

ON TEST SOLARIS 50

FACTS

Test Editor Toby Hodges

- ▶ Where we tested: Monfalcone, near Trieste in the Adriatic Sea
- ▶ Conditions: light: winds from 3-14 knots over calm water
- ▶ Model: upgraded sails and carbon rig, standard three-cabin, two-heads layout, but finished in whitewashed oak



Photos by Paul Wyeth

When style meets substance

This new Italian model aims to be a modern-day Swan, but does she have more than catwalk style? Toby Hodges finds out



Production yachts are rarely referred to as trendsetters. Like a mainstream saloon car, their primary goal is to offer maximum potential value, rather than seek admiring glances. So if asked to name a catwalk model in the world most of us inhabit – that is a monohull, built in series from a mould – how would you answer?

For decades the staple response could have been Swan. But now that the Finnish firm is more focused on large yachts and superyachts than on everyman performance cruisers, who can rival it for style and quality?

For me, the most up-to-date performance cruiser today – a modern-day Swan if you will – is the Solaris 50.

With deck lines seemingly drawn with a set square, however, the Solaris doesn't emulate the world-girdling Frers-designed Swans of old. But there is a link: the designer of the Solaris, Argentinian Javier Soto Acebal, 56, worked under German Frers for 11 years, and has a gift for contemporary aesthetics.

Among the features that give the Solaris 50 her trendsetting looks and status is a dreadnought bow and chines with inverted flare. But does the Solaris

have the engineering and build quality to match her good looks? We sailed her in the Adriatic to find out.

Italian style

On arriving in Aquileia, near Trieste, the home of the 40-year-old Solaris yard, I admit to being slightly concerned. I have tested a series of stylish Mediterranean designs recently and it worries me when practicality plays second fiddle to looks. Would that be the case with the Solaris?

She lay alongside, shiny and inviting at only one week old, the epitome of cool. The Solaris 50 makes any surrounding vessels instantly appear very ordinary.

Once out of the harbour and under sail, we were soon matching or even exceeding the true wind speed of 6-9 knots, close reaching (up to 40-45° apparent) under full main and Code 0. The Solaris was a true delight, almost sailing herself, and she was remarkably slippery despite a wide beam carried so far aft.

The Solaris has a very generous sailplan, including a powerful, roached main so she heels quickly onto the hull chine, which starts softly from amidships and gets progressively more pronounced. But then she tends to stay comfortably at

▲ **Above: view from the helm, where the remarkably clean decks are apparent**

the same heel angle. The result is that she feels as if she is tracking on rails.

The Solaris 50 is obviously set up to excel in light winds, and the test boat had an optional carbon rig and fancy Millenium film-on-film sails. During our second day, for example, we were still able to slip along in conditions when it would barely be worth setting canvas on most cruising yachts, and boat speed was consistently quicker by a knot than the 3-5 knot zephyrs.

The yacht is particularly rewarding to sail under self-tacking jib, and we achieved up to 27° to the apparent wind (40-43°T). The flat water was much to her liking, and we hit 9.5 knots close reaching in 12.5 knots.

She's delightful on the helm, well-balanced and responsive, and there's a direct sensation from the deep, narrow rudder. The Solaris 50 makes you want to throw her about off wind in a breeze. We did sail her downwind under gennaker, but only in a dying breeze. Even then, she only needed heating up a little to show off her reserves of power and acceleration.

Sailing short-handed

This is an easy yacht to sail short-handed, thanks to the combination of a self-tacking jib and a single-point



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Solaris today

Solaris has changed significantly since my last visit in 2008. Gone are the refits of yesteryear. The yard has developed a full assembly line and launched a new model every year since. Some 20 new yachts were built last year, including five of the new 58, and managing director Michele Ricci says he wants to increase production to 28 a year.

Solaris has facilities to build nearly everything on site and produces a full mock-up for every new model. The hull and deck of the 50 are built using vacuum-infused vinylester E-Glass with an Airex core. Composite bulkheads

are specified for the mast and forward watertight bulkheads, and all bulkheads are laminated (not glued) to the hull and deck for rigidity. Keels are recessed into the hull, with just 25cm between bolts.

Solaris has created a full production range from 60ft down to 37ft, while retaining its larger custom range. The Doug Peterson-designed Solaris 72 is an example of the latter, and is one of most seaworthy yachts I've been aboard.

Efficiencies in production mean the 50 can be offered at a competitive price. The Solaris sits neatly between X-Yachts' Xp and Xc ranges, having a similar base price to the Xp50.

