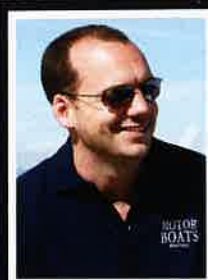


Carl says...



Rarely has one boat been so keenly anticipated. This is the trawler the people wanted to see from Bénéteau, but it has to be affordable, fun and very capable to succeed...

Bénéteau ST34

Regardless of its trawler quirks, this could be one of the most spacious 34-footers around

REPORT BY CARL RICHARDSON

MOTOR
BOATS TESTED

On paper, designing a successful 34ft boat is going to be a harder task than when you have 42ft or 52ft to play with. Which is why, you might presume, Bénéteau

opted to build its Swift Trawler 42 and 52 before embarking on this little exercise.

But history suggests that 30-odd-foot trawlers can work spectacularly well. Take the legendary Grand Banks 36. This boat was and indeed still is so cute it could wander into an audition for the next Andrex puppy and get a call back – but it also delivers masses of useable space with superb decks and a big bright saloon. So why haven't more builders had a crack at their own baby trawler? Perhaps the reason is simply flawed perception – a belief that these boats are sweet novelties rather than serious cruisers.

With two recent hits under its belt, Bénéteau clearly takes the trawler option far more seriously and has once again succeeded in creating what looks to be another smart, fun and very charismatic take on the classic design.

But more than that, this 34-footer might just deliver every ounce of cruising ability you will ever need in a very affordable package.

Design & build

The ST34 boasts all the key trawler ingredients. From its long upper deck-cum-flybridge down to the sheltered and very safe bulwarked side-decks it really looks the part – proud, able and interesting. Below the waterline the hull delivers a fine entry to cut through the chop, and a good run of keel protects the running gear and steadies the ride. Back at deck level, the saloon is as bright as you could wish for, with masses of stowage and a fairly constant 6ft 4in of headroom throughout the two-cabin interior. In short, this baby trawler is actually a far more practical, useable and engaging boat than almost any other design you'd care to mention.

But, of course, this isn't a small boat at all, it's just a smaller than average trawler and there's a big difference between the two. With its optional bathing platform, the hull stretches

over 36ft and those beefy deck levels translate into a loaded displacement of 8.5 tonnes. Compare that to the similarly sized and single-engined Nimbus 340 which weighs in at under 7 tonnes – and the Swedes aren't exactly known for building light boats either.

Bénéteau, on the other hand, is known for building boats to a price. So when it comes to finish you can expect a few bare mouldings and one-size-fits-all cabinetry. Having said that, you can also expect everything to work and be safe in the knowledge that all the practical aspects of boating, like stowage and simple space, will be respected. In short, there might be a lack of love but there is certainly no lack of thought. And

when all that thought is wrapped up in a smart trawler package, with ports, bulwarks and overhangs, the love starts to come through in other ways.

