

Elevated position

Grand Soleil, the Italian builder of a stylish range of higher-end performance sailing cruisers, is entering a new era thanks to a private-equity investor. New models, extended facilities, wider distribution and an imminent brand makeover are all part of the grand plan. **PHIL DRAPER** reports.



1 Purpose-built, Grand Soleil's main site is now five years old. The location is an industrial estate facility on the outskirts of Forlì, which is some 65km southeast of Bologna. One flexible line accommodates Grand Soleil's performance-cruiser portfolio, save for the biggest Grand Soleil 56, which is really a semi-custom product and assembled in a different way. There are currently 17 fit-out stations on the line — all of which can be seen here — but once a plant extension is complete there will be 21 distinct stations. Workers tend to stay with their one station or group of stations. Note the test tank that marks the end of the line. **2** ISB's managing director, Stefano Mion. He is responsible for both Dufour (France) and Grand Soleil (Italy) activities. **3** One of Grand Soleil's two lamination halls at its second site: all Grand Soleil decks are moulded and everything is finished off in this bit. These facilities are to be found at its old site, which is about a kilometre from its new industrial estate site and headquarters on Via Gramadora. **4 & 5** A manual cutting table accommodates all the company's in-house lamination requirements. Two people work this table. Together they can produce enough fabric reinforcement for one boat a day. They cut mostly combinations of woven rovings and CSM (chopped-strand mat), although unidirectionals are also used for decks. Ahlstrom is the favoured supplier.

Grand Soleil, also known by its official yard name Cantiere del Pardo, is now benefiting from the sharper focus that always tends to follow a change in ownership. Not only is much effort being expended on the Grand Soleil model range and brand makeover, but its capacity and global dealer network are also being significantly expanded.

Today Grand Soleil offers an attractive

performance sailing cruiser portfolio from 11.3m-17m (37ft-56ft). In all there are six models. Such is their positioning that they occupy the ground between the mid-market and the top-end — say, something like 20-30 per cent less than equivalent specification X-Yachts, but 20-30 per cent more than Bénéteau Firsts.

The smallest is the Grand Soleil 37, which was introduced two years ago, the brand-new

Grand Soleil 40, which was shown at Genoa 2006, the Grand Soleil 43, which was shown for the first time at Genoa 2005, the four-year-old Grand Soleil 45, the three-year-old Grand Soleil 50 and the flagship Grand Soleil 56.

The Botin & Carkeek-designed 37, 40 and 43 are the newest and their cohesive styling has established what is the current range 'look'. But the Grand Soleil 45 and Grand Soleil 50, ➔





Grand Soleil – production tally 2006/07

Model	Units	Basic-Spec Retail (Prices, excl taxes)
Grand Soleil 37	39	€146,200
Grand Soleil 40 (old & new)	46	€178,900
Grand Soleil 43	39	€219,800
Grand Soleil 45	25	€248,400
Grand Soleil 50	27	€351,200
Grand Soleil 56	6	€629,600
Total	182	

Grand Soleil – turnover history

Year	Sales	Growth	Units
1996/97	€8m	n/a	35
1997/98	€13m	62 per cent	55
1998/99	€16m	23 per cent	80
1999/00	€22m	38 per cent	110
2000/01	€26m	18 per cent	50
2001/02	€26m	0 per cent	150
2002/03	€32m	23 per cent	150
2003/04	€36m	13 per cent	155
2004/05	€41m	14 per cent	176
2005/06	€43m	5 per cent	182
2006/07	€45m	5 per cent	190

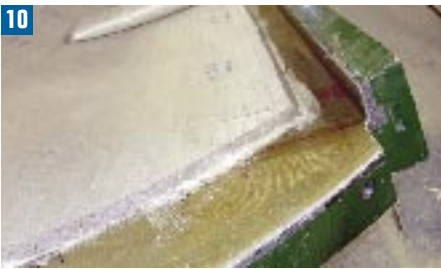
which came from Judel & Vrolijk, and the Grand Soleil 56 from Philippe Briand, still have the same obvious family identity. Grand Soleils have always had great lines — usually gleaming white hulls and dark blue flashes.