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- 1 The anchor arm appears a little awkward considering the attention lavished on aesthetics elsewhere, but it does serve to keep the ground tackle clear of that showpiece stem. A retractable arm is optional.
- 2 The sail locker is large (and long) enough to be used as an optional crew cabin. The test boat's housed a Code 0 and gennaker and still left room to stand.
- 3 There is very little to hold onto when going forward – equally, not much to trip over either.
- 4 The Solaris 50 has deck stowage aplenty, but gas locker space is minimal.
- 5 There is dedicated liferaft stowage abaft the companionway entrance.
- 6 It's an impressive feat to squeeze a (beam-wide) tender garage aft on a sleek 50-footer. Its restrictive height means a RIB needs to be deflated and the outboard removed.
- 7 Like most modern beamy, open-transom designs, the Solaris helmsman's position could feel exposed if the boat were rolling in big seas.



Trendsetting features

The Solaris 50 is the first production yacht to use a dreadnought bow and chined quarters with inverted flare. Solaris insists these have been adopted for hydro dynamic gains. Designer Javier Soto Acebal explains the benefits:



A. Inverted flare: “We want to be aggressive and modern with a wide stern at deck level in the after zone. This helps move the helmsman athwartships, improving the view of sails and sea. I hate it when you have to extend your neck to see the telltales and the coming waves . . .”

B. Chines: “Chines on these cruising boats are higher in relation to racing boats with lower Disp/LWL ratios. We do not want them to disturb water unnecessarily, but to increase reaching stability at high speeds and when beating at heel. The chines allow you to draw a stern

from three points, with a very circular, or elliptical, low wetted area below the chine.”
C. Dreadnought bow: “Once the J measurement is fixed, we can reduce the redundant bow forward at deck level for less weight and

windage. Keeping the knuckle forward (inverted bow) creates a longer waterline, while moving the bow forward ‘shoulders’ the volume in the 20 per cent forward zone (close to water level). This helps counteract stern volume, or allows us to increase it for the same balance.”

mainsheet. The latter is a neat set-up that leads around a turning block on deck, inside the boom end and back aft under the deck to a pair of winches forward of the twin helms.
That there is no option for a traveller reflects the clean deck aesthetic, and is an indication that Solaris thinks typical owners will want to sail short-handed.

Tidy cockpit

I particularly liked the area forward of the wheel pedestals where you can sit, helm and trim, thanks to tidy line leads to two winches each side. The mainsheet on the test boat was led to the inboard winches, but some may prefer to swap leads with the jib sheet to allow the powerhouse main to be trimmed while steering.
It is when heeled and helming that you fully appreciate the benefits of this immaculately clean deck, as there is nothing to interrupt the view forward.
Take the windward wheel and you are in a perfect position to admire 47ft of pristine

grey-caulked teak. And because of the yacht's generous beam aft, this position gives a good view of the telltales from both sides, too.
While she is a remarkably pleasant yacht to helm, I can't say that she is so comfortable for the crew. With just a short bench coaming to support the back on the cockpit benches, these are really only practical for lounging to leeward while sailing. Cushions are available with higher backrest supports, and a sprayhood that stows flush into the coachroof will help provide shelter on passage. The standard fixed table would also aid bracing.
Conversely, a benefit of the low coamings is the ease with which you can get around the boat. Other than negotiating five companionway steps to get down below, very little clambering is needed on this boat. There is an easy transition from cockpit to side decks, which encourages the maximum use of the deck when not heeling. That the side decks run all the way aft to the transom with no

▲ **Above: heeled on a chine, sailing offwind under kite, the Solaris is a delight. Note the inverted flare to the aft quarters**

scupper means it may be a damp seat for the helmsman in a swell, however.
The reverse bow shape of the Solaris 50 also suggests that she may be a wet boat in head seas. However, she has a high, voluminous stem, with plenty of reserve buoyancy. Together with a relatively soft, vee shape below the waterline, she should not slam in waves.
In answer to my worry that this might be a wet boat, designer Javier Soto Acebal comments: “The bow is high, so I foresee this will not be a big concern. Widening the stem increases buoyancy, and the upper flare of the following sections helps with the spray, too.” (See Acebal's thoughts on design features in the panel, left).
Showroom smart
The exterior style and build quality of the Solaris is replicated down below. The interior is showroom smart and provides an air of luxury.
She seems well-considered proportionally, and all areas feel



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Saloon The Solaris 50 has some neat design features to maximise space. The test boat had an outboard-facing chart table option – a conventional navstation is also offered – which helps create a greater impression of space. This has a stool below and views through the hull window. Another space-saving trick is to eliminate cushioned backrests on the forward and aft table seats, allowing the port berth to be used as a chaise-longue. The seating is nicely upholstered and the cushions have been tailor-made to encourage you into the most comfortable seated position.



