CATCH THE 655 SPECIAL

Oyster's latest model in their stylish g5 (fifth generation) range is the 655, but the yacht we sailed was a slimmed-down, performance-orientated version with a taller carbon rig. David Glenn reports on a yacht benefiting from years of client feedback.

When I first set eyes on Ron Oyster Marine’s new 655 he designed 655 line, I did think it really be an Oyster, with its mast stepped in a clinically.

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We were on the River Orwell in Suffolk with the yacht just downstream from Oyster Marine’s headquarters, the hen which now can be regarded as one of the successful producers of ocean-going sailing craft.

The 655, of which 15 have already been launched, is a 51ft (15.5m) range running their new 100ft and 131ft superyachts, RMK in Turkey. Since 1974 the company has built over 1,000 yachts and is a leading manufacturer of sailing yachts.
When I first set eyes on Roulette v2, the fourth hull in Oyster Marine’s new Rob Humphreys-designed 655 line, I did a double take. Could that really be an Oyster, with its lofty carbon-black mast stepped in a clinically white, streamlined hull? The yacht’s owner is a repeat customer and the first Roulette was an Oyster 56, a phenomenally successful model from a company which in 33 years have moved impressively through the business gears and are currently in overdrive with 60 yachts building or on order.

We were on the River Orwell in Suffolk making a rendezvous with the yacht just downstream from Fox’s Marina in Ipswich, Oyster Marine’s headquarters, the heart of an organisation which must by now be regarded as one of the world’s most successful producers of ocean-going sailing yachts.

The 655, of which 13 have already been sold, is the latest in an 11-model sailing boat range running from the Oyster 36 to their new 100ft and 135ft superyachts, which will be built by RMK in Turkey. Since 1974 the company have sold more than 1,200 yachts, a record which has contributed to two Queen’s Awards, one for export and another for international trade. Oysters are currently built by four companies, Landamar (who built Roulette v2) and WadBoats both in Wroxham in Norfolk, Southampton Yacht Services (SY), who build the larger yachts like the 73 and 82, and McDell in Auckland, New Zealand, who build 55s, the 51 and the 154’ motor boat.

All yachts, including those shipped from New Zealand, are commissioned at Fox’s and go through a minutely detailed quality assurance process before handover.

Main picture: Roulette v2 going well upwind off the Orwell. Right: a computerised look inside the new yacht.
Oyster 655

Before we look at the 655 in detail, it is worth making reference to Oyster’s service and client feedback network.

Stored in a special container at Fox’s are rows and rows of files with detail about every yacht they’ve ever built, which enables the company to refer back to the smallest detail in case of trouble. Records for early yachts comprise a few faded, type-written sheets, while the latest 655 will include a detailed computer-derived Oyster Build Manual. It must weigh in at several kilos.

In an adjoining office, Oyster’s after-sales team is hard at work monitoring and servicing yachts around the world, from Singapore and Turkey to Burnham and Bora Bora.

But perhaps one of the most important functions in the team’s prompting of owners for regular feedback about how their Oyster works. This crucial hands-on information and worldwide service network has enabled Oyster to develop their product with real confidence, learning from their mistakes and listening to clients who are out there doing it.

Oyster 655 also benefits from Oyster’s latest restyling exercise, manifested in their go (fifth generation) range, applied first to the 72 and then to the 655. It provides an exciting, practical alternative to traditional yachts, with a more modern, efficient design.

The new Oyster 655 is a striking design, with a modern, sleek hull and a clean, contemporary look. The deck is designed to be easy to navigate, with well-placed handles and cleats. The cockpit is spacious, with plenty of room for crew members to move around comfortably.

The deck is also equipped with a variety of features, including a davit system for lowering and retrieving the dinghy, a Lewmar windlass for anchoring, and a powerful outboard engine for maneuvering.

The sailplan is highly efficient, with large, well-shaped sails that provide excellent performance in both light and heavy air. The rig is designed to be easy to handle, with a self-tailed mainsheet and a boom that can be easily moved to different positions for optimal performance.

The new Oyster 655 is a truly remarkable yacht, offering a unique combination of luxury, performance, and functionality. It is a testament to Oyster’s commitment to excellence and attention to detail.

Oyster listen to clients who are out there doing it

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the fact that it is a step-up from the standard rig. Standing rigging is, however, red.