Design & build

Outstanding mix of classic style with a contemporary twist

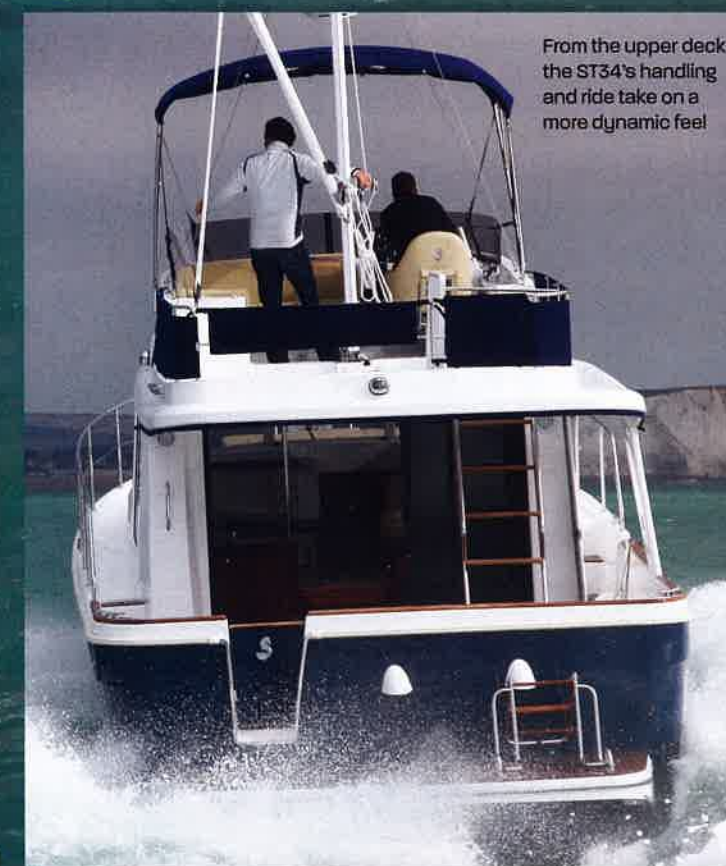


FACTFILE

Bénéteau Swift Trawler 34
LOA: 36ft 5in (11.1m)
PRICE: from £189,595
TOP SPEED: 22.4 knots

“The hull is incredibly tight and responsive”

From the upper deck the ST34's handling and ride take on a more dynamic feel



deck level sorted. Now we can climb up to the next one because it is much more of an upper deck than a flybridge.

The aft of the upper deck is left clear for a tender. The mast is standard but you will have to shell out extra for the crane arm. It's worth doing though as it offers a lifting capacity of 120kg – about what a 3.2m RIB with a 9.9hp outboard would weigh in at.

The deck is surrounded by stainless steel stanchions and dodgers making it pretty safe for kids, and forward is a simple surround of seating opposite the helm. It all feels fairly well protected and although the seat bases are not the deepest,

they are still comfortable. Dressed with the mast and optional bimini it looks good up here but the expanse of GRP deck would certainly improve if a bit of teak could be worked in.

Exterior

The best decks you'll find on a cruiser under 40ft



It's not exactly dripping in detail but the upper deck is a very useable area with seating for four or five



Superb starboard deck is a stand-out feature



You'll have to pay extra for canopies and a bathing platform, while the bathing ladder is a pain to negotiate

Exterior

Boarding from the pontoon-level bulwark gate onto the starboard deck is incredibly simple. The transom gate works fine too, but if you option in the bathing platform your route aboard is inhibited by a bathing ladder. In any case, boarding from the side deck has a certain occasion about it and so should be indulged whenever possible. And as such, it might be worth Bénéteau beefing up the hinges on the gate or fitting stops to take the strain off it.

Stepping onto the starboard

deck you are immediately protected by a lit overhang and 2ft 6in of bulwark and stanchions. Opposite the gate a side door leads to the helm – a layout which will work brilliantly when mooring up short-handed. The deck steps up towards the foredeck and along the port side (still an impressive 10in wide at its narrowest point) allowing complete and very safe access all the way around the boat. The port-side deck also includes a neat domestic locker, housing a gas bottle and water filler.

At the broad foredeck, two

hatches lie either side of an electric windlass but, sadly, they both lead to the same large void. Back aft the boat's 13ft beam creates a cockpit that looks more 40ft-cruiser than 30ft-trawler – the size of it is exaggerated as there is no fixed seating. The answer to an owner's desire to spend evenings sat out here comes beneath your feet, with a large lazarette able to take several folding chairs as well as a dingy, outboard and pretty much anything else you might want to take with you on passage. The lazarette increases its volume by pushing forward either side of the enginebay, in a U-shape, and it comes ready-plumbed for a generator. So that's the first

Side gate's idiot-proof claim is tested



Same naff side door from ST42 but it all works well



Foredeck boasts two hatches, but only one locker



Lazarette will swallow up gallons of cruising kit



Port deck's domestic locker is very tidy



No fixed seating in the cockpit makes it feel huge

Sail-away deal: the ST34 really feels like a boat you could go places on



View exclusive footage of the Bénéteau ST34 on test at mbmclub.com



For a 35ft boat, the size of the saloon is excellent. Finish is basic but details like the timber deckhead trim help warm it up. Forward galley works well

Accommodation

Just as with life on deck, the interior is incredibly easy to get on with. Every element works well, even if the finish doesn't always match up to the terrific character of the boat. The standard-fit cabinetry and teak-effect sole look a little soulless but the finish will soften with time, and the interior will certainly warm up once an owner's belongings are aboard.

