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ITALIAN CHARMER?

A traditional yard building custom and semi-custom boats, Comar might be expected to produce just a few models a year. But their range covers 21 to 100ft and they have produced 80 boats in a year. How do they do it? Toby Hodges visits the yard in Rome and trials the company's stalwart, raised-saloon 62-footer

Photos: Richard Langdon/Ocean Images





With a proud smile, Massimo Guardigli presents another weighty lump of stainless steel. "Look here," he says, blowing off a cloud of dust like an archeologist revealing a rare find, "a bow roller we made for the 85..." "And here's the pushpit from a 35," he continues with the enthusiasm of a favourite uncle unveiling his beloved model train set.

From dark and dusty cupboards the chief executive of Comar Yachts pulls out everything from keelbolts to quadrants. He knows exactly which boat they're for and explains how each one was crafted on the premises because the builders couldn't find a product of the exacting standard they were looking for.

And herein lies the beauty of a long-standing family-run yard like Comar, who build the Comet branded yachts on the outskirts of Rome at Fiumicino. They bring a hands-on, traditional craftsmanship approach to an industry in which quicker and more efficient methods fuel the mass production machine, arguably sometimes at the expense of quality.

But that is not to say they build just a handful of

boats a year. In fact, they produce a staggering range from 21ft to 100ft, including three one-design classes. More on this on page 49, but in the meantime, to get a feel for one of their products, I test-sailed the Comet 62RS, a four-year-old design, but one which has a number of interesting features that keep her current.

We haven't seen many modern Comets in home waters, for reasons that will probably become apparent later, and first impressions were of a solid yet attractive cruiser, with a curvaceous cockpit and saloon that prove a real selling point.

The sunbathing area dominating the entire aft deck is large, even by Italian standards, and may give an indication of her warm water fanbase, but this all lifts hydraulically to reveal a whopping dinghy garage.

This layout works well by bringing the wheels forward, yet still leaving a large and very comfortable cockpit free of sailing systems and protected by the coachroof and sprayhood. There's lots of space and light down below and three en-suite cabins make sensible use of space, while leaving room for a huge crew cabin in the bows.

ON TEST COMET 62RS

Solid under sail

A certain amount of chaos ensued, and a great deal of voluble Italian, as far too many crew leapt to grapple with a twisted spinnaker. But despite the theatrics, I was immediately struck by how powerful this 21-tonne design is, thanks to a generous sailplan, balanced by a 3.1m T-keel. The fully battened main provided significant grunt, backed up by a 105 per cent genoa.

The wrap sorted and with white sails up, we began making 7.5 knots in 9-12 knots of true wind at 23-27° to the apparent wind. The Comet 62RS pointed reasonably well and tacked obediently through 85°, albeit with more than marginal load on the helm.

CEO Massimo Guardigli wasn't happy with the figures, concluding that a dirty bottom could have deprived us of up to a knot. Epoxy construction and sandwich

bulkheads reflect the importance of performance to the yard, which build some very successful cruiser-racers, and this model had the optional carbon rig, carbon rudderstock and blade.


Once the crew had finished playing with the hydraulic backstay, outhaul, vang, etc, we were up to 8 knots. Speed wasn't such a concern for me – this is a cruising boat after all – more importantly, she exhibited a solid, dependable performance.

Having both the main and primaries to hand is very useful for short-handed sailing, but the German mainsheet set-up isn't ideal as the winches are behind the helm. This creates two problems: you have to look away from the sails when easing/working the winch, and it's unnerving to sit up on the coaming right next to the mainsheet and its associated loads. I'd

therefore question how comfortable it would be to helm at heel for long periods if you were forced to stand at an angle. Crew, meanwhile, have the benefit of lifting the table slightly to provide a useful footbrace.

Helming with the gennaker up was very rewarding and we recorded 9.5 knots in a Force 4 at 80-90°. At this close angle the 62RS is an enjoyable ride, powerful yet with notable grip from the carbon rudder blade – allowing her to luff up and take a puff, before executing a big bear away to carry the apparent wind nicely.

With the chute snuffed, the afternoon breeze topped Force 4 and 20 knots over the deck. The log now showed 8.5-9 knots upwind at 25° apparent – very respectable figures and, combined with an enjoyable helming sensation, it was easy to envisage reaching like this for a long passage.



