

**BEAUTY REALLY IS
ONLY SKIN DEEP
ON THIS LADY.
UNDERNEATH
SHE'S
TOUGH
AS NAILS.**



BY RON CALCUT.

I HAVE REVIEWED LARRY Wiltshire's plate aluminium SpaceCraft boats before, and been most impressed with the quality of the product, and the innovative flare that makes these boats quite different to anything else.

It was one of my reviews that brought Rhys Griffiths down from New Caledonia to look at Larry's work. Rhys is into coastal shipping up that way, and having originally been a shipwright by trade, he was always going to be harder to satisfy than the average boat buyer. To cut a long story short, Larry's work lived up to the glowing report I had written, and Rhys sat down with him to work out the details for the new boat.

If you have not done any amount of boating in the Pacific Islands region it's hard to appreciate just how much of a do-it-yourself business it is up there. Even keeping yourself alive at sea when things go wrong can be a do-it-yourself event, and the people who get the most out of their boating tend to be those with bullet-proof equipment.

Rhys wanted something that could handle long range work, and he wanted the cockpit room to handle dive and fishing charters as well as his own recreational boating needs. They ended up with specifications of 8.0 x 2.84m (26'2" x 9'3"), and that three to one format delivers a massive cockpit.

There are many things about SpaceCraft boats that make them stand out in a crowd, but the most significant thing by far is the placement of the motor. Buyers of big plate aluminium boats usually go for diesel stern drive power, but Wiltshire could never get happy about the things all that weight right at the back of the hull did to a boat, so he did something that was radical in the extreme.



FIELD TEST SPACECRAFT TOURNAMENT XT800

Stern drive engines go right at the back of the boat because that's where they have to be if the engine leg is going to go out through the transom. Wiltshire's solution to this age old problem was to put a short tunnel in the back of the boat so that the engine could be taken forward into the cockpit and the leg run under the cockpit sole. The end result is a perfectly balanced boat, a low profile engine box with access between it and the transom, and a hull that is far superior to many other sterndrive rigs in the handling department. It is also reasonable to entertain the notion that the propeller might be getting served with cleaner water in that tunnel as well, but that is pure speculation on my part.

LAYOUT

This being a first cab off the rank proposition, and a custom job as well, the layout was designed specifically for Griffiths, although it is certainly practical enough to be the right way to go for a lot of other people as well, especially if they live in warm to hot areas.

The boat breaks down into just two areas - cockpit and cabin, which means that both areas are quite huge.

The cabin is so large that the central foot well area is a major storage space, and this is backed by even more storage under the side bunk bases. With the infill in place the total bunk area would easily accommodate two adults and a couple of kids for a comfortable night's sleep. Large side shelves deliver even more storage.

Just inside the bulkhead an oversized 24 switch Heinemann breaker panel puts control of the boat's power supply within easy reach of the helm. This is a nice position for it as you can reach down to the switches from the helm seat, but everything is well and truly protected from the elements in there.

The bulkhead companionway has been designed as an open passage, but the whole cabin area can be sealed and very securely locked with a set of plates that slide into recesses either side.

Beyond this, almost two thirds of the boat is dedicated to cockpit area, with the forward half coming under the protection of a long hard top. This over head cover extends forward of the screen top, and the space between is sealed with a set of clears with zip-out centre sections. This allows you to seal up completely, seal up with the centre sections out for enhanced forward vision, or you can take the lot out and have the full breezeway between screen and hard top. A good system, I feel.

I thought that five people could travel up in this forward area quite comfortably if weather conditions sent the whole crew looking for shelter. Seating is provided for four, with the two forward pedestal seats and two fold-down seats coming off the sides immediately behind.

SpaceCraft does very nice helm areas, and this one is no exception. The Volvo instrument cluster dictates gauge setup to some degree, and this sits just up above the wheel at a shallow angle. There is still space beyond that for a flush set compass and a stereo/cassette unit.

The wheel was a nice padded Morse and both the throttle and leg trim button were sensibly located to fall easily to the hand.

Dash top space continues across to the left at the same level to accommodate a row of three JRC CRT display cabinets, including a JLV-121 GPS/chart plotter, a JFV-86 colour sounder and a JMA- 2112 radar. The radar was located to the far left, the sounder in the middle and the GPS right next to the helm.

I was very interested to see how this all worked in practice, and concluded that it was a workable enough situation. The JRC radar is a very simple set to operate, and in practice requires less hands on than the other two units. They were pretty much stacked in order of priority I thought, and simplified operating systems these days make it reasonable to run a setup like that if you have the dash-top space.

