

Dehler 29 – born again



DEHLER 29: Race-bred performance cruiser PRICE: from £59,335 including VAT

Now in Mk II guise, Dehler's 29 makes a welcome return to the British market. David Harding put her through her paces

A few years ago, sporty 30-footers were popular for lots of reasons. Big enough to take you away for a week's cruise and fast enough to cover the ground at a good lick, they were still small enough to be easily managed short-handed and, if you wanted to race, you didn't need to recruit an entire army every weekend.

This is where the Dehler 29 fitted in, following in the tradition of boats like the First 29, Hanse 291, Hunter Impala, Jeanneau's Sunlight 30 and plenty of others: fast, fun and not stupidly expensive to buy or run.

The pity is that builders then started to drop their smaller models

and move ever upwards in pursuit of new markets and greater profit margins, making the sporty 30s and sub-30s something of an endangered species.

To many people, the Dehler 29's quiet exit from the UK scene went unnoticed because she never made that much of a splash over here when she was first introduced back in the 1990s. The dealer at the time didn't really push her and the next one dropped her entirely to concentrate on her bigger sisters, partly because the baby of the range was becoming an expensive boat for her size. To justify keeping her in the range, Dehler had to sell her for a price that, only 18 months or so ago, had reached around

£90,000 ex-factory, so it's no surprise that they only sold two or three a year.

Since then, much has happened to the once-mighty Dehler. For a while their future was uncertain to say the least, but now they're back under the ownership of Hanse as part of a major force in German boatbuilding. There's a new UK dealer (part of the group that owns Hanse UK) and, along with several new models, a new-look Dehler 29.

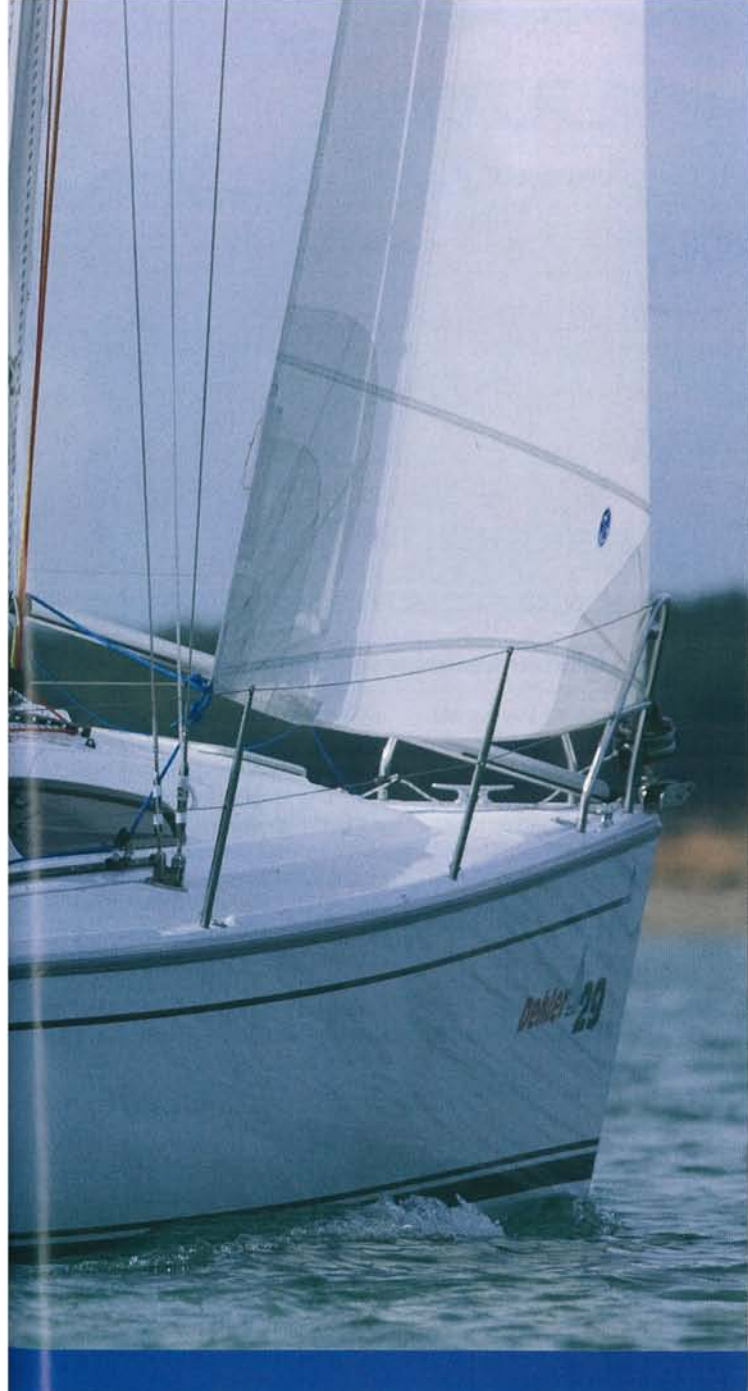
Dehler and their new owners were aware of the continuing demand for sporty sub-30s but knew that they had to reduce the price substantially, which they did through a combination of re-tooling and using Hanse's enormous

