

## MASTER OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

**The same instincts that make a winning sailor make a winning boatbuilder, says Eric Bruneel--a man who knows a thing or two about both**

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By Dieter Loibner [More articles by this author](#)

**If an executive has worked 20 years for one employer and shown a good hand for the business, his decision to take a well-earned sabbatical shouldn't surprise anyone.** And if he used that time to write a memoir or embark on a leisurely cruise, it would all seem normal enough. These

are the things that bring life into focus. What's rare, though, is the businessman who would take a leave to build a stripped-out raceboat and set off alone, upwind, against the gales of the North Atlantic, as Eric Bruneel recently did. Sailing a purpose-built trimaran in the 2004 Singlehanded Transat race, the 46-year-old managing director of Fountaine Pajot didn't merely complete the passage from England to Boston; on his first attempt, he won his class and set a new transatlantic record for 50-foot multihulls, slicing more than two days off the existing mark.



Billy Black

Bruneel's closest competitor in that race was Rich Wilson, who holds the nonstop record from Hong Kong to New York. He trailed Bruneel into Boston by 23 hours. "Eric had an interesting and well-prepared boat," Wilson said of his rival. "He made good decisions and showed a lot of guts."

Bruneel's success in that race may not have brought him the kind of singlehander stardom enjoyed by his countrymen Michel Desjoyeux, Vincent Riou, Jean LeCam, Bruno Peyron, or Yves Parlier, but that wasn't the point. And while Bruneel's talent for marketing has surely had something to do with making Fountaine Pajot the most prolific builder of cruising catamarans in the world, he seems to have withheld that talent from promoting his own exploits. What's clear, though, is that the same instincts that drive the disciplined sailor deeply inform the boats his company builds.

### Going Big, Going Small

Last winter, in the balmy southeasterlies that travel across the Gulf Stream from the Bahamas and into Biscayne Bay, I sailed with Bruneel aboard the Eleuthera 60, Fountaine Pajot's newest flagship. As I saw from the scale of the spacious cat and from several Transat accounts, Bruneel is a man who knows when to go big and when to go small.

"This is the biggest fiberglass structure in the world that's resin infused in one shot," Bruneel said of the hull we were standing on. At 60 feet overall length, the Eleuthera is a symbol for how the company and the boats have grown since Fountaine Pajot went into business nearly three decades ago.

Founded in 1976 by Jean-François Fountaine and Yves Pajot (brother of America's Cup challenger Marc), the Fountaine Pajot yard near La Rochelle, France, initially built racing dinghies: 505s, 470s, and 420s, monohulls all. From there, the yard graduated into IOR Half-Tonners, which twice won the prestigious Figaro solo race. Fountaine Pajot's entrée into the multihull arena came in 1981, when the yard built Royale, a 60-foot offshore racing trimaran for Loïc Caradec. The company commenced its run of production cats in 1983 with the launch of the first Louisiane, a 37-foot cruising cat of foam-core-sandwich construction.

Eric Bruneel, who holds a degree in accounting, joined the company in 1983, bringing with him the idea for a day-cruising catamaran with simple accommodations that he'd designed with his friend Gildas Cornic; they called it the Corneel 26. That boat went on to earn a *Bateaux* magazine nomination as boat of the year.

From those beginnings, Fountaine Pajot's growth through the years has been steady. In 2004, the company employed approximately 400 craftsmen, delivered some 140 boats (ranging from 34 to 75 feet), and reported revenues of 38.5 million euros.

Yet, for all that, it was arguably going small that put Bruneel on the Transat podium. Following the adage that races can be won at the finish but lost before the start, he hedged his bets early. First, he gathered weather data with meteorologist Jean-Yves Bernot--just as the stormy 2002 Route du Rhum race was under way and many of its 60-foot multihulls were forced to retire, several having dismasted or capsized.

"I knew that the Singlehanded Transat was going to be sailed mostly upwind in rough conditions," said Bruneel, "so I decided to remain conservative by choosing a smaller rig that saved weight and was easier on the skipper with fewer sail changes. We calculated the trade-off in lost sail area and performance and found that it would be less than one day."