Comar developed a boom extension with Harken, such that a halyard can be led through and used to hoist the tender

The cockpit is a marvel – sociable, protected and very comfortable. The optional cockpit table is especially cool, rising electrically out of the sole. With the carbon inserts, this is a large and stable table for eight, completely free of sail systems

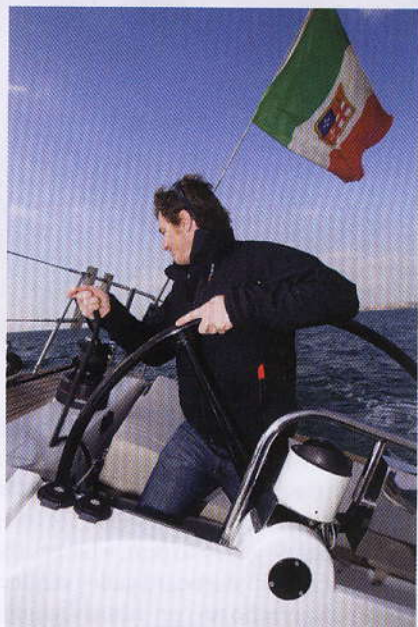
Halyards are locked on mast clutches, so you need to go forward to adjust these, but this does keep the cockpit clear of rope tails



A tall rig and fast underwater shape make for a powerful cruiser that could cover long distances comfortably



Releasing the mainsheet from the winch behind the helm is an awkward manoeuvre. Plus you have to turn away from the sails as you ease the sheet



Dinghy garage is superb – the whole aft deck lifts on pistons (like the lid to a powerboat's engine bay) to provide an area large enough to stow a 3.2m RIB with the outboard still mounted





Spoilt for choice

While most owners opt for a forward master cabin and two aft en-suites with a crew cabin forward, there is a fair degree of choice in these semi-custom models. One, for example, had a separate galley to port, whereas the test boat had a small starboard galley requested by her owner who was previously a motor boater and mainly ate ashore.

Although RS models represent Comar's cruiser line, their waterlines are still fast, with flat bilges, so together with a comparative lack of headroom aft and the dinghy garage,

the forward cabin works best for an owner's suite. The test boat was finished in simple, natural oak, but American Cherry is standard.

A shallow, curved companionway makes for a welcoming entrance into a large saloon bathed in natural light. The sole is raised so you can enjoy the view when standing, which is especially pleasant under sail. Engine, batteries and tanks are predominantly contained under the sole, leaving stowage room under benches.

Access to the engine bay is excellent as all the sole boards lift – the trouble is that this

soaks up the majority of the saloon access, making it near impossible for a skipper to do any service work while the owner is aboard. The well-executed insulation is first class.

I'd want to be able to open the forward coachroof windows for ventilation. As it is, mastic is used to absorb the movement of the 2cm thick windows, but the finish of this was poor, and some of the panes were looking tired and crazed after nearly three years. There are large hatches in the coachroof, but a method of locking these off at various angles would be welcome too.



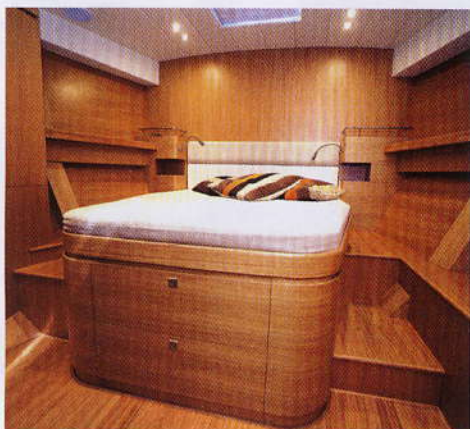
Galley The owner of the test boat had ordered a small galley, with high worksurfaces, but there's still a useful alcove area, plenty of stowage and space for three fridges and a freezer.



Saloon/navstation An extension to the table allows eight to sit around it in airy comfort. Otherwise, the saloon is rather conservative. The linear navstation boasts a huge chart table with



a revolving stool – which justified my dislike for this type by detaching during our sea trials. But there's ample space for plotters, screens and instruments, and the circuitry installation is impressive.



Master cabin This is sizeable and comfortable, with abundant oak veneer and joiner work, and I liked the way features have been made of the structure, like beams in a country cottage. These also make it very solid (stringers used as shelves, for example).