purchasing power to negotiate better terms from their suppliers. Production, however, remains in the original factory rather than being incorporated into Hanse's Greifswald plant in eastern Germany, giving Dehler a high degree of autonomy and helping them to concentrate on building boats that still look and behave like Dehlers rather than simply becoming Hanses by another name.

Today's Dehler

Astonishingly, when you consider what she was selling for, a new Dehler 29 ready to sail away from Hamble now costs just under £60,000, including VAT at 17.5%.

For your money you're getting a boat that, while not a new design, certainly doesn't look like one from yesteryear. With her near-vertical stem, short stern, high-fractional rig



The outstanding feature of the cockpit is the superbly comfortable helming position on the coamings. It's also well laid out for short-handed sailing

and bulbed fin she's pretty much up to the minute in many of the obvious respects, though the rig has been tweaked from its original 7/8ths to the current 9/16ths and, as on the earlier model, the chainplates are inboard to allow for an overlapping headsail.

Like the 33, which was introduced at the same time and has shown herself to be extremely competitive in the right hands, the 29 appears to have the ingredients for a first-rate performance including a fine

entry, decent draught (1.58m/5ft 2in with the standard fin) and plenty of sail. Her 44sq m (471sq ft) of main and foretriangle area combined with a displacement of 3,000kg (6,631lb) and the 8m (26ft 3in) waterline give her a sail area/displacement ratio of 21.4 and a

displacement/length ratio of 156. Figures like that are usually the preserve of respectably quick ships, especially when combined with a modest wetted area.

Unlike many newer designs with their wide beams and enormously broad sterns, the Dehler is of more modest proportions. Her beam of 2.99m (9ft 10in) is narrow by today's standards, resulting in a relatively deep canoe body and,

in conjunction with her other qualities, pointing to good performance in light airs. At the same time a reasonably flat run aft and a healthy ballast ratio (37% with the standard fin) also indicate that she should be a powerful performer in a breeze and more than able to

The 29 appears to have the ingredients for a first-rate performance

hold her own on downwind legs.

Even without some of the 'nice to have's', such as a lead keel and a keel-stepped mast, she has the makings of an excellent all-rounder.

I found further encouragement the moment I stepped aboard from the pontoon. All too often boats have cockpit coamings that are taken right out to the gunwale to maximise the cockpit's width. That means no deck outboard of the coamings, so as you walk aft you have to step over the coaming on to the cockpit seat. That in itself isn't necessarily a problem, but it makes so much more sense to run the decks right aft where possible.

To me, the Dehler's inboard coamings were a sign that here was a boat designed by people who understand the ergonomics of sailing. When you're helming with a tiller you want to be able to sit on the coamings and lean back against the guardwires so your torso is inclined beyond the vertical. Otherwise, as the boat heels you have to resist the pull of gravity trying to hurl you to the low side of the cockpit.

Light-airs flyer

To start with on our test sail we had no opportunity to test the coamings at any heel because we were greeted by a flat calm and thick fog. Then a zephyr arrived that brought the Dehler to life.


With the anemometer registering just 3.5 knots on the true scale we clocked 2.5 knots upwind, increasing to 3.3 knots when the wind nudged up to 4.4.

The flat water helped, of course, but the fact is that the Dehler proved to be extremely easily driven. This sort of performance allows you to sail in conditions

when other boats have to resort to the engine.

With the breeze showing no signs of increasing any further after our photo session, we headed back to Hamble for the interior photos and came back out a few hours later when Bramblemet (the weather beacon on the Solent's Bramble bank) was showing the wind gusting up to 14 knots.

This was what we needed to wake the boat up. With the standard 110% headsail – by North, like the mainsail – we settled down on the wind with the log hovering in the mid 5s. Now able to test the coamings properly, I found the helming position to be among the best on any boat of this size – or any size, for that matter. They're perfectly angled so you can sit on their outboard side with the tiller extension in one hand and the mainsheet and/or traveller in the other. This is how tiller-steered performance boats should be sailed, and the Dehler is a true performance boat in the context of a cruiser/racer: she goes upwind beautifully, with a nicely balanced helm that gives just enough feel, and she tacks through less than 80°. If the helmsman brings her through the wind gently the crew can sheet the headsail nearly all the way home without needing to wind the winch, so short-tacking is a doddle but the headsail's extra area compared with a self-tacker makes it so much more efficient.