Keeping it simple usually enhances the feeling of space on board and the saloon looks particularly big with an expanse of uncluttered deck. Triple cockpit doors open up the saloon that bit more and allow it to work with the cockpit, creating one long spread of social living space for the summer months, while large side

windows flood the interior with light.

Only one two-seater sofa is included in the saloon, which helps to explain the extra space that has been found. But it's not just a sofa, it's a sofa bed, and a very comfortable one at that, allowing a proper double berth to be made up without the need for any fussy in-fills. But if you cruise as a family of four, one sofa, however comfy, isn't going to cut it, so it's back to the those foldaway chairs in the lazarette.

The galley sits discreetly forward and offers up lots of clear worktop. We would like to have seen the gas hob recessed into the worktop for safer use, but otherwise a decent-sized sink and fridge plus plenty of stowage complete the scene.

Similarly the toilet and shower compartment is

a simple but effective design with masses of stowage and a full-length access hatch to a slightly scary looking 12V distribution board.

Saving the best until last, we have the cabins. The bunked guest cabin is going to be a favourite with kids but it can easily take two adults thanks to plenty of elbow and headroom, plus heaps of

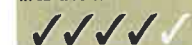
“The master cabin delivers a double berth that doesn't require a stepladder to climb into”

stowage. The bottom bunk is the best berth in terms of width and we'd like to see a guardrail designed for the slim top bunk, especially given the cabin's child-friendly persona.

That just leaves the forward master which, as well as offering a set of his 'n' hers cavernous lockers, manages to deliver a double berth that doesn't require a stepladder to climb into. Despite sitting nice and low in the cabin, there is still bags of access and stowage underneath as the berth lifts up on gas struts for easy access.

Accommodation

Class-leading space and design lifts the flat finish



Performance & handling

Given the fixation for all things twin, we need to talk engine numbers. Having a single engine is going to be an issue for some owners, especially those looking to move across from a sportscruiser or a flybridge. But knocking out a hefty 425hp this engine is certainly man enough for the job, pushing the Bénéteau to a useful 22 knots.

Running at its fast cruising rate of between 15 knots and 17 knots, the hull is incredibly tight and responsive. The keel underneath steers the ST34 round unerringly fast and true, with almost zero heel. The boat feels alive when running above 15 knots and if you want to spice things up even more, head to the upper helm where the combination of a smaller steering wheel and the increase in height speed life up. Sat up top, we found ourselves laughing out loud as the bow came round at 90° in a flash, rather than pulling the usual long arc.

But this isn't really a fast, 20-knot boat. For one thing its extra weight means that to start enjoying a little of that single-engined frugality you need to pull back on the revs – not that this boat's economy is going to set the world alight. Using the Nimbus 340 again for comparison, the ST34 burns around 1.4mpg at its fast cruising speed, whereas the V-drive Nimbus is pushing well past 2mpg. That would appear to be the price for extra weight and the power required to push it.

Put simply a heavy boat with a shortish hull length and a big engine is never going to be the most efficient, but it does feel smooth and very capable. This leads us to the other reason to slow down, and that is because life on board the ST34 at 20 knots feels more like 15 knots anyway. Sound levels are excellent, staying below 75db(A) for the most part. To put that into perspective the Linssen 34.9, a quiet boat, hits 74db(A) at 7 knots. Upwind, the fine-entry hull delivers a particularly smooth ride, making progress seem ridiculously laid back. It's so lacking in drama that you really might as well ease the throttle back to 2500rpm and actually cruise at 15 knots. Of course, the problem then will be that this will feel like you are doing about 10 knots.