All the Grand Soleil performance cruisers, bar the biggest 56, feature a galvanised steel grid system bonded into the hull floor and sides, a system pioneered by key competitor X-Yachts, but engineered specifically for Grand Soleil by a Forli-based technical department of Bologna University. There is a lot of sense behind this approach. Those galvanised steel frames resolve chain-plate, mast-step and keel-bolt loads and are much more efficient structurally than conventional FRP laminates. The first model to get the treatment was the Grand Soleil 45 four to five years ago. Grand Soleil's hulls now all include Airex-foam cores above the waterline too.

All the models, regardless of designer, have interior layouts by Patrick Roséo — an independent stylist who works almost exclusively with Grand Soleil. The usual cabin and specification options are available. Mahogany is the standard veneer choice throughout the range, although teak is also available as a charged option.

Grand Soleil is based in the town of Forli, which is some 40 miles (65km) southeast of Bologna. It has two facilities on industrial estates there that are about a kilometre apart.

All the lamination work is handled at what used to be the company's HQ. It still uses wet lay-up techniques. It says it has been



6 Grand Soleil's other lamination hall. It concentrates on hulls and internal mouldings. Reichhold supplies the gelcoats and DSM the resins — the first layer is Atlac vinylester and subsequent layers are Synolite 'orthos'. The hull tool in the background is for the Grand Soleil 50. **7 & 8** Split moulds are preferred. Lever clamps bring the two hull halves together, but screw mechanisms tighten things up. A third section of the same tool produces the transom. Laminating this way means a recessed cove-line can be moulded in. The cove-lines on white hulls are blue and for blue hulls they're gold. Incidentally, the cove-line and boot-tops are painted; they're not tapes. Although dark-blue hull options run throughout the range, 90 per cent of its clients opt for white. **9, 10 & 11** All hulls are cored with Airex foams, 80kg/m³ or 100kg/m³ depending on the model. Vacuum bagging consolidates the sandwiches.



12, 13 & 14 Laminated in and neatly finished, galvanised steel frames reinforce all Grand Soleil hulls, save for the Grand Soleil 56. The first to get the treatment was the four-to-five-year-old Grand Soleil 45. Those frames and their 'wings' resolve chain-plate, mast-step and keel-bolt loads. It is much more efficient structurally than a conventional FRP laminate. All the internal hull surfaces that are visible or could be accessed from inside the boat are painted with this brown gelcoat, which is believed to contrast nicely with the joinery veneers. **15** The deck lamination area: note the MVP resin-mixing equipment. **16, 17, 18 & 19** Transoms are laminated separately. While still in the tool they are clamped into place at the back of the main hull tooling assembly. They are then laminated into place. The resulting joint is very neat and requires minimal dressing. Much of the flash can be broken off between the fingers.



looking at infusion, but thus far has not committed owing to some of the aesthetic compromises it believes would be necessary. The company line on the matter is that it prefers to get its models designed for client appeal rather than for any particular production process. Key considerations for any Grand Soleil model are safety, performance and aesthetics — each with equal weight.

The main Grand Soleil facility on Via Gramadora was purpose-built five years ago. It handles all fit-out work and includes the administrative offices for both Grand Soleil and ISB. Presently one flexible production line handles all of the models, save for the largest one. There are 17 fit-out stations on the line currently and the line moves every 12 hours at the moment. The fit-out teams stay put.

Only the flagship Grand Soleil 56 is built off the line. But then it is really a semi-custom model. Only six or so are currently built a year. One area off the end of the production line is given over to the 56. The joinery that goes into that one is a more traditional affair, meaning the interior is built in the boat rather than put together from sub-assemblies.

