



Introducing a new series on Australia's most popular second-hand production boats. Experienced yacht broker David Bray profiles the history and enduring success of the Compass Yachts range

A press clipping captures the scene when the 300th Compass 28 rolled out of the shed. Toasting the new yacht are Don Lees and Gunther Heuchmer, the two founders of Compass Yachts, and the proud new owners. All are resplendent in the fashion of the day, which has come and gone (and come and gone again). But Compass Yachts' popularity endures to the year 2000 in the second-hand market, almost two decades since it stopped production.

Asked to write a regular piece about popular production yachts, I thought that Compass was a logical place to commence. So I rang Don Lees, now in Brisbane, who I occasionally catch up with on the phone when a client needs a surveyor up north. True to form as always, Don was happy, interested and obliging, despite the ups and downs dealt out by the boating industry to those who have been part of it.

What was going to be a quick 15-minute exploratory chat, turned out to be an hour of lively banter about the history of Compass Yachts, punctuated by happy reminiscences of just about every person involved in production-yacht building back in the '60s and '70s.

True to his word, an express post envelope arrived the next day bearing 'The Don Lees Library' full of photos, brochures and memorabilia that Don has collected over the years.

I was impressed by a black-and-white photo of a 'young slip of a kid', complete with thongs (jandies if you're a Kiwi), standing next to the strip plank plug of the Westerly 26 (later to be revamped and known as the Pacific 27). That photo was taken in 1969, when Don was 31. Oh how we age... or do black-and-white photos make us look young?

Like most fibreglass production-yacht builders of the day, Don started out his working life as a shipwright. Born in New Zealand, he had always messed around in sailing dinghies, from the P-Class up, and then yachts. The natural progression was to become a shipwright and Don also picked up naval architecture experience working with top New Zealand yacht designer Bob Stewart, famous for the Stewart 34s.

Don then moved to Australia and to gather more experience, he worked at the well-known Halvorsen's yard in Sydney, before moving out and starting work on his own.

By contrast, Don's co-director/co-designer, Gunther Heuchmer, came to Australia from Germany as a fibreglass technician, expert in both the marine and aeronautical fields with this relatively new material - 'fibreglass'. The story goes that the pair met up when Gunther was subcontracting the fibreglass mouldings and Don the timber fitout for the Endeavour 24s.

And so G.H. Fibreglass was formed somewhere in 1965/66, with Don and Gunther's first design being the Northerner 28. "A bloody big production yacht at the time," Don says. In fact, the only bigger fibreglass yachts on the local scene then were the Clansman 30 and Nicholson 32.

The first Northerner 28 hit the water in 1966 (a year after the Beatles' hit, Yesterday), to be followed by the Southerly 23, Westerly 26, and Easterly 30, filling out the four points of the compass, hence the company's name change in the '70s.

A feature in the Northerner 28 which was to follow through into the Compass 28 and Compass 29 was the high-set dinette and large cabin windows, to allow light in and a view out. In Don Lees' words, "On most yachts, going below was like going down a mine shaft!"

Interestingly, even though it was a large yacht by the day's standards, a Northerner 28 could be launched fully complete for under \$10,000 in the late '60s.

Around 1970, Don and Gunther made what was to be a fairly short-lived arrangement with the yacht designer/builder John Duncanson in South Australia. Duncanson was going to produce the fibreglass mouldings, to be fitted out by Don and Gunther.

Duncanson did produce a more modern deck moulding which was then used in what became the Compass 28 and in South Australia the Duncanson 29.

Another offshoot was that the Duncanson 18 briefly became the Compass 18, before moving on to David Rose and becoming the Compass Careel 18, Australia's most popular production trailer yacht.

By the time all production moved back to Sydney, the Compass 28 was replete with full fibreglass internal mouldings for the furniture, neatly trimmed with Don Lees' high standard of timber finish. It was therefore one of the first production yachts to be fully finished, commissioned and launched by the factory. Alternatively, the yacht could be ordered at various stages for owner fitout, using factory kits or their own resources.

The Compass 29 was born in 1974 out of Don and Gunther's desire to upgrade what had become Australia's most successful production yacht, to keep up with what customers desired and take advantage of some new production techniques to improve efficiency of construction.

Comparing the two, the Compass 29 has more freeboard, allowing two metres of headroom plus extra beam, which, together with the revised deck, allows for a beamier cabin including a dinette suitable for four adults - still with the fantastic view (the Compass 28 dinette is really only comfortable for two adults and two children, as the sidedeck encroaches too much).

The shrouds were moved inboard, allowing easier access forward, plus changes were made to the underwater shape. There is still argument as to which is the best sailing yacht... but as Don Lees says, "It depends who's on the tiller!" The Compass 29 definitely wins hands-down on internal room and comfort.

Initial thoughts (and hopes for factory efficiency) were that the Compass 28 would 'die off', to be taken over by the new Compass 29. This proved wrong, as the Compass 28s continued into the '80s. In fact, I remember selling two 28s into a charter fleet at The Spit in Sydney in the early '80s, at which stage I was Sydney Sailboat Centre with Geoff 'Grandad' Pearson.

Back in those days, people still bought new boats, as second-hand boats were still priced relatively close to the new boat price, and for some customers the Compass 28 was within reach while the Compass 29 was just that bit too expensive.

