



44-FOOTER GOING CHEAP!

An absolutely basic production yacht that can be ordered online, this €84,000 cruiser-racer had cut so many corners it gave Toby Hodges serious concerns about comfort and safety, especially as the test boat was about to take fee-paying crew round Britain

Photos: Paul Wyeth

We tested the Varianta 44 from the Weymouth and Portland Sailing Academy, where a new venture called the Round Britain and Ireland (RBI) Challenge had just taken delivery of the first six boats in the country. Similar in theory to Clipper Ventures, RBI Challenge attracts sailors from all experiences and walks of life to circumnavigate the British Isles. It is planned to run three times a year and participants can choose to do just one of nine legs or the whole circumnavigation (over 28 days). The first started in late March, and as we went to press, five of the six boats were almost filled.

They chose the Varianta 44 from German builders Hanse, because it's based on a proven Judel/Vrolijk hull (the Hanse 430) so could offer entertaining matched-boat racing, but crucially, at €84,033 (£73,252) ex VAT, is certainly the cheapest production boat around.

The Varianta website describes it as a safe family cruiser that can be raced in regattas, and it is sold either directly via the site or through so-called 'point of sail' outlets – 'usually a sailing school' which will also '... teach you to sail if you are still unsure of helm and sheet!'

The test boat was so new it hadn't even been blessed with a boot top or antifoul, and riggers were still putting sails on in the travel hoist, hence we returned for a second sea trial. But some things were noticeable immediately: low guardrails, an open transom with just two of these wires acting more like tripwires and a cockpit locker that opens straight into the interior. It didn't fill me with the confidence I'd be looking for in a high-speed tour round our beautiful, yet brutal coastline.

The single foredeck cleat is indicative of her Spartan fit-out. I presume it's from this that you'd have to set an anchor, if you had one, or even

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somewhere to stow one, as there's no bow roller and no chain locker. The website suggests running a line through a snatch block back to a winch (no mention of chain on a 44-footer!) And the interior gives a new meaning to the term 'basic'; it's as if a poltergeist has visited and ripped out what soul the Hanse 430 once had.

The Varianta is so no-frills it's tricky to build up any confidence in her, hence our maiden voyage was a little nerve-racking. The helmsman stands on a raised hatch aft, an elevated position made more unnerving by those low wires behind (just 53cm from the raised hatch to the top wire). By the time we returned for a second sail two weeks later, RBI had made some crucial changes – including a high webbing strap joining the quarters, which I feel is essential for safety at sea. But the hatch below still had a distinct lack of grip, and represents the only stowage on deck as the portside cockpit locker opens straight into the aft cabin – for the record, RBI are proposing to glue theirs down.

Sprightly performance

Despite many misgivings about her fit-out, I found the Varianta a pleasure to sail. She moves through the water and swell well, tacking through 85°, showing good speed. Her specs indicate a sprightly performance and her design is proven, but during the maiden voyage, we had several Challenge guests aboard, no instruments and the wind was only a Force 3 gusting 4. A second sail with 20-30+ knots blowing across the deck proved well worthwhile.

The Varianta has a powerful sailplan, hence a reef was quickly taken in, after which she gave us an enjoyable, rewarding ride. Instruments were still uncalibrated, but my GPS readouts seemed respectable, with 7-7.5 knots upwind and at least a knot more reaching. She behaves politely when overpowered, at which stage it's helpful to have the traveller to depower the large main.

But the sheer lack of comfort taints this sailing pleasure. The backstay lead cuts off headroom at both quarters, preventing the helmsman from sitting comfortably, and with nothing to brace a foot against you can't straddle the wheel when seated.

Although Variantas come bare-poled, the test boat had 2:1 main and jib halyards added, but these simply contributed to a degree of friction severe enough to prevent raising or lowering either sail easily. In fact, without mast steps, dropping the main in a blow was a real challenge, and the whole point of having a hanked-on jib to facilitate a speedy drop was completely negated.

I couldn't help but think of the crews out in the North Sea and wonder how they'd fare.



The large single wheel was pleasant for helming, though I found the seated position uncomfortable. The raised hatch behind the wheel had very little grip and the guardwires did not inspire confidence. In this photo from our second test a high webbing strap had been added by RBI



Above: a single cleat on the foredeck for anchoring and no bow roller. Below: transom wires measure just 53cm from hatch



Above: the Varianta moves through the water well, showing good speed and tacking through 85°. Left: the deep trench in which the wheel runs begs for a net to prevent it becoming jammed by lines



Above: very basic accommodation in white laminated plywood. The saloon table offers little legroom and I worry about security at the stove when cooking at sea (left)



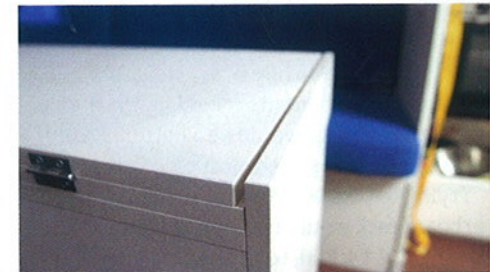
Right: berths in the forward cabin are divided by bulwarks with ferociously sharp edges



Above left: there is no chart table aboard this boat; radio and instruments are stowed in a cupboard behind the port saloon berth, which is a little awkward to access. Above right: the angular companionway into the accommodation



Right: the saloon table hinges in the middle to allow passage forward, but again edges were sharp. Below right: cupboards use push-to-open latches, some of which fell open at heel, while doors don't have the luxury of latches



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There's no sprayhood for shelter and the width of the cockpit makes it a feat to cross during tacks, with benches too wide to brace across. A crash bar in the centre of the cockpit would certainly be a wise addition.