As it turned out, the 2004 Transat was a bruising affair that took the competitors farther north than any other race had in the past. Consistent 50-knot winds and four fronts battered the 33-boat fleet. The long list of Did Not Finishers included some of the best-known names in solo ocean racing. Bernard Stamm's *Cheminées Poujoulat-Amor Lux* lost her keel and capsized; Jean-Pierre Dick's *Virbac* capsized and dismasted; Vincent Riou's *PRB* lost the stick and retired; Dominique Wavre's *Temenos* was knocked down twice.

Meanwhile, Bruneel, with his small rig, was sitting pretty. And he made the most of it, keeping his spartan *Trilogic* moving fast toward Boston,

while others fought for survival or repaired the damage their boats had sustained. Because his craft was manageable, Bruneel was able to spend hours down below, hunched over a screen, analyzing weather patterns and planning his next tactical move.

"His decision to use a shorter rig was courageous," Wilson said, "but absolutely correct in terms of seamanship."

#### **Double-Digit Fun**

On each day of last February's Miami boat show, between 500 and 600 visitors signed the guest book to board the Eleuthera 60. They were drawn by the boat's impressive size and by the striking appearance that was shaped by Berret-Racoupeau Yacht Design: oval hull ports, round skylights, a large cockpit with teak sole, and a banquet-sized dinner table.

"We asked Berret-Racoupeau to come up with a bigger boat with a large, comfortable cockpit that accommodates different groups of people who do different things at the same time," Bruneel said. "Those who sail shouldn't interfere with lunch and vice versa."

Most of the crowd had to wait to get a close-up look, but once aboard, they fanned out on deck, turning winches, hopping on the helm seat, or gazing up the 72-foot mast. Below, they opened cupboards and drawers, ran their fingers along the douka-wood surfaces, tried out the plush island berth in the owner's cabin, and estimated the contents that the huge stainless-steel fridge/freezer could hold. It didn't take much fantasy to imagine a rollicking party on this boat, accompanied by thumping rhythms, cold drinks, and exotic food.

A few days after the boat show, I joined Bruneel and a couple of others for an overnighter on Biscayne Bay. The conditions were moderate to windy, ideal for some well-paced fun on a big cat. Bruneel left the helm to others yet remained tacitly in charge, even as he trimmed sails or fixed a batten. For me, operating the Eleuthera from the helm station to starboard of the saloon's aft bulkhead was a treat because of the 360-degree visibility and the lack of clutter. The big cat answered her rudders willingly, a trait that's promoted by the hulls' rockered shape and by short keels. The raked windshield offered protection from wind and spray yet didn't hinder communication with the foredeck. Inside the saloon, the forward-facing nav station to port can be equipped with a remote for the autopilot.

Under main and engine, we headed for the outer Cape Florida Channel, where the depth would give us room to maneuver. As soon as the dangerous shoals lay astern and we bore off on a broad reach, Bruneel suggested the screecher. It was blowing in the low 20s, and he thought that might be a good call to wake everyone up. With the two Yanmar 100-horsepower diesels shut down, Bruneel--working with Philippe Guillemin and Stephane Williamson, partners in Willmar USA, one of four U.S. importers of Fountaine Pajot catamarans--unleashed the 1,300-square-foot headsail. Within seconds, it caught the breeze and sent the 40,000-pound vessel driving across the waves, which grew longer as the sea deepened to indigo. A two-speed electric Harken winch on the cabintop eased the maneuver as we steered to 110-degrees apparent and sheeted her in.

Throughout our sail the saloon was quiet, and the objects on the table--glass, pencil, notepad, camera--resembled a still-life painting by Giorgio Morandi that freezes time and space. No squeaking, creaking, or pounding disturbed the serenity, but a glance out the portlights showed the silhouette of Miami's towering skyline gliding past a few miles to the west. It was a perfect deceit. The Eleuthera, christened with the Greek word for freedom and in homage to the island that now lay tantalizingly close, just a day's sail to the east, disguised the rate of progress with her tranquility.