Unlike most Italian boatbuilders,





20 The inside of the transom is painted. Internal hull surfaces visible from external lockers are painted white. **21** A finished deck moulding for a Grand Soleil 43, comprising assembled deck and headlining mouldings, awaits the move to the fit-out hall. Note wiring looms and trunking are already installed at this stage. **22 & 23** Laminating headlinings and decks. These are for a Grand Soleil 45. **24** Decks and headlining are glued together in the lamination hall. **25, 26 & 27** Note the ply strips between deck and headlinings. All procedures are clearly documented for the workers. Note the pictures incorporated. These communicate the process and any pitfalls very effectively.

Grand Soleil subcontracts very little. Indeed, it handles just about everything in-house, save for steel work, cushions, keels, rudders and all the usual bought-in materials and equipment. Like most bigger boatbuilders these days, Grand Soleil's supplier list is being purposely kept to a minimum, as that helps maximise supplier relationships and minimises prices and administration. Grand Soleil and Dufour's purchasing functions have been centralised;

everything is now co-ordinated by a single purchasing and supply-chain manager at the French yard. Most of the Grand Soleil models use Volvo Penta diesels, although the 56s get Yanmar installations. Sparcraft supplies all the aluminium-mast requirements, which actually applies to most delivered boats. But there is always the option of carbon alternatives, usually from Hall Spars. Facnor headsail furlers

are fitted as standard and rigging matters are taken care of by Navtec. Solimar steering, Lewmar deck hatches, and Harken winches and deck hardware are other favourites. At the moment the whole Grand Soleil operation employs 238 people — 82 in the lamination area, 107 in the assembly plant and 49 in the joinery department. The working week is 37.5 hours, seven hours a day, with flexible Saturday working. The gross basic



28 & 29 The joinery shop benefits from a number of CNC routers. **30** A sprayhood moulding that includes companionway hatch framing for a Grand Soleil 56. **31** Plywood divides the lazarette of this new Grand Soleil 40, either side of the rudderstock. Note the holes for various wiring and trunking. **32** Bulkheads and doors 'ready to go'. Mahogany is the standard veneer choice throughout the range; teak is optional. **33** As much of the interior as possible is put together in modules that can be craned into position. **34** Wooden-parts store. **35** Note the way the edges of this bulkhead have been stripped bare to provide a key when they are glassed into position. **36 & 37** Hulls are carried down the assembly line on cradles. The line moves under power every 12 hours or so. The forklift truck shunts the empty steel cradles from the end of the line back to the start. There are no wheels on them. They just slide over the concrete — noisy, but efficient. **38 & 39** Most of the upholstery is handled in-house.

labour rate is €14 per hour, which is not far off the European average in this industry.

Currently Grand Soleil is pushing capacity to the max, building around 180-190 boats a year. It delivered 182 in its 2005/06 year and should build a few more this year. Certainly the present situation is a far cry from 1996/97, when it was doing nearer 35 yachts a year. But then the early to mid-1990s were something of a low point in the company's history. It was forced to seek insolvency protection from its

creditors back in 1992 when the recession of the early 1990s got the better of it. Previously, at the end of the 1980s, the yard employed over 100 people in two factories in Crespellano and at its peak produced around 120 boats a year for a peak turnover of 30 billion Italian lire.

Rhône Capital acquired a 70 per cent stake just over a year ago in the Italian yard's holding company ISB, which for a number of years now has also owned Dufour, France's second-largest sailing cruiser builder and one of the world's

top five mainstream players. Standing for 'International Sailing Boats', ISB is the first foray into the marine sector for Rhône Capital, a mid-market private-equity firm with offices in London, Paris and New York. Thus far it is said to have been very pleased with ISB developments, all of which are geared to leveraging both brands to maximum effect over the course of the next few years.