Down below

The angular companionway steps prepare you for what's to be found within. If you like hard edges and corners, then the Varianta's for you. Her previous life as a Hanse means there's lots of space to fall around in at sea and discover each corner painfully. The bulkheads and furniture are all in white laminate, so although brand new, our test boat had scuff marks on every surface.

The saloon features a long, large, right-angled table split in two with a hinged central part for walk-through access, yet very restrictive legroom. RBI had removed the port side of this table and were trying to improve legroom to the starboard side. Though it may be practical to get a sailing school to sit around this large table for chartwork, that's no excuse for providing no navstation at all.

Crews on the RBI Challenge will be hot-bunking, using the aft, saloon (232cm) and forward berths, preferring to leave the vee berth for bag stowage, and leechcloths have been added throughout.

There's plenty of space beneath the forward berths, but it's most suitable for sails and, in our case, contained the anchor too – not perfect if you want to drop the hook in a hurry! The hull sides are lined with a leather-like material (in cream) with soft pouches, which offer the most useful stowage forward of the mast.

Aft cabins are near-identical and large enough, with 6ft headroom and double wardrobes, but otherwise appear dark, plain and noisy (the engine has zero insulation).

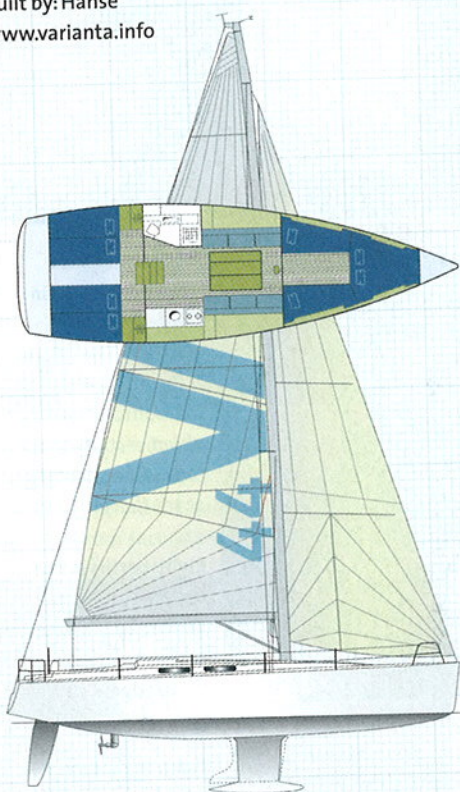
The linear galley has plenty of stowage, but in large, open cupboards that will need pegs, non-slip mats and customisation to keep items secure, while two small 12V coolboxes are provided for cold stowage – a top-opening fridge would be a better use of space and surely isn't that much costlier.

Trying to cook at the two-burner stove on starboard tack would be a perilous feat with nothing but a 5ft fall to the heads behind you. RBI have added a vital webbing strap to help here, along with grip tape on various areas of the sole. They also plan to add webbing loops around the interior to grab hold of (a bit like a bus then).

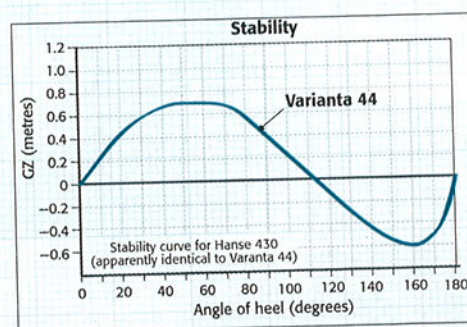
Altogether, I think the interior feels spacious because there's only one heads and no navstation. I'm afraid it continually made me question its practicality and durability.



Designed by Judel/Vrolijk & Co
Built by: Hanse
www.varianta.info



SPECIFICATIONS	VARIANTA 44	
LOA	13.33m	43ft 9in
LWL	12.00m	39ft 4in
BEAM	4.16m	13ft 8in
DRAUGHT	2.23m	7ft 4in
DISP (LIGHTSHIP)	9,800kg	21,605lb
BALLAST	3,200kg	7,055lb
SAIL AREA (100% FORETRIANGLE)	104.1m ²	1,121ft ²
BERTHS	8-10	
ENGINE (SAILDRIVE)	30kW	40hp
WATER	280lt	62gal
FUEL	120lt	26gal
SAIL AREA: DISP	23.1	
DISP: LWL	158	
PRICE (EX VAT)	84,033 (£73,252)	



CONCLUSION

Using the old Judel/Vrolijk-designed Hanse 430 hull with a T-keel means in terms of shape there's little to be concerned about. The Varianta 44 is two tonnes lighter than the Hanse 445 (see page 64) and sets more sail, so has the legs too. And she's built like a Hanse, albeit without the level of fit-out.

But have too many corners been cut? If everything is annoying, tiring or dangerous then where's the enjoyment? I couldn't help but feel rather sorry for that group of RBI Challengers coming for their first sail. But they got afloat, the sun was out and they were all smiling, so what do I know!

Who else is it designed for, though? It could perhaps suit a club racer who wants to spend the money saved on sails and deck gear. Or a skilled boatbuilder/DIY enthusiast doing their own fit-out. Additions to get her coded were very apparent on our revisit – with bulkheads lined with screw holes and a reliance on bungee chord and bits of grip tape, it all started to look a bit DIY.

It's interesting that the UK Hanse/Dehler dealers distance themselves from this 'point of sail' venture. And I know why. Personally, I'd sooner trade 10ft and get a well-fitted-out 35-footer.