388, one of a new generation of models

Ever so quietly, without making a song and dance about it, Germany's Hanse Yachts has become the world's second biggest boatbuilder. Through a mixture of growth and acquisitions, including Moody, Sealine and Privilege, it now lies only behind the mighty Groupe Beneteau. Hanse has been helped by the decline of Bavaria, or course, but it has also read the market well with its range of quality cruising and racing yachts.

Naturally enough, CEO Jens Gerhardt doesn't see it quite like that. "The decline of Bavaria has been irrelevant for Hanse," he tells me when I visit the yard at Greifswald, close to Germany's Baltic border with Poland. "Bavaria makes charter yachts; Hanse is not focused on charter and our boats are more robust, more stable."

(Ger)hardt to beat

If he sounds a bit pleased with himself, he has every right. The business is largely debt free and has recently expanded with the purchase of France's Privilege luxury catamarans – financed entirely through cashflow. The yard's flagship 67-footer is selling well with 18 units built since its launch three years ago, and Hanse is expanding its existing buildings by Griefswald's historic harbour. It is a remarkable transformation for a company that traces its roots back through the long, lean years of the German Democratic Republic, when it was on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain and mainly built or repaired fishing boats.

These days, the yard is housed in the ubiquitous crinkly tin of all

ABOVE
Hanse CEO Jens Gerhardt has overseen steady growth at Hanse since he was appointed in 2012

factories, but it still occupies a site where ships have been built since the 14th century. "We build 35 designs here, and every year launch five or six new models," Gerhardt says. Of the nine Hanses, all but the biggest and the smallest have been updated from the five series to the eight series, which improves lighting, introduces new wood and upholstery options below and options like extra teak on deck and a barbecue and sink under the helmsman's seat on some models. The 315 and 675 are likely to get the same treatment shortly.

That'll be the Dehler

The yard also builds five Dehler models and three Moodys. Its stripped down Varianta line is still available but no longer marketed – something Phil Dollin at UK dealer Inspiration Marine cannot mourn. "We only sold two Varianta 37s," he says. "In 10 years the market has gone from being mostly 35-footers in 2007 to more over 50ft now. Hanse has recognised the shift and, having all the development capabilities in-house, they have been able to move faster than other boatbuilders."

In one of the largest sheds on the site, I meet a couple of resin-streaked technicians who are overseeing the milling of a new hull plug from a giant block of polystyrene, and laying up various female moulds. The smell of solvent is strong enough to knock a man off his feet, so we don't spend too long in here. But it is enough to see the plug of Sealine C390 being recycled into the smaller Dehler 30 offshore racer – an exciting new development at the yard.

"It's much, much harder to build this than a larger Hanse, where one tonne more or less doesn't matter," explains sales manager Maxim Neumann. "It's a concept boat, so we don't know where it will lead – it could make a family racer, or it could become a championship class. It's not a project to make you rich; it's about positioning Dehler."

They will finish the tooling here before it is moved 50km down the road, and across the border to Szechin in Poland, where the balsa-cored hulls are hand laid up. The workers there are dedicated to Hanse, but because of wage differences, it is still cheaper to have this labour-intensive work performed off-site. When they arrive in Greifswald, the hulls and decks are still separate, supported on special frames for transport, with just the wiring looms already hanging in place.

Hulls are transferred onto a big steel trolley as soon as they arrive, then ushered straight into the building halls and onto the production lines. There's one side for the bigger boats, and one side for the smaller boats – each with 17 bays, representing a different stage of the build. Every six hours, a siren wails, the workers step back onto the fixed gantries, and the whole train of 17 hulls advances one station – the completed hull on the left being whisked off outside, and a new one joining the line on the right. "Of those 17 stages, five are quality control gates," explains Neumann. "And if there are any problems, the firefighters come in at night."

Somewhere close to the end, the deck is brought in from outside, craned up over the hull and lowered into place, but not before every element of the internal fit-out – from engine and electronics to joinery →

and plumbing – has been installed first. "The deck-hull joint is glued and bolted," says Jens Gerhardt with evident satisfaction as he enumerates the features that make Hanse yachts "more stable" and robust than the competition. The sub-frame is laminated and glued in to the hull, and the bulkheads are also laminated, making for extremely reliable construction.

At each station, there are rollcages piled high with equipment, fittings or joinery, depending on the allocated task. All the screws, silicon beading or Sikaflex is already portioned out exactly. This is the reality of high-efficiency production boatbuilding, and the chief way that input costs are managed. And it has to be, because even a small increase in the cost of parts used has a knock-on impact on the profitability of the yachts.

Knock on wood

The joinery department is a whole other ecosystem, and one that is being expanded to produce the interiors for Privilege catamarans as well. In order for the perfectly varnished sheets of wood to reach the final installation stage (cabinetry goes in before the deck is attached to the hull), it runs through a number of processes – most of them automatic. The journey begins in the wood storage hall, where there are stacks of marine ply in seven different finishes (mahogany style, chestnut and oak for joinery, four more for floors) and several different thicknesses. Here a robotic arm automatically selects the required wood for each yacht and a five-axis CNC milling machine cuts the large boards into the required shapes – almost like a series of jigsaw pieces. A technician has already determined the most efficient pattern for each model that will see the greatest number of parts produced from each board. Each piece of wood gets a barcode that identifies its purpose, and the hull number it is destined for.

RIGHT
The Hanse 548 has been one of the marque's strongest selling yachts in recent years

BELOW
Two views of Hanse's flagship, the 675

'The joinery department is a whole other ecosystem'

Next stop is the varnishing room, where two 30m-long machines spray each piece of wood perfectly uniformly. The number of coats is a closely guarded secret, but it takes a mere 15 minutes for a part to make its way through the line, where a UV lamp means that the varnish is already dry. At this point, the wood has barely been touched by human hand, but all that is about to change. Next stop is the joinery department floor, where nearly 100 chippies work on assembling the furniture modules to be dropped into each hull. Behind a glass screen, there are three teenagers working away at planks of solid wood – one with an adze, I notice to my surprise. Fortunately for the efficient operation of the yard, these guys are apprentices, learning their trade through the use of traditional tools. It is safe to say that no element of a Hanse, Dehler or Moody yacht requires the wielding of an adze. "We have 40 apprentices here across eight disciplines," says Neumann. "It is very important to us to train the next generation, and 90 per cent of them stay with us when they qualify."

Gerhardt has one eye firmly on the next generation, which he believes will want a more intuitive boat. "We are working on making sailing even easier," he says. "It's about space and light below, making it easier to access the water and how you use the boat, from fishing to barbecues."