Further ISB acquisitions are not ruled out either. The success of the Ferretti Group ➔



40 Hull fit-out begins. Note most Grand Soleils now have Volvo Penta engines, although the 56 still gets Yanmars. **41 & 42** Substantial and fairly complex jigs are used to position bulkheads and joinery sub-assemblies. **43** Most hull-bulkhead joints are glassed; the only ones that aren't are those round head-shower-rooms. Those that are glassed in get the resin and mat treatment on both sides. **44** Stern plumbing. **45** Decks are put on as late as possible. **46** Here's a neat water tank installation aboard a Grand Soleil 50. **47** Interior modules and their jigs are craned into position.

multi-brand model has not escaped those concerned with ISB's strategic development.

Private-equity investment is never just about companies. Fund management is also about investing in people, the right people. Beyond Rhône's majority stake, the remainder of the shares are spread among various ISB top management in France and Italy.

ISB's managing director, ultimately responsible for all Dufour and Grand Soleil activities, is Stefano Mion, who joined the operation in 2003, two years before Rhône

appearing on the scene. Prior to ISB, Mion, a professional engineer, had not been involved in the marine industry, but his industrial track record is impressive. He previously had a long spell with Italian supercar builder Lamborghini.

Mion has Agostino Gioia, formerly of Italian gun specialist Beretta and now Grand Soleil's CEO, and Jean-Louis Delhumeau, Dufour's equally experienced CEO, reporting to him. The sales functions of both French and Italian companies are in the hands of ISB sales director Paul Wuyts, who has 30 years' experience

managing dealer networks first for Etap and then Bénéteau.

Similarly, both brands' marketing is now in the hands of one man — Andrea Giacobbe. He comes to the company from outside the marine industry, but brings with him a wealth of high-level marketing experience working with brands such as Apple, Ford, Nissan, IBM and BP. Previously he has worked for big league agencies such as the Ogilvy Group and TBWA. On board since September, it is Giacobbe that is tasked with implementing sound brand ➡



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60, 61, 62, 63 & 64 Hull-deck joints are 'screwed and glued'. The maximum bonding flange is claimed to be 80mm and the minimum 65mm, so the structural bonding adhesive used has plenty of surface to bite into. Screws are used every 25cm or so. **65** The busy line currently copes with around 180-plus boats a year, which is up from 150 or so a year ago. And it still only works the one shift. Indeed, Grand Soleil believes it could crank the line-up to cope with 220 boats a year before resorting to two-shift system. But it does depend on the product mix to a certain extent too. **66 & 67** Teak decks are vacuumed down. This one is for a Grand Soleil 37 deck. Teak decks are only standard-fits on the 56.

same growth percentage as it accurately forecast for 2005/06.

One area where there is certainly plenty of scope for Grand Soleil improvement is in export markets. Amazingly, the domestic and export split is currently not far off 50:50, a situation into which can be read two obvious positives: one, that Grand Soleil is doing exceptionally well in its home market; and two, that its export business must have plenty of potential

as regards future growth. In all, Grand Soleil has around 20-21 dealers around the world. The best export territories are presently France, Spain, the UK and Scandinavia.

Much work is also being put into bolstering dealer support and after-sales service, which has always been one of Grand Soleil's great strengths. Around 3,000 Grand Soleils have been built since the yard was first established by Giuseppe Giuliani back in 1973 and repeat

business accounts for something like 30 per cent of present sales.

Several initiatives are intended to reinforce such perceptions. For instance, a new 'owner's club' initiative will soon help to enhance the Grand Soleil owner experience still further.

On the product-development front, a few surprises are in store too. The next new model will be the Grand Soleil 53, the first of which should launch in August 2007 in time to



68 A deck aperture for the mast. **69** Electrical installation work is also impressive. **70 & 71** A Grand Soleil 43 cockpit: check out the transom lockers' rubber seal and stops. The locker lids are produced using RTM (resin transfer) techniques, which of course is a two-part, closed-mould process that allows parts to be produced with attractive finishes on both sides. **72** Note the 'pinked' edges to the bed boards. They provide precise location and lock together easily. And of course they are equally easy to lift up — for example, for access to batteries. **73** Some of the plumbing is particularly neat for a production builder. **74** A finished head-shower compartment; Grand Soleil currently favours Jabsco heads.

premiere at one of the Med's key autumn shows. That model will be the first Grand Soleil to come from the Luca Brenta Yacht Design studio, still best known for its work with Wally and in the superyacht arena. Brenta and his team will give the 53 a similar look to the present portfolio, while taking things to the next level in terms of modernity and style. It will include, for instance, uncluttered decks and in-boom furling.