In line with her 'designed to be sailed' philosophy, the 29 has the option of a full-width mainsheet track across the middle of the cockpit. This places it immediately forward of the helmsman who, if sailing short-handed, can play both sheet and traveller. If you really don't want a traveller for some reason, the mainsheet is taken to a moulded plinth on the cockpit sole. 

Another option is a second pair of Harken 35 winches on the coamings to supplement the 35s on the coachroof. The jamming footblocks on the deck allow the headsail sheets to be led to the coachroof winches or aft to those on the coamings. When you're sailing short-handed the second pair is useful for upwind work because they're close to the helm and easily reached by the crew forward of the traveller. When racing, you would need the mainsheet man next to the helmsman and the headsail trimmer to use the coachroof winches. The second set would come into their own on the spinnaker legs.

It's a good size of cockpit for a 29-footer and one that should work well in both racing and cruising modes, though with a full crew the cam cleats on the traveller would need to be switched so they're angled forward rather than aft.

As the wind picked up further we had over 21 knots across the deck for a time. We flattened the mainsail as far as possible, wound the backstay on as hard as the meagre 4:1 purchase would allow, eased the traveller a little more, wished for a 4:1 fine tune on the end of the 6:1 mainsheet, and kept the boat tramping upwind at a comfortable 20° or so of heel. She maintained both her speed and her balance, partly thanks to sails that are several cuts above the standard issue supplied with many production boats. For competitive racing you would go to your own sailmaker but the Dacron Norths are more than adequate for cruising and delivery work.



Tie-bars are attached to a return in the inner moulding that spreads the load over a large area



Original 29s had a hob but no oven in the galley. The light immediately above might not be in the best position

Obedience testing

Especially on a boat that's likely to be sailed short-handed I like to know what happens when she's left to her own devices, so I did the usual trick of letting go of the helm. She rounded up, tacked, bore away, gybed, rounded up and tacked again before sitting hove to with the wind on the beam, fore-reaching at about 1.5 knots. From here she could be gybed around with the sails still pinned in to carry on where she left off. The keel – the standard fin on our test boat – remained stalled for a few seconds before laminar flow resumed and she was away.

Since we had plenty of wind at this stage I was also able to find the point at which the rudder lost grip. One agreeable feature of boats with modest beam and sensibly deep rudders is that they tend not to make a habit of broaching violently

without warning, and in this respect the Dehler is one of the most tolerant boats I have sailed. If intentionally sailed too deep upwind she continued to respond up to 40° of heel before rounding up a few degrees in the mildest of rebukes. How she would behave if pressed downwind we were unable to determine, especially with no spinnaker on board, but I think she would hang on in there pretty well.

Faced with a run home against the tide under plain sail, we poled out the headsail and made 5.8 knots with the wind anywhere between dead astern and well over the weather quarter. Poles have their uses even when you're not flying a kite.

We maintained the same speed, give or take, when the breeze died to 10 knots as we beam-reached back up Southampton Water.

There's no questioning the Dehler's performance potential in light to moderate conditions and no

reason to doubt it in fresher breezes either. As a fast cruiser she's a doddle to handle and infinitely more rewarding to sail than some of the stodgier, high-volume alternatives. As a race boat she doesn't have much of a track record in the UK but I would be surprised if, pointed in the right direction by people who know what they're doing, she doesn't give a good account of herself across the wind range and become established as a highly competent all-rounder.

Dressed to impress

Little about the way the Dehler is equipped externally suggests that many corners have been cut. In addition to the North sails and Harken winches, she sports a Seldén rig, Spinlock clutches and fittings elsewhere principally from Seldén and Harken. Some hardware would need to be added and purchases increased for

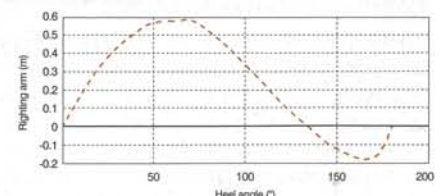
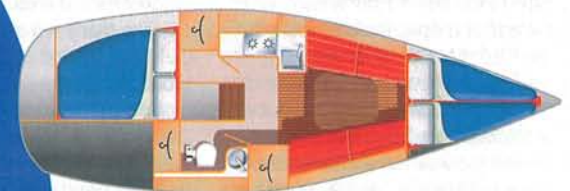
Dehler 29

