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“These days, it’s more and more about family,” says Gert van Barneveld as we head off on possibly the most civilised sea trial I have ever experienced – pottering at a relaxing seven knots around the extensive and complex canal network near Leeuwarden, capital of the northern Dutch province of Friesland.

Van Barneveld is the co-head of MariTeam Yachting, the official European sales centre for Grand Banks, which builds the Eastbay 44, or EB44 for short. His remark about “family” refers to the fact that, particularly in America, the once macho mentality that went with the ownership of a cruiser like this is gradually changing to one of greater inclusivity. “It used to be all about men getting together, heading out into the open sea, drinking beers and competing to catch the biggest fish,” he says. “But now buyers are becoming more interested in buying a boat that they can enjoy with their wife and children, a boat that’s comfortable, versatile and safe.”

Cue the EB44, 14.6 metres of well crafted cruiser that combines classic style with mod cons where they matter, a deep V hull for stability and manoeuvrability, and a comfortably broad beam that gives everyone space to move inside and out, provides sleeping accommodation for six and allows for a variety of cabin configurations. As a family boat and a means of escape for the weekend or overnight, the EB44 seems to have it nailed.

Despite having been around since 1956, Grand

FAMILY GUISSE

You can cut loose on the Eastbay 44, but it also has the space and comforts to keep the whole brood happy

Words: Simon de Burton

Banks may have escaped your radar. Building yachts in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, the firm claims to have established the cruising trawler genre and opened up a whole new market with the arrival of the original Eastbay model, the 38, which it unveiled to the world at the Miami Boat Show exactly 25 years ago.

Although especially strong in the US and Australia, Grand Banks has sold more than 1,500 boats in Europe since the 1980s, but suffered following the financial crisis of 2008, after which it underwent considerable restructuring. It now employs around 700 people at the Johor Bahru yard and produces two models, the EB44 and the more trawler-style GB60, with a new 52 due out at the end of this year.

THE FIRM'S CURRENT GOAL IS TO ATTRACT A YOUNGER AUDIENCE BY OFFERING BOATS WITH SLICKER INTERIOR DESIGN AND BETTER SPECIFICATIONS

Like that of many builders, the firm's current goal is to attract a younger audience by offering boats with slicker interior design and better specifications – and the EB44 certainly seems to show how it's done. As we potter away from MariTeam's base along a maze of small channels, the first impression of the EB44 is that it's remarkably spacious, both outside and in.

The teak-clad saloon combines the bridge with the galley, dining and seating areas but doesn't feel in the least cramped with three or four people



The well-equipped galley means catering for a full complement of guests is more pleasure than chore

SPECS

GRAND BANKS EASTBAY 44

LOA 14.65m (with martin board)
Beam 4.44m
Draught 1.03m
Displacement 13.5 tonnes
Engines 2 x 435hp Volvo IPS600
Speed max/cruise 31/25 knots
Fuel capacity 2,200 litres
Range at 20 knots 512nm
Owners/guests 6
Construction GRP
Builder Grand Banks
t + 44 (0) 7831 301815
w grandbanks.com
Price: \$1.35 million

millling around, and really comes into its own on warm days such as this, thanks to one of those aforementioned “mod cons” – electrically operated side and rear windows that drop down at the touch of a button to create a superbly airy ambience with an inside-outside feel.

But what also appeals about the EB44 is that its designers haven't gone over the top when it comes to gadgetry. Instead of having some complex, remote-controlled electric sun shade to cover the main deck aft, for example, the boat is supplied with the simplest possible alternative: a piece of material that ties on at four points in a matter of seconds to create an effective and maintenance-free parasol that also serves as a graceful enhancement to the boat's lines.

Where technology has been applied, however, it has been applied well, notably in the use of Volvo Penta's IPS powertrain. The system's forward-facing pod drives make manoeuvring a breeze, which is demonstrated when using the IPS joystick to nudge into our dock in the pretty town of Grou, only a dozen steps from our chosen lunch spot. It's all so simple that nightmares about strong cross-breezes, whining bow thrusters and fellow yachtsmen shaking their heads in dismay are banished from my mind. I would happily pack the family on board for a weekend adventure with zero qualms. More extended trips are definitely possible, with a comfortable master cabin in the bow, and single and twin cabins behind, making it perfect for a couple with two to four children.

To this point, the canals have curbed my instinct to be lead-footed, so I ask van Barneveld if it might be possible to explore the outer limits of the EB44's performance. He duly obliges by directing us along the wide Prinses Margriet channel and out towards a small lake that proves entirely



The additional cabins can be specified with twin or single berths, making the EB44 ideal for families with up to four children





adequate for testing the EB44's mettle. The pick-up is immediate as the pod drives dig in, pushing us to the yacht's top speed of 31 knots in what seems like no time at all. Weaving figures-of-eight on the calm water is a serene experience, but we're jolted from our torpor by the boat's impressive ability to stop on a sixpence.

Our un-gentlemanly speeding is over all too soon as we head off down another channel back to the EB44's covered berth at MariTime HQ, where I find parting with this pretty little cruiser more emotional than I'd anticipated. As a second yacht - something to keep near home when a trip to the big boat seems like too much hard work - it's a great choice. If, like me, you're lacking the mothership, it would also make a superb primary boat. All I need to do is convince the family it's \$1.3 million well spent. ■



The main cabin has a full-sized bed and more than adequate wardrobe and cupboard space