In a following sea you will be required to put a



Sofa bed is a winner. No spare cushions or infills to stow, just a quick, simple and very proper double berth



An uncomfortable silence, but a very comfortable bed

bit of effort in at the helm as the keel tries to plot a course of its own, but it isn't much of an ask unless you insist on going flat out.

The other side to the ST34's cruising persona is the slow efficient one. You may decide to pull right back and mooch along at 7 or 8 knots, perhaps have some lunch or take a walk out on deck. Either way you will be enjoying true efficiency at these speeds and a range of, perhaps, 500 miles. It's not worth lingering

around 10 knots as the economy is nowhere near as healthy, so it's either 8 knots or 15 knots.

Performance & handling

Quiet and confident across the rev range



At slower displacement speeds the composure of the boat is still good – that keel again working hard to minimise any roll. Although a big RIB up top might upset the balance a little.

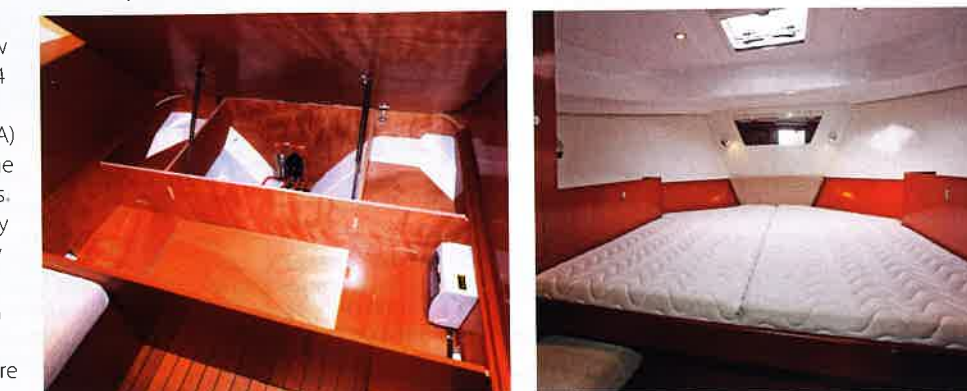


Triple doors open up the saloon to the cockpit, the simple layout working to deliver a very useable area while still feeling welcoming and warm



Toilet compartment and that scary distribution board

Guest cabin's top bunk could use a guardrail



It's not the most luxurious but the master cabin offers space and stowage in equally impressive levels

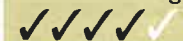
Specification & value

The base price of £189,595 inc VAT looks like good value. The going rate for a two-cabin flybridge boat of comparable size is around £200,000 with the Nimbus 340 around the same. We'd like to see the ST34 available for a similar, all-in figure but as ever with Bénéteau there is a fairly long options list to negotiate, taking the likely on-water cost past £230,000. Even if there are too many options, most of them are sensibly priced and to help you wade through the list Advantage and Elegance packs bundle up most of the kit you'll want, from deck lights and the lifting crane to electronic navigation.

But we still find it hard to believe that a mooring and anchoring kit (£891) is seen as optional on a boat like this, while a combined cost of over £10,000 for delivery, commissioning and a handover looks a bit frightening even with a full tank of fuel thrown in.

Specification & value

Too many options push price up but value is still strong



Engine options

The 425hp CMD, the only engine option, sits within a well-insulated bay, allowing noise levels to be reduced and creating more stowage space around it. Fuel and water filters are intelligently set by the entrance but the oil dipstick requires a bit more foraging.