The owner and Oyster went through the yacht and its systems with a fine-toothed comb looking for ways of reducing weight, from foam-cored composite bulkheads (ply is standard) and lighter battery bank to reducing sound insulation and choosing a lighter aircon system. As a result of the savings, including the 500kg in the mast, another 15 tons could be taken out of the keel.

Single skin

It would have been easy for Oyster to deviate from their monolithic single skin hull construction and go for something, say, lightweight. Having dabbled with the SPRINT system and cored composites, they said ‘no thank you’ and instead the 655 has a hand lay-up matrix of E Glass, Kevlar (for impact resistance) and some carbon (for stiffness and light weight) combined with a vinylester laminating resin.

The system has been engineered by High Modulus and while the structure is considerably lighter than Oyster’s earlier, less sophisticated schedules it’s comparatively bullet-proof, making it more reassuring for...
the fact that it is 1.5m taller than the standard rig. Standing rigging is, however, rod.

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**Single skin**

It would have been easy for Oyster to deviate from their monolithic or single skin hull construction and go for something really lightweight. Having dallied with the SPRINT system and cored composites, they said ‘no thank you’ and instead the 655 has a hard laid-up matrix of E Glass, Kevlar (for impact resistance) and some carbon (for stiffness and light weight) combined with a vinylester laminating resin.

The system has been engineered by High Modulus and while the structure is considerably lighter than Oyster’s earlier, less sophisticated schedules it’s comparatively bullet-proof, making it more reassuring for the many owners who take their Oysters long distances. Ultra high-tech is also considerably more expensive, although all Oyster’s tooling is designed to accommodate it – Richard Matthews regards this as being ‘technology-proof’.

As we took a close look under Roulette’s sole boards, the extensive stiffening framework revealed a tough and well-finished structure with very few mouldings hiding the inner surface of the hull. To improve panel stiffness, particularly forward, Oyster bond a lot of furniture joinery to the hull providing more space and reducing weight by eliminating conventional stringers and frames.

The 655’s keel was then matched to a sail wardrobe from North UK featuring a yacht designed to perform. The upgraded suit has cost the owner of Roulette about £30,000 and includes a Spectra North main, jib and storm sails and a North G2 genoa which has evolved from the sailmaker’s work with VOR and America’s Cup sails to reduce the need for constant trimming. Roulette can also fly symmetrical spinnakers, the 45 series, useful for deep running on long ocean legs.

Alain Brook told us that Hall had built extra stiffness into the lower section of the carbon spar so that sail shape and tube control can be maintained if the inner forestay is removed, useful on a downwind leg requiring plenty of gybes.

**Sailing Roulette v2**

It should be remembered that this yacht has been specially optimised for Mediterranean sailing in light and heavy wind bands. Rob Humphreys told Yachting World that compared with the standard sailplan, proportionally more area has been designed into the main and less into the jib thus moving the centre of lateral resistance slightly further aft. To counteract this and to provide...
more control, the standard rudder blade has been extended by 300mm, not only providing more surface area deeper down, but also a small area of balanced rudder forward of the stock. Most of the blade is protected by the skeg, but in the event of a collision the tip is sacrificial.

In spite of the taller rig, Roulette v2 with her 100 percent blade, sets 320% less than the standard sailplan with its 150% percent overlapping headsail.

With her wide shroud base taking the chainplates out to the rail, a much narrower sheeting angle can be achieved for the powerful, high aspect ratio, leech-battened jib. Manual Harken furlers are standard for jib and staysail but Roulette was fitted with the optional leckmann electric unit, taking the tail of the sail well off the deck. While there is sail area lost here, the advantages are improved visibility, less interference with the guardwires and stanchions and in a seaway less chance of taking solid water into the foot of the sail.

On a grey day in flat water off the Orwell and a true breeze which peaked at about 16 knots, the conditions couldn’t have been less like the Med. With a full main and that powerful jib set, the Raymarine displays showed impressive upward speeds of around 8.3 to 8.6 knots.

To begin with I found the yacht a little on the heavy side and it took some time to get her settled into the groove, suggesting we might have been too much overpowered. The water wasn’t quite on the side deck.

The helm improved with the mainsheet eased down the track and more outboard via the hand-pumped Navtec hydraulics. Roulette clearly has a lot of pace, she is instantly responsive and you feel as though you’re at the helm of a yacht which will reward you if attention is paid to trim and rig control. Rob Humphreys said that the breeze we sailed in was probably just outside her optimum conditions for the way she is set up.