As my mates took turns goosing the boat and celebrated as the speedo reached double digits, I volunteered for the catbird seat forward, hoping for a lukewarm shower from the bow wave. Alas, I was disappointed. More than six feet of freeboard put me out of Poseidon's reach. Watching smaller craft in the vicinity buck and bounce, their occupants clad in foul-weather gear and holding fast, reminded me how size impacts the ride.

In all fairness, the boat was closer to light-ship displacement than the 3 tons of kit and topped-off tanks of full-on cruising trim. As such, she flew across the waves. The Eleuthera is entertaining and safe because her layout and wide decks provide a solid platform on which to work. She could be sailed by two, although this might get sporty when the breeze is up. I found three to be ideal because it adds a pair of hands and cuts down on the number of trips from one side to the other.

Meanwhile, Bruneel--peering at the patches of the early sunlight and reading the water to windward--was planning our next move. "Let's jibe and catch some waves," he said. While he and Guillemin dealt with the screecher, Williamson worked the mainsheet. The battens flopped over, and the Eleuthera gathered steam as we headed up and sheeted her home. A set of large waves lifted her sterns, and a quarter turn on the wheel sent her off on a sleigh ride. The numbers on the speedo clicked past 14.5 knots; Bruneel, who isn't a loquacious man, acknowledged them with a nod and a smile.

Near dusk, we threaded our way into Biscayne Channel, past Stiltsville's rickety huts and around a lot of thin water. We were greeted by dolphins that crossed our bows and by jumping stingrays that managed a few feet of air travel before landing with a splat.

When the hook rattled down into 15 feet of water near Cape Florida a few minutes later, it was time to finally enjoy Eleuthera's inside/outside living arrangements that incorporate saloon and cockpit.

Just behind the bar of the U-shaped galley, there's room to prepare food for a large, merry gathering. A four-burner Nardi stove and oven with ventilation hood, a double stainless-steel sink, a bar fridge, and room for a dishwasher echo the entertainment possibilities on this spacious cat. The test boat had a stainless-steel CLD freezer/fridge at the bottom of the steps of the starboard hull. The saloon table seats five on the settee, while the cockpit table clearly met its design brief to accommodate eight to 10 al fresco diners.

Fountaine Pajot produces the Eleuthera in five layout versions, three for owners, two for charter. Our boat featured the so-called Orchestra arrangement, with one owner's stateroom and three guest cabins. In the owner's cabin, the queen-size island berth with a Bultex foam mattress on wooden slats made me forget the comforts of home. Workaholics will be happy to learn that a laptop fits nicely on the cabin's desk, with 110-

volt power outlet nearby. The foldout vanity mirror is built into that same desk.

### Staying Ahead

Conversation with Eric Bruneel inevitably turns to boatbuilding. He built his first boat at the age of 20 and crossed the Atlantic with it a year later. The difference in scale between that project and the Eleuthera could hardly be more impressive. In fact, last winter I visited Fountaine Pajot's factory in Aigrefeuille, near La Rochelle, and saw for myself the Eleuthera's staggering dimensions, even in the earliest stages of construction. The reason for this is that both hulls and the bridgedeck are built as one piece, using vacuum bagging and resin infusion.

"We use isophthalic and orthophthalic resins and multidirectional cloth, which is laid down and secured by a special glue before it's vacuum-bagged and infused with resin," Bruneel said.

This process employs a closed mold and the use of atmospheric pressure to draw resin through the laminate. It's more complex and expensive than the traditional method of laminating a hull by hand in an open mold; however, it has several advantages. It traps the emission of volatile organic compounds and drastically reduces the level of toxic styrene, which eliminates the need for exchanging heated air throughout the laminating shop. The laminate quality remains constant from boat to boat, and the labor and materials are reduced. "This method saves weight and produces a stiff structure," Bruneel said, "but above all, it's cleaner and healthier for the workers and the environment." The 2002 implementation of close-molded construction, beginning with Fountaine Pajot's Lavezzi 40, is still another example of Bruneel's ability to sight down the course and anticipate the shifts. In this case, he's kept a keen eye on European Union regulations and focused on one thing: being prepared.