I asked Don Lees if he still had any old boat tests, as they were always a good source of information. His response was, "We were too busy selling them to do boat tests!"

It's probably sufficient to say that some people would describe the sailing ability of the Compass 29 as boring, while others would say sedate and 'un-scary'. The latter point of view explains why so many Compass 29s have been sold, and continue to sell quickly when they come on the second-hand market, as they satisfy the need for a safe, family yacht.

Checking through my sales folders proves that there is no such person as a typical Compass 29 owner. They can be first-time yacht buyers all the way through to those looking for "My last yacht... and I'll be taking the grandkids out on her".

Recently I sold a 1980 Compass 29, Karamanda, which apart from being in very good condition for its age, had the three magic ingredients that buyers want - wheel steering

recently sold a 1966 Compass 29, Karamanda, which apart from being in very good condition for its age, had the three magic ingredients that buyers want - wheel steering, headsail furler and the bigger Yanmar 15hp diesel. As the photos show, Karamanda is a stock-standard production yacht showing excellent utilisation of space. As mentioned before, the dinette 'with views' seats four adults comfortably and makes a good double bed when converted.

The dinette table includes a chart drawer, so that the space normally used for a dedicated chart table allows for a larger, longitudinal galley and two full-size adult quarter berths.

Forward of the galley and dinette is the private toilet area and the forward double bunk, which completes the roomy six-berth layout.

The Compass 29 was a cleverly packaged, old-fashioned yacht that imparted a feeling of safety to the buyer, together with a bright, airy interior taking full advantage of fibreglass furniture and linings.

Resale of the Compass 29s (and Compass 28s) is excellent, with most flying through marine survey. Structurally, the Compass 29s are 'over-built'; when they became popular as charter yachts both on Pittwater and in the Whitsundays, Don Lees could have built the boats lighter and still complied with the charter requirements. Many other production yachts had to be beefed up to comply.

The Compasses do suffer the usual crop of osmosis, which today is nowhere near the mystery it was 10-20 years ago. One well-known surveyor has gone to the trouble of backtracking through his surveys of all types of yachts and found that 95% of the fibreglass yachts have had osmosis during their life.

Don says: "Like many manufacturers worldwide, Compass Yachts suffered the period of transformation to the newer formulated resins, inheriting larger overseas and local resin manufacturers' initial problems. In retrospect, the material was critically unstable and required a post-curing and workshop temperature control not found in production yards even today."

As the largest producer of fibreglass yachts at that time in Australia, Compass was used as something of a 'guinea pig' for the new materials, causing some heartache in the company's warranty hip-pocket.

On the positive side, most Compasses on the market are 20-25 years old and have generally been surveyed at least five times or more during their life, giving the intended buyer solid reassurance.

In the mid '70s to early '80s, the yacht marketplace started to change and 'go modern'. Compass Yachts built the 1975 Sydney-Hobart winner, the groundbreaking Farr 1104, Piccolo. But as Don Lees says, "At Compass we had a very loyal customer base who wanted the more traditional cruising yacht, and as it turned out, a lot of them went to the Ron Swanson-designed Arends 33, while boats like John Buck's Northshore 27 and 33 and the Peter Cole-designed Traditional 30 picked up the modern end of the market."

At the end of 1979, Gunther decided to leave Compass Yachts and go to the performance end with his Farr 40s and 37s and later the Spider trailer yachts. One of his Farr 40s, Indian Pacific, sailed to victory in the notorious 1984 Sydney to Hobart Race.

Don Lees stuck with Compass Yachts and put his efforts into the centre cockpit Compass 33 Innovator, which was based on the Farr 1104 hull. The concept was ahead of its time and also totally foreign to the loyal band of Compass followers, who still wanted something traditional.

Don recalls that at the 1981 Sydney Boat Show, "The lights went out - it was recession time and no-one wanted to buy boats". It was certainly a sad time, since Compass yachts had put out close to 1000 yachts and had an excellent rapport with their customers.

I can recall picking up the last Compass 29 to come out of the factory - despite the obvious difficulties of a voluntary liquidation, Don had the boat ready on time, as promised. Just as we learnt to depend on Don, you can certainly depend on Compass Yachts.

Compass Yachts Production Stable	
Northerner 28	1965-70
Southerly 23	1968-70
Westerly 26	1969-70
Easterly 30	1969-72
Compass 18	1970
Compass 28	1970-81
Compass 29	1974-81
Compass 750	1977-81
Compass 38	1970-76
Defiance 30	1980-81
Farr 1104	1975-79

Current Market Values	
Compass 28	\$24,000-\$30,000
Compass 29	\$33,000-\$40,000
(Guide only - there are always exceptions at each end of the scale!)	

Compass 28	
LOA	8.58
LWL	6.70m
Beam	2.48m
Draft	1.30m
Displacement	3.25t
Ballast	1.78t

Sail Areas	
Main	17.46sqm
Jib	9.77sqm
Genoa	18.42sqm

Compass 29	
LOA	8.84m
LWL	6.90m
Beam	2.81m
Draft	1.30m
Displacement	3.60t
Ballast	1.73t

Sail Areas	
Main	15.47sqm
Jib	12.82sqm
Genoa	27.40sqm

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