



The cult of the Amel

These go-anywhere French bluewater cruisers and the design ideas they incorporate were one man's vision and part of an all-encompassing philosophy. Elaine Bunting investigates Amel's fascinating history

A typical Amel owner, apparently, is someone taking early retirement after selling a company. So it's curious that the man who started it all off and defined a whole long-distance bluewater cruising philosophy did it the other way around.

Henri Amel set up the eponymous boatbuilding business when he was aged 50. In the decades until he died in 2005 – aged over 90 and involved until the last on a daily basis – the yard produced more than 2,000 yachts that have cruised all over the world.

Amel's vision shaped every detail of his boats, from the hull he designed with the aid of a tame naval architect to every latch and gauge. He even concocted his own name: born Henri Toncet, he served with the French Résistance during the war and afterwards adopted his operational codename, Amel.

Amel had lost an eye during the war and eventually became blind in his remaining eye, but he never let that hold him back. He bought his first boat in the late 1940s and was a keen amateur boatbuilder/designer, building Sharpies in 1947 for the Olympics.

In the Fifties and early Sixties Amel designed and built a series of small sailing and motor yachts for coastal cruising from a yard in La Rochelle. In 1968 the shed caught fire and was destroyed. Amel started again, took a moulding from an existing boat and built a new factory with the help of his employees, who worked at weekends to revive the business.

This loyalty was the principal reason why 'le capitaine', as he was known, later decided to give the business over to his employees. Today shares in Chantiers Amel are entirely owned by those who have worked there for over 20 years, and they can only sell them back to the business.

Amel's first bluewater cruiser back in 1968 was the 39ft Sharki. It sported features that are stamps of the brand to this day: ketch rig, central cockpit and solid stainless guardrails. The Super Mistral followed, among others, then the Meltem, at 52ft large by the standards of the day.

In 1974, aged 60, Amel decided to take nine months off and sail on a Meltem with his wife from La Rochelle to Tahiti. It was on

▲ Above left: Henri Amel, a stickler for detail. Right: a Super Maramu under twin-poled headsails, a rig Amel popularised

this trip that he honed the ideas that turned Amels from a series of production designs to what he termed 'integrated cruising systems'. Armed with the experience of living on board and passagemaking in the Tropics, he wrote down and sketched every idea he had, and each day he conveyed these ideas back to the yard on the SSB radio so they could get a head start.

The result was the 46ft Maramu which, through its various larger evolutions the Super Maramu and the Super Maramu 2000, stayed in production until 2005 and ended with hull number 497.

The Maramu was envisaged as a complete boat, with everything needed to sail and live on board, and every system was carefully thought through so that it could be sailed by a couple capable of lifting no more than 20kg.

Amel insisted that ketches were easier for a cruising couple to handle and the philosophy never changed. The designs had electric furling sails and the first bow thrusters to be fitted as standard on production yachts. Every task except line handling was designed to be done from the cockpit, including anchoring.

His boats were sold complete and they were the Model T Ford of yachts, available in one shade. The company never encouraged options. You got what they made. If you didn't like it, shop elsewhere. In Henri Amel's era customers didn't even get to choose a different colour of curtains or upholstery.

The recipe was all-inclusive, from big items such as electric furling and winches,



l'accueil sur l'eau

“ These are real liveboard boats, made for long-term comfort and to Amel owners looking out from within, the view is just fine ”

Henri Amel gets a warm welcome in Tahiti when he headed off on his voyage in the 1970s, aged 60, aboard a Meltem

watermaker, generator, washing machine, washer-drier and so on, all the way to spare filters, a built-in safe, a vacuum cleaner, clothes hangers, towels, bathrobes and a hairdryer – even a bottle of champagne in the fridge and a set of glasses.

Until recently there was, unsurprisingly, also a Henri Amel prescribed method of sailing. Maramus had special fittings on the mast and shrouds to allow two poles to be set up downwind. In the Trades you sailed an Amel with twin headsails forward, the mizzen aft and perhaps no mainsail at all. You popped on the pilot and off you went. If the breeze got up, you pushed a button and took in a few rolls of headsail. Simple.

The same easy sailing ethos prevails today, though the twin pole fittings have disappeared to be replaced by a gennaker.

Amel's one-size-fits-all approach didn't appeal to everyone, but they argue (and I would tend to agree) that it helps with a higher degree of reliability. The relationship with regular suppliers is central to this, as is the uniformity of production and testing. When things do break down or need to be replaced, Amel have an excellent reputation for after-sales service, which owners I've met never fail to mention. This matters a lot when you are on the other side of the world in a place with few direct flights, obstructive Customs officials and a timetable to keep.

As for the look of older models, that beige Seventies or Eighties vibe, it's never been a mainstream taste. But the thing to remember is that these are real liveboard boats, made for long-term comfort and



The Amel Kirk from 1972, a really rare sight as this 35-footer was one of the very few sloops the company built



An interior photo of the 1971 Amel Euro – even then the high gloss varnish work was a notable feature of the design

convenience, and to Amel owners looking out from within the view is just fine.

The Amel 55 is a serious departure for the company. I wonder how Henri Amel might have viewed it – warily, I suspect, if only because the hull wasn't designed and the curtains chosen personally by him. I think it's a major aesthetic improvement, yet the Amel genetic code is clearly visible, right down to the moulded decks.

And the funny thing is that those old-fashioned features that still make Amels so idiosyncratic and cultish would be almost unsaleable for another brand. As a product, the Amel is cleverly beyond imitation.

Interestingly, too, Amel has an enviably sustainable niche as a small-scale boatbuilder. Co-operative ownership has made it easier for the management to resist the 'Anglo Saxon' business model of aggressive leveraging and expansion, and as a result they are carrying a very small debt. Last year the company had sales of €24 million ex VAT. With 132 employees it is "an ideal ratio", according to company chairman Jean-Jacques Lemonnier.

"We are one of the last companies that are 100 per cent independent. There's nobody from the bank on the board," he says. "Before we built one model [at a time], now we build two, but we are going to keep to 16 boats a year. We are not seeking more turnover. We want to improve quality and service, but expansion is not the philosophy here."

In other words, don't expect any more radical changes at Amel for a while. That's enough for now.

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