

Actualité en France

No. 39 – November 2012

Innovation is the propeller of French water sports



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The French boat industry is a strong exporter, largely due to its innovations, which are these days turned towards promoting environmentally friendly yachting. Its creative imagination also lends itself to furthering the more fanciful end of the yachting market with futuristic prototypes piloted by celebrity sailors.

The French are specialists in unidentified floating objects. They tested the first boat powered by an internal combustion engine (1870), they trialed the first keel boat with a ballast-filled bulb at the end of a fin (1885), they devised the first outboard motor (1892) and they manufactured the first planing hull power boat (1906). Today it is the Hydroptère by inventor Alain Thébault, built in carbon and titanium, with its floating wings that make it glide above the waves, that is stirring the imaginations of lovers of sea... and air! On 31 August this year, the Hydroptère set the record for fastest sailing boat in the world in San Francisco Bay, and the Breton inventor became the new star for the Americans, who nicknamed his revolutionary trimaran the French Flying Carpet! Modern innovations are bringing performance on by leaps and bounds, and the speed records are often in French hands.

It is not only high-flying helmsmen who benefit from the latest technological feats, but all yachting enthusiasts, who now have access to ever lighter and at the same time ever more reliable boats. Indeed boatbuilders are going in for performance whilst giving due consideration to safety. The major work in research and development is in the materials (aluminium, composites, carbon) used in the highly rated wing masts. Not to mention the constant improvements being made to the electronics and computer systems that go into the equipment.

High-tech innovations today are very often aimed at making sailing as compatible with sustainable development as possible, like the famous Hydroptère, 100 % ecological and without an engine. Whether individually built or mass-produced, new French yachts are designed to be environmentally friendly. Their hulls are made of polyester, which enables the weight of the boat to be reduced, saving energy. They are equipped with electrical or hybrid propulsion systems or photovoltaic panels.

Boatyards are implementing varnishing techniques without polyurethane, using non-polluting materials (resins with low emissions of volatile organic compounds) and are developing new processes such as low-pressure injection moulding. Boatbuilders use low-emission moulding methods in the construction of hulls, decks and parts.

There are many initiatives aimed at promoting ecological water sports. Among others, the French Federation of nautical industries issues a “blue label” to boats and equipment that respect the environment and holds a “blue boat” competition aimed at encouraging innovations in clean design and manufacture. As part of its “Future Investments” operation, the French Agency for energy management and development launched a call for expressions of interest for its “Green Ship of the Future” project.



These assets are enabling businesses to weather the storms engendered by the economic crisis, by making themselves stand out from the crowd. The industry is diversified, comprising both Bénéteau, world leader in sailing boats - covering the entire market for single-hulls and catamarans - as well as myriad smaller specialised boatyards. The flagship of the national water sports industry, sailing boats represent 60 % of France’s pleasure boat production. Boatbuilders have also managed to make the most of their technical expertise to develop a prosperous powerboat sector, placing the country fourth in the production of motorboats. France is also world number one in the production of inflatables and board sports equipment.

The domestic market is holding up better than in other countries and exports, which represent nearly 70 % of the sector’s turnover, remain strong. France can hold its own against the biggest, the United States, Italy, Great Britain and Germany, and its market share is growing steadily. Its main clients are European (Scandinavia, Central Europe, Germany, Italy), but Asia, Latin America, Russia and Eastern European countries are proving to be buoyant markets. Brazil, China, India, Turkey and the Gulf Emirates have got the wind in their sails.

French yachtsmen enjoy a worldwide reputation. Take Franck Cammas for instance, who beat the English and Americans in the most recent Volvo Ocean Race, a particularly demanding round-the-world race. Since the popular Eric Tabarly, ocean racing has been seen as a French speciality. A unique concept of adventure-race has developed, a significant example of which is the Vendée Globe (the next one due to set out from Les Sables d’Olonne on 10 November next): a round-the-world yacht race from West to East via the three great capes, Cape of Good Hope, Cape Leeuwin and Cape Horn. Prestigious boat shows, especially the Salon Nautique in Paris in December - one of the top two world-class shows along with Boot Düsseldorf - are also showcases which contribute to the excellent brand image of French water sports.

Sylvie Thomas

Websites:

<http://www.hydroptere.com/>

<http://www.grand-pavois.com/>

<http://www.salonnautiqueparis.com/>