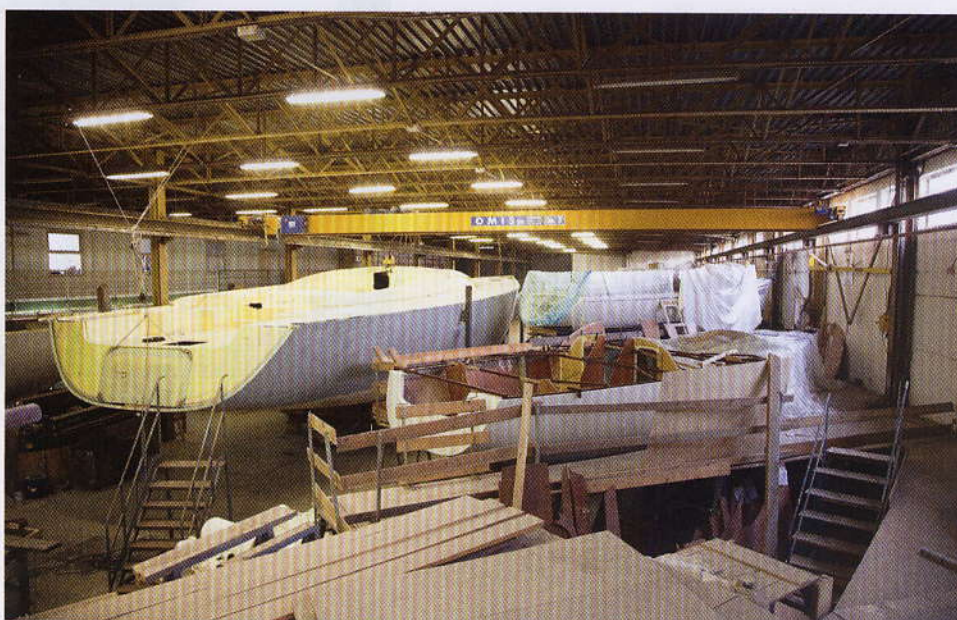
Despite a large overhead hatch, hull windows would be appreciated for extra light. Stowage is good, particularly in wardrobes aft on each side, and the en-suite is champion, including a stand-up shower with separate rainfall showerhead above a seat, and a large, deep sink area.



Aft cabins Identical, with ample space, these each feature twin berths that use the space well – but mounting these on rails to join into doubles would be a suggestion. Natural light is fine, although again a hull window wouldn't go amiss, and practical stowage is confined to one wardrobe and a shoe locker. The en-suites are an essential comfort on this size of boat and each has its own separate shower with seat.



The crew cabin is certainly one of the largest I've seen on a boat under 75ft and about the only one in which I wouldn't feel too claustrophobic. It has two separate berths, a head/shower and proper stowage, so will swallow all sails and fenders, as well as the crew's kit, if necessary.



Passion for the practical

The Italian firm of Comar have an old-fashioned philosophy in these days of mass production, but there's nothing old-fashioned about their range and quality of models. Toby Hodges investigates

When I walked into Comar's yard in the boatbuilding suburb of Fiumicino a few miles out of Rome, I couldn't help making comparisons with my father-in-law, who has a boatyard a little like this on a much smaller scale. To the casual observer it may look a little – how can I put this without fear of family fall-out – chaotic, but I know that at any given moment he'll be able to lay his hand on a certain jig or section of teak and tell you exactly where it came from.

Despite the comparatively disorganised nature of the Comar yard, a similar hands-on, do-anything approach to boatbuilding has meant that, during the downturn when mid-size production yacht sales have suffered, the Comet brand has kept a loyal customer base.

By expanding their custom line to its limits, Comar now produce a staggering range of boats, currently spanning 21ft-100ft, including three one-design classes, with a proposed 125ft project.

Clients obviously appreciate their can-do philosophy, hence Comar enjoy a high level of brand loyalty. Two years ago they were producing 70-80 boats a year, but although numbers are down, the yard have "been able to fulfill the demand of the semi-custom owner", according to chief executive Massimo Guardigli.

While Sergio Lupoli does the naval architecture for Comets below 35ft and



Chief executive Massimo Guardigli with his wife Flavia who heads up the interior design team

Andrea Vallicelli for those above, in the offices overlooking the factory floor Guardigli's wife Flavia heads up the design team for interiors and details. "Massimo likes to work with his hands and build things right," Flavia told me, "but we had to tell him to stop when he wanted to start building masts!"

Comar began life 50 years ago in Forlì on the east coast (initially under the name Sipia) and were one of the first yards to use glassfibre. When the Van de Stadt and Finot-designed Comet 910 launched in 1971 and went straight out to win the Middle Sea Race, work took off and more than 1,000 of

ON TEST COMET 62RS

the marque were sold over the next 15 years. The Comet 801, 11, 13 and 14 followed, and by 1989 Comar had 160 employees, producing an incredible 145 boats a year with a reported 25 billion lire turnover.

But with the downturn in the late Nineties, Comar's business declined. Guardigli bought the brand and remaining Comet hulls and relocated to the old Chris Craft shipyard in Fiumicino. A champion windsurfer, Guardigli had opened Rome's first sailboard shops before building up the Media Ship broking company he still owns with his brother Alessandro. Guardigli commissioned Vallicelli to design a new fast cruiser with a spacious interior and the Comet 51s was born, from which Comet's sports line has evolved.