Also new for this year is Grand Soleil's return to the Grand Prix race scene. An all-new carbon prepreg Botin & Carkeek-design Grand Soleil 42ORC will arrive on the scene in time for the 2007 season. Seven of these are currently in build, but not at the main Grand Soleil facilities. The company has always used contract-building partners for these sorts of projects and not necessarily ones close to home. For instance, King Marine in Argentina is

building the first seven of the 42ORC models. High-profile events such as the Copa del Rey in Palma de Mallorca this summer will be key.

Although relatively small business in comparison to the mainstream cruising lines, these race models return a healthy profit and are proving well worthwhile in terms of product development and marketing. Previous race models have included the Grand Soleil 40R, 42R, 44R and 56R.



75. 76. 77 & 78 There are two stations on the line for attaching keels. The keels are located using jigs and hulls are leveled to the waterline using jacks at each cradle corner. The keels are aligned with the help of laser-sighting equipment. **79 & 80** The hardstanding at the front of Grand Soleil's Forlì plant: note the outdoor finishing area in the canvas walled and roof building at the end. The main assembly hall on the site will soon be lengthened to provide extra space for this function, so everything will eventually be handled under cover of the main building. **81** A major plant expansion is currently underway. These new halls will be ready for spring 2007. They will accommodate a completely new joinery shop and model-development areas. More land adjoining this site is available for further expansion too. **82** Such is the flexibility of the Grand Soleil line that it can accommodate the odd strange request. Check out this old Grand Soleil 43 model that went down the line in December. It is destined for a customer insistent that he wanted an identical new version of his old boat and not the latest Grand Soleil 43 replacement. Note the old-fashioned rake to transom and the bold strip along the coachroof. **83** The all-new Grand Soleil 40, on display at Paris's Salon Nautique 2006 in December. **84** The Grand Soleil logo represents a 'dp' — which stands for Cantieri del Pardo. **85** The hull of the new Luca Brenta-designed Grand Soleil 53 is soon to move into the fit-out area, although the first one or two will be built off line. A 3D scanner was used to map the precise internal shape of this first hull, the data from which will be used for the interior design process and subsequently the CNC cutting of joinery panels. Six-and-a-half staff are said to be involved permanently with this prototyping work — two handling time and methods, two doing prototyping joinery and two-and-a-half doing deck layouts.

Beyond that, we could well see Grand Soleil move beyond its existing 11.3m-17m (37ft-56ft) cruiser offerings, although nothing more is being said on that score for the moment. All we can be fairly confident about is that, should the present envelope be expanded much beyond existing limits, some alternative production arrangements will probably need to be made.

Certainly smaller boats would be difficult to build cost-effectively in the present plant. And bigger models wouldn't be suitable for the plant's production line either. Grand Soleil did

offer a 19.5m (64ft) model up until a few years ago — the Maxi One — and there has been serious consideration given to a replacement of the existing flagship 56 and of something bigger still.

Indeed, significant plant expansion work is already underway on the main site, ready hopefully for spring 2007. Among other things it will accommodate a completely new joinery shop and model-development areas.

The main assembly hall will also be lengthened to provide extra fit-out stations

and more space for finishing, which currently takes place outside, albeit under a canvas roof. All of this additional space should boost capacity of the present model-mix as high as 220 boats per year or, say, one per working day of the year.

And beyond that, more land next door is earmarked for a future development phases.

So, all in all, we can expect to see the profile of this higher-end performance sailing cruiser builder increasingly raised over the months and years ahead.