Since Bruneel became managing director of Fountaine Pajot in 1992, there have been many shifts along the course indeed. Looking ahead, he emphasized the importance of meeting the International Organization for Standardization's coveted ISO 9001:2000 standard, a set of guidelines that measure a company's commitment to quality, process, and resource management; employee competence; product design; processes to resolve customer complaints; and monitoring customer perception about the quality of goods and services delivered. Obtaining this certification is a lengthy and expensive process, but it's a stamp of approval that carries considerable weight. "We are the first French boatyard to obtain ISO 9001," Bruneel said. "It's internationally recognized and shows our customers, many of whom are in manufacturing, how we conduct business."

Like many other businesses, Fountaine Pajot has been compelled to adapt to the global market. Indeed, his company learned some harsh cross-cultural lessons during a 2003 California product-liability court case that resulted in a \$3.25 million judgment against the company. That case has since been settled, but it was bitter while it lasted. "Today more than 1,500 Fountaine Pajot cats are in operation worldwide," said Bruneel, "and our employees, even if they don't speak a foreign language, understand the international nature of our business. They have learned to deal with different cultures and demands."

Asked about the course he's charted for Fountaine Pajot, Bruneel said he plans to double the company's revenue over the next five years. He'll focus on specific market segments for production boats above and below 500,000 euros and on such custom projects as fast ferries and the buoy tenders for the America's Cup 2007.

To him, managing growth and improving processes are survival strategies in a time when cost control and stringent environmental regulations are transforming the industry.

"It's going to be difficult to be small," Bruneel predicted.

### The Artist's Touch

The layout arrangements within Fountaine Pajot's lines carry such names as Duo, Maestro, Concerto, and the aforementioned Orchestra--names to which Bruneel is partial. Landlocked in Lyon, near the center of France, Bruneel's parents instilled in him a love of the outdoors and an interest in music. They sent him to a local conservatory, where he refined his skills as a flute player and recorded with the school orchestra. He still plays piano whenever he gets the chance, and he arranged to have Didier Lockwood, a renowned jazz violinist, perform at the christening ceremony for the first Eleuthera.

As any musician knows, a performance such as the one he delivered in last year's Transat deserves an encore. What will be Bruneel's? At press time, he was preparing for the 2005 Fastnet race and the 2006 Route du Rhum. "We'll take the same approach," he says. "The RdR starts in November in St.-Malo and later hooks into the trades, so this, too, will be a windy affair."

While her skipper is scheming and researching his best options, *Trilogic* is earning money in charter for corporate-incentive trips in and around La Rochelle. One challenge for the guests is to break the boat's top speed on record, which stands at 27.2 knots.

Until his next race, Bruneel is tending to the fortunes of Fountaine Pajot. "I love all aspects of the job," he said. "The design, the construction, and the sailing. It's an art, because you are really creating. But it's also like racing. It's a very important and serious race, one you can't afford to lose."

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Dieter Loibner is a CW associate editor.

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**ELEUTHERA 60**

LOA 60' 0" (18.28 m.)  
LWL 53' 6" (16.30 m.)  
Beam 28' 0" (8.57 m.)  
Draft 4' 9" (1.45 m.)  
Sail Area (100%) 1,509 sq. ft. (140 sq. m.)  
Displacement 39,600 lb. (18,000 kg.)  
Bridgedeck Clearance 3' 0" (.9 m.)  
D/L 115  
SA/D 20.74  
Water 227 gal. (860 l.)  
Fuel 158 gal. (600 l.)  
Mast Height (vertical clearance) 78' 9" (24.0 m.)  
Engine Two 75-hp. Yanmars (100 hp. optional)  
Designer Berret-Racoupeau Yacht Design  
Price \$1,200,000

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