Comar continue to produce dependable fast cruisers and racing yachts today. Vacuum-bagged airex sandwich foam is now used with epoxy vinylester resin and the boats are built to last. "Everything is over-dimensioned, from the stainless to the



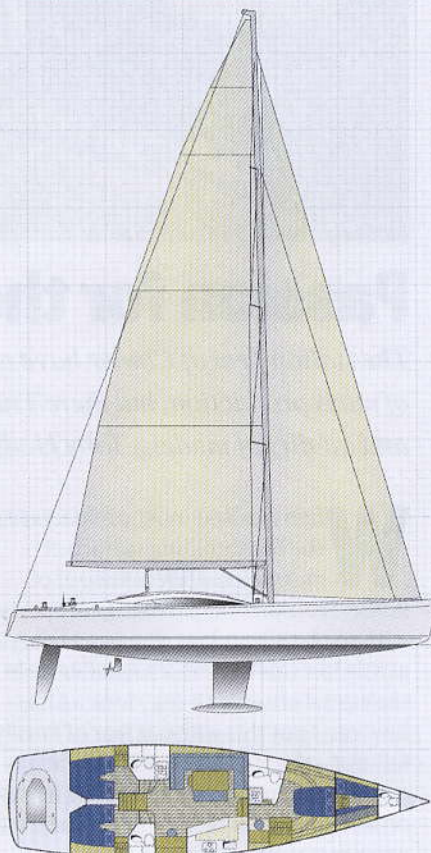
Stainless steel cleats made on the premises

deck gear," explains Guardigli, "because we want the boats safe in any condition." He maintains that the majority of the investment is hidden in the construction, which makes for the end quality of the boat, and the literature on the company's website is very anti mass-production.

For the last three years Comar have been building their smaller boats (21-35 footers) in Poland. Guardigli justifies the decision, saying: "In Poland you can do a good job like this at a good price." Their connection with Poland stems from the specialist lamination workers they've employed over 15 years.

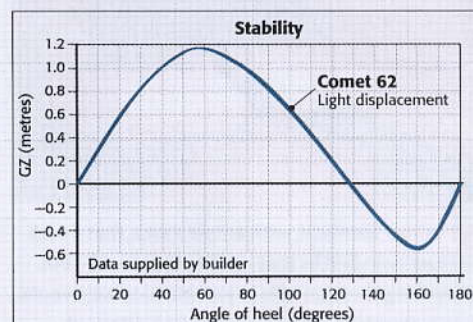
Without doubt, a lot of work still goes into the smaller boats (1,000 man hours on the 21, for example). This looks like an exciting one-design class, while a Comet 31, due to be introduced at the Genoa show in October, also looks promising.

A combination of these high-turnover small boats and large custom projects seems to be ensuring the Comet brand prospers.



SPECIFICATIONS	COMET 62RS
LOA	18.90m 62ft 0in
LWL	16.00m 52ft 6in
BEAM	5.25m 17ft 3in
DRAUGHT	3.10m 10ft 2in
DISP (LIGHTSHIP)	20,000kg 44,092lb
BALLAST	6,500kg 14,330lb
SAIL AREA (100% FORETRIANGLE)	172.7m ² 1,859ft ²
BERTHS	6+1
ENGINE (SAILDRIVE)	160hp Yanmar shaft drive
WATER	800lt 176gal
FUEL	800lt 176gal
SAIL AREA: DISP	23.8
DISP: LWL	136
PRICE (EX VAT)	€1,220,000 (£1,064,500)

Designed by Studio Vallicelli



CONCLUSION

I wondered whether a four-year-old design would be showing its age, but I came away impressed with the Comet 62RS. It would be hard to tire of her lines, and the innovation in her layout, particularly the dinghy garage, cockpit and crew cabin keep her modish.

The quality of her build becomes obvious when you sail her. Her fittings, I know from the yard visit, are robustly engineered, even oversized, which boosts confidence. She proved

rewarding and powerful, with a good turn of pace and a comfortable cruising motion. The price reflects a very complete spec, including bowthruster, watermaker and genset.

The can-do attitude of the Italian yard to build what they want how they want and at whatever size they want injects character, soul and quality into their boats. I worry that, with such a large range, they are juggling a lot of balls in the air, but if you're after something a little less run-of-the-mill, particularly a warm-water cruiser with scope for your own custom input, I'd say it could be time to think Italian.



See our in-depth video of the Comet 62RS test at yachtingworld.com/video

OR IF YOU HAVE AN IPHONE, USE THIS CODE TO VIEW THE COMET 62RS VIDEO

1. Search for QR Reader in your app store. Download your selected app.

2. Scan the code with your phone, using the app.

3. View *Yachting World's* exclusive video of the Comet 62RS