Her powerful, marginally overlapping jib made tacking very easy even at the top end of the wind and cockpit ergonomics and deck geometry seemed well sorted.

Reaching back into the Orwell allowed us to break out the big North 22 asymmetric and, as we powered her up, the speed leapt to then 12 knots. There were a couple of moments when it felt as though we were about to round up, but the rudder kept its grip and the yacht felt controllable. In fact, as we got used to it, we felt we could push it a bit without worrying too much about the need to ease vang or sheet. Fast and exciting was my verdict on this point of sail. In a seaway she could provide an easy, powerful, mile-eating ride.

Steering is Whitlock rod via bevel boxes onto a tiller arm, providing plenty of feedback through the wheel. This yacht is fitted with a 0.5hp Whitlock autopilot.

Cavernous locker space aft and forward should be sufficient for those crossing oceans and, at risk of threatening the aesthetics, the 655 is big enough to sport davits – carbon ideally – for carrying a small RIB.

Six deck hatches, two companionways and opening windows in the deck salon should provide plenty of air in the tropics, although the yacht is fitted with Webasto Blue Cool air conditioning.

Tried and tested

The cockpit layout with twin wheels set aft in the main seating area has been well tried and tested. It gives the helmsman plenty of options, a good view of the headsail telltale and, while not all winches come to hand, the autopilot is always there if a lone watchkeeper needs to go walkabout for trimming and checks.

The walkthrough onto the aft deck and then down onto a smallish bathing platform via built-in steps works well.

Roulette is fitted with a Max-Prop, which should suit her performance/rating requirements, but Oyster have had good reports from owners using the Brunton-bladed Varifold prop which is quieter than three-bladed props because the blades are shorter.
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Six deck hatches, two companionways and opening windows in the deck saloon should provide plenty of air in the tropics, although the yacht is fitted with Webasto Blue Cool Classic air conditioning.

**Tried and tested**

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The focal point of all Oyster accommodation is the deck saloon and Roulette’s is no exception. With its enormous expanse of forward and side windows, extensive deckhead lighting and maple timber finish, the sense of space and airiness is exceptional. Sitting at the chart table, a couple of steps down to starboard of the companionway, looking up at the halogen light-studded deckhead, I felt as if I was aboard some sort of spaceship.

In terms of décor, Jo Humphreys (Bob’s wife) hasn’t held back, with extensive use of maple and a distinctive, almost industrial-style pattern applied to much of the door furniture and other metal trim.

Sleeping accommodation is split into two areas, with the owner’s vast double cabin and a passage berth aft and three cabins forward. The standard layout provides a double up forward and a tiered twin. Ideal for a skipper and crew if required.

Customer feedback has decreed that the passageway leading to the master cabin aft should not interfere with the galley so it runs down the starboard...
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Developing the 65 styling and making changes to accommodate what clients want has been made easier by steadily improving 3D modelling programs for decks, interiors, structures and engineering. Darren Townsend in Oyster's design department used a Rhino 3D program for Boulevard 65, shortly to be replaced by Dassault Systèmes's Catia program, which is widely used in the automotive and aviation industries. The new software enables designers rapidly and extremely accurately to build up a picture of the yacht and then make changes quickly and efficiently. We hope to be looking at this program in more detail in a forthcoming issue.

The hull shelf into which the highly complex systems are designed using programs which automatically update when changes are made.

A look inside the 65s. The Rhino 3D program allows fast and very accurate modification.
Conclusion

We called a non-standard Oyster 655 and there is no doubt the performance boost adds an exciting dimension to what is essentially a cruising yacht. Spending time listening to how Oyster have improved their product through customer feedback gave us an insight into what goes into a yacht of such complexity and helps put the basic price of £1,253,000 ex VAT into perspective. How much more was spent on R&D? We imagine their performance is confidential information.

Kouture is a powerful, responsive sailing yacht which will clearly be in the money on the race course and at the same time provide a very comfortable cruising platform. In terms of detail and finish, this 655 is difficult to fault.

Oyster have done an exceptional job of finding space for the plethora of equipment under sole boards and behind settees, but it would be interesting to see a yacht with a larger machinery space, perhaps in lieu of the passage cockpit.

Oyster are a mature company with a highly professional approach to their product and the 655 is the latest impressive result of their development of serious offshore sailing yachts.

SPECIFICATIONS

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