LOA	8.75m (28ft 8in)
LWL	8.00m (26ft 3in)
Beam	2.99m (9ft 10in)
Draught - standard fin	1.58m (5ft 2in)
- shallow fin	1.22m (4ft 0in)
- deep fin	1.80m (5ft 11in)
Displacement (standard fin)	3,000kg (6,613lb)
Ballast (standard fin)	1,120kg (2,469lb)
Sail area (main & foretriangle)	43.75sq m (471sq ft)
Sail area/displacement ratio	21.4
Displacement/length ratio	156
Engine	Volvo D1-13, 12hp saildrive
Headroom	1.8m (5ft 11in)
Designer	Judel & Vrolijk
Builder	Dehler Yachts, Germany
Distributor	Dehler UK. Tel: 02380 457008 www.dehler.co.uk

The fractional rig is now 2/3rds as opposed to the original 7/8ths



Keel choices are standard, deep or shallow



The GZ curve shows the maximum righting moment at 68° and an angle of vanishing stability (AVS) of 134°



Simple and unfussy, the finish looks as though it should wear reasonably well. Window bezels are now fitted

racing, as is only to be expected.

The biggest omission on deck in my view is any non-slip on the coachroof: it's totally smooth except around the foot of the mast. An off-white deck or a contrasting colour for the non-slip would be useful as well, to reduce glare.

Teak on the cockpit seats and sole is an extra, and there's a full-depth locker to starboard containing the fuel tank. Because the cockpit isn't excessively wide you can brace your legs across to the opposite seat when sitting inboard, which is impossible on many new boats these days.

One thoroughly simple and sensible idea is the removable transom moulding – it just lifts out so you can leave it behind when racing. At the other end of the cockpit is more clever thinking. The three smoked acrylic washboards are linked together and slide down to form a sill.

Instruments for the engine are on

the port side and include a tacho.

The 14hp Yanmar saildrive on our test boat (Dehler has since switched to Volvo) gave us 6.7 knots at full chat (3,700 rpm). Smooth and well insulated, it produced negligible kick in astern but, as is often the case with rudders that are nicely balanced when the boat's under sail, the prop-wash made the blade slightly over-balanced under power so she couldn't be left to steer herself.

In the interests of keeping the starting price down, Dehler put the folding prop we had on the extras list. It's hard to imagine why anyone would choose to sail a boat like this with a fixed prop.

Structure and accommodation

Poking around below decks reveals a one-piece inner moulding running the length of the saloon and to just above the waterline each side,

incorporating the bunks and the landings for the galley modules. It's bonded directly to the solid-laminate outer hull in the floor section, where the keel bolts pass through it and their load is distributed by substantial aluminium plates and a series of transverse stiffening members.

Outboard of the backrests, the moulding angles inwards to create a return the length of the saloon to which the tie-bars are attached.

As a structure it looks robust and reassuringly straightforward, especially in view of the absence of core material in the hull laminate. My principal reservation, as often in these cases, is the potential for water to get trapped inside the inner moulding having entered through holes cut for cabling and ducting.

At either end of the boat, beyond the inner moulding, the forecabin and aft cabin structures are formed in plywood.

Overhead is a solid headlining,


above which the deck fittings are tapped into aluminium plates in the deckhead – an economical solution, if not my favoured practice for all sorts of reasons.

The layout is simple: galley to port, locker unit to starboard (replacing the small chart table on the original 29), settees each side in the saloon (long enough for a berth to starboard) and an open-plan forecabin. Lifting the saloon cushions to reach the stowage space isn't easy because of the shape of the backrests.

Aft the heads is a wet locker from where there's easy access to the seacocks. Access to the engine is good, too. It's mounted with the saildrive forward so you have to lift the cushions and bunk boards in the aft cabin to reach the impeller.

The finish is generally tidy and the boat is unpretentious below decks. The most obvious sign of economy, perhaps, is the shortage of lights.

PBO's verdict

The reborn Dehler 29 is one of the most appealing sporty cruisers in this size range available today. She's nippy, manoeuvrable, light to handle and a real pleasure to sail. A few aspects of her finish and fit-out suggest that costs have been watched carefully but they don't spoil a very attractive package. 

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Other boats to look at... (prices include VAT)



Mystery 30

PRICE: FROM £73,500

This David Thomas design was tested as the Hunter Link in PBO October 2008. Elegant, slim and sporty, she's small and fairly basic below decks but fast and well mannered.

■ www.mysteryyachts.co.uk



Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 30i

PRICE: FROM £47,000 (EX-FACTORY, FRANCE)

Appreciably more voluminous than the Dehler, she's unlikely to be as fast but, designed by Marc Lombard, is no slouch either. Choice of fixed fin or swing keel with twin rudders.

■ www.jeanneau.com



Huzar 30

PRICE: FROM £77,380

This Polish design was tested in June 2005 and was conceived as more of an offshore cruiser than the Dehler. Well thought out and a fast and capable all-rounder,

■ www.simplyyachts.com