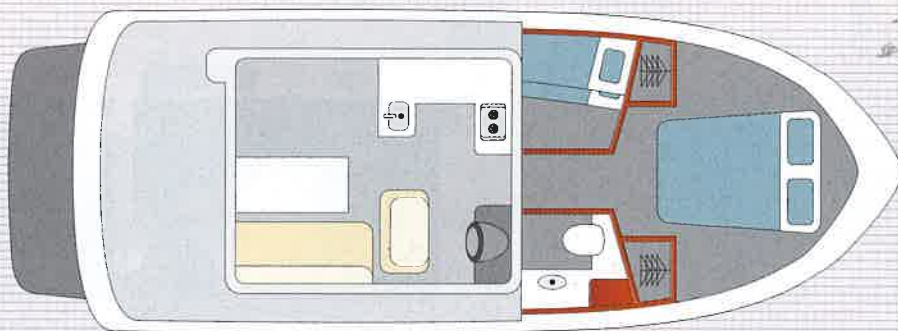


MBM verdict

If variety is the spice of life then this Bénéteau is the Kampot Pepper of the sea. It is a timely reminder that classic design can deliver incredible results. And, even if some of the finish might not quite go the distance, the ST34 is a boat that could well become a future classic

MBM rating **9/10**

Bénéteau ST34 technical data



specifications

BUILD	GRP
RCD	B
LENGTH OVERALL	36ft 5in (11.1m)
BEAM	13ft 1in (4.0m)
DRAUGHT	3ft 3in (1.0m)
AIR DRAUGHT (mast down)	11ft 9in (3.6m)
DISPLACEMENT	8.5 tonnes (loaded)
FUEL CAPACITY	175gal (800lt)
WATER CAPACITY	70gal (320lt)



key dimensions

WIDTH OF SIDE DECKS (starboard)	min 22in (58cm)
WIDTH OF SIDE DECKS (port)	min 10in (25cm)
HEADROOM IN SALOON	6ft 4in (1.9m)
MASTER CABIN BERTH	6ft 4in x 5ft 3in (1.9 x 1.6m)

performance

Engines	Cummins MerCruiser Diesel QSB5.9-425					
Configuration	6cyl 5.9lt 425hp @3000rpm					
conditions	wind SE'ly, Force 4, sea moderate					
Load	fuel 50% water 20% crew 2					
Rpm	knots	lph	gph	mpg	range	noise
1200	6.8	8	1.8	3.77	528	63
1500	8.2	12	2.6	3.15	441	65
1800	9.2	21	4.6	2.00	280	67
2000	10.1	28	6.1	1.65	230	69
2300	13.4	38	8.3	1.61	225	73
2500	15.4	48	10.5	1.46	205	75
2800	19.2	68	14.8	1.29	180	74
3100	22.4	88	19.2	1.16	160	75

Range figures quoted above are in miles based on standard fuel tanks and include a 20% margin. GPH & MPG refer to imperial gallons. These figures may vary due to weather conditions, air, water, engine temperature, crew numbers, hull fouling, fuel quality and other issues. Noise readings in dB(A) and were taken in the wheelhouse

prices

STANDARD BOAT	inc VAT
with CMD QSB5.9-425hp	£189,595
MOORING KIT	£891
COCKPIT CANOPIES	£1937
UPPER DECK CANOPIES	£2424
HEATING	£3170
BLUE HULL	£1482
UK DELIVERY & COMMISSIONING	£10,592

BOAT AS TESTED £238,268

ENQUIRIES www.beneteau.com

To view the ST34 in the UK, contact Dickies of Brighton. Tel: 01273 675755

the rivals



NIMBUS 340

From £199,771
Clever, smart and efficient, this Nimbus delivers an incredible amount of cruising sense but lacks some of the charm and the interior volume of the ST34. Tel: 01590 677955 www.offshorepowerboats.com



CORVETTE 320

From £233,593
Wonderful mix of classic looks, quirky style, interior space and a bonkers hull that delivers whether you're cruising fast or slow. New 340 also planned. www.corvettemarine.co.uk



LINSSEN 34.9

From £205,254
If you're not in a hurry you could opt for a full displacement cruiser like this Linssen, available in aft-cabin or sedan versions. Tel: 01590 679222 www.berthongroup.co.uk