Forward cabin A benefit of the subtle sheer line that rises from a low stern to a tall stem is the space in this forward cabin, particularly the headroom. The cabin has abundant stowage and is tastefully finished, with panels around the windows and indirect lights providing a soft effect. The heads, which has clear-coat carbon surfaces, has a separate shower with bi-fold doors.

relatively spacious. That said, the interior is quite open so a handrail along the coachroof headlining would help when moving from companionway to saloon. The immaculate headlining, interspersed with LED downlights, is an example of Solaris's detailed finish quality. Although executed to a high standard, the abundance of bleached-look joiner work on the test boat, as specified by the owner, created quite a cold, sterile impression. A warmer timber choice might perhaps bring it more to life. Considering the generous space

allocated to sail locker and tender garage, it is unsurprising that the Solaris 50's layout is confined to a typical three-cabin/two-heads configuration. Alternative options comprise a forward cabin with offset berth and heads, a traditional forward-facing navstation and a crew cabin instead of the sail locker. Rather surprisingly, there is no dedicated space below for a generator – this would need to be housed in the tender garage. And if I were to nitpick, I'd like to see soft-closing mechanisms on all lockers and wardrobes lit and ventilated.



Heads The heads is well fitted-out with reasonable stowage and a separate shower. The standout feature is the wet weather locker within the shower, which drains down to the shower tray.



Galley The well-appointed C-shaped galley is generous in size. Stowage allocation is practical, including useful (optional) fridge drawers to complement the standard lift-top cold stowage. A retaining strap would be required to work at the stove on port tack.

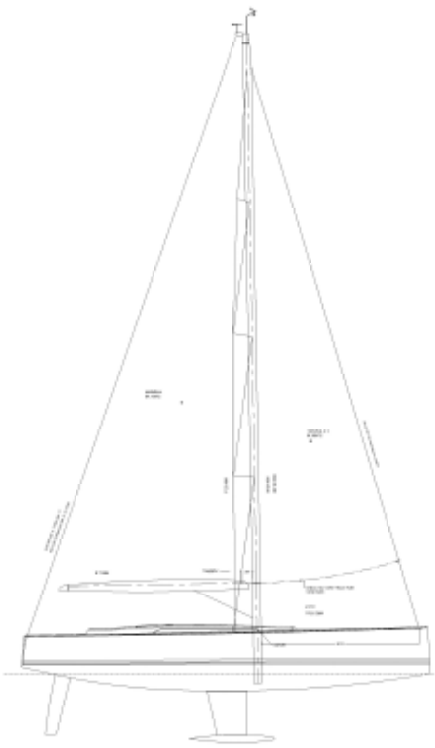


Aft cabins The option for a convertible twin in the port cabin is a useful one that allows passage/race crew, children or singles to share. Aft cabins can often feel bland and claustrophobic, yet these are neither, providing plenty of natural light, space and stowage.

DATA SOLARIS 50

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	15.40m	50ft 6in
LWL	14.25m	46ft 9in
Beam (max)	4.55m	14ft 11in
Draught	2.80m	9ft 2in
Disp (lightship)	14,200kg	31,305lb
Ballast	4,900kg	10,803lb
Sail area (100% foretriangle)	151m ²	1,631ft ²
Berths	6	
Engine	Volvo Penta 55hp s/drive. Gori overdrive	
Water	500lt	110gal
Fuel	300lt	66gal
Sail area:disp	26.3	
Disp:LWL	137	
Price ex VAT:	€480,000 (test boat €662,500)	
Designed by:	Javier Soto Acebal	
www.solarisyachts.com		



Conclusion The Solaris 50 is the melodious meeting of South American design flare with Italian styling. Does she have the substance to match her style? The quality of build and finish is excellent. She has a feeling of luxury, is an absolute pleasure to helm and she has engineering to equal her looks.

This is the second excellent new Italian yacht I've sailed recently – the other was the Italia Yachts 15.98 – and the latter shares that shortcoming of shallow benches in an exposed cockpit. But just how much time would you spend trying to sit on a windward cockpit bench while sailing to windward? Owners of the modern Solaris production range predominantly sail in the Mediterranean, where it's about enjoying the conditions, not sheltering from them. Yes, she heels easily, but strap the crew in and enjoy the ride, because this is where she excels. The flat deck and accessible bathing platform make so much more sense when the majority of sailing time is spent in pleasant conditions, rather than parting ocean swells. But note that the Solaris 50 is nonetheless a moderate displacement performance cruiser, with plenty of hull below the waterline, and not some lightweight flyer. The Solaris 50 is a bona fide trendsetter. She is sexy, elegant and sophisticated, and, to my mind, the most stylish Mediterranean production yacht to date.