And speaking of dash tops, SpaceCraft again uses a grey carpet cover across the top of the white dash top to eliminate glare and reflection onto the back of the screen. This is a great idea and it would be nice to see anti-glare treatments here becoming an industry standard.

The whole dash drops into a large recess beyond the companionway to accommodate a spirit stove directly in front of the passenger position. This may sound a little odd, but you have to remember that these stoves come with a timber inset cover, so it all works as simple dash storage until you want to use the stove. A narrow sink angles back to the side off the stove to provide about the most compact little galley setup I can remember seeing. I imagine you would remove the bucket seat from the pedestal to prepare a meal here.

Built to survey standards, the XT800 has what Larry described as two massive girders running the full length of the boat that effectively divide the underfloor longitudinally into three sections, as well as stiffening the whole thing considerably and allowing the creation of sealed compartments a much simpler process.

Immediately aft of the helm position two enormous ice boxes with a capacity of 850 litres each are located. Behind these, a 450 litre fuel tank resides on either side adjacent to the engine box. Most of this weight then is biased just forward of the transom and from mid-ships aft, contributing to longitudinal balance and exceptional lateral stability at rest. This boat does not move very much at all when you step down on a side deck.

Goodies galore abound as you move aft. Huge, long side pockets that hold extensive rod racking towards the back of the boat. The sides of the engine box have been tapered in as it rises to minimise the profile in fact and in effect. A basic fighting chair is located on the box top.

The transom has been maximised with a door that drops out with steps built-in to become a diver's ladder when it is down. It carries a massive, clear fronted bait tank that extends aft beyond the transom to deliver a big surface area, a deck wash system and further storage spaces. A cleaning table sits over the transom and dive tank holders are located outboard.

A simple observation-only tuna tower sits over the hard top - a very handy thing to have when you navigate in coral reef areas.

The nature of the frame tower is such that it naturally provides all the hand holds you would want to move safely along the side deck to the ground tackle houses on the foredeck in an open locker, and as you would expect on a boat of this type, all deck hardware is of very serious dimensions.

In line with the amazing standards of work now established by our best aluminium people, SpaceCraft boats are produced to a standard of finish that is about as close to perfection as can be achieved within the limitations of the material. That standard goes beyond the skin to high integrity internals designed to stand up to long term abuse.

There is a great deal more in the way of detail that might be commented on, but it all comes under the general heading of custom work for a particular owner.

The external lines of this boat are particularly pleasing. I looked at it during the time of the Port Stephens game fishing competition, and although dwarfed by the big fly bridge boats all around it on the marina, the SpaceCraft was clearly a star attraction, with a lot of knowledgeable boat people stopping to check it out and admire the fit up.

PERFORMANCE

I looked at this boat in weather that had brought the game comp to a halt and kept the entire fleet tied up at the marina. Fortunately, the layout of the bay in that part of the world allows one to sneak up on a wild sea one step at a time, so it was possible for us to take a run on some fairly torrid water without being silly about it.

The boat had been set up with a Volvo KAD 42 DP 230hp diesel and Marcon hydraulic steering. Although the Volvo demonstrated that it had impressive grunt and economy going for it, it also had a compressor producing an unholy level of noise whenever it cut in. Rhys indicated that the Volvo would soon be having a little operation to deal with the offending compressor.

Obviously, the level of loading is going to have some bearing on the performance of a boat with the load carrying capacity this one has, but speed tests prior to loading, then after adding one ton, saw performance fall away by just one knot. With the fuel tanks half full and

five on board, a speed of 32 knots was achieved. It cruises at 20 knots at 3000 rpm, which is near ideal for a hull of this size. At that speed the engine is burning close to 15 litres per hour.

Rhys took the boat out to sea in what was pretty much a gale force wind, and I was pleased that he was driving, as I would never have pushed his boat as hard as he was prepared to. He proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was going to take some hammering to break his new boat.

Because of the way these boats are balanced they are able to push hard in any direction without the need for any great modification of leg trim. They rise well into large, steep seas and you can hammer them down into troughs as hard as you want to go. They run hard and straight and need very little attention to the wheel, even in the quite extreme conditions we were working with.

We stopped beam-on to the seas at one point and concluded that stability really was outstanding, although it could hardly be anything else with a low profile boat carrying weight the way this one was.

When it is trimmed off at speed in a light chop you can hear that pattering under the hull indicating a boat riding high in the water. There has been a definite shift of interest in recent years from big fly bridge craft to pocket battle wagons in the 7 to 10 metre range, like this one from SpaceCraft. If you get the chance to run one in rough water it is not hard to understand why. They have the range, the rough water capacity, the speed and the cockpit space to go where the fish are and to handle quite extreme conditions.

With boats commonly doing 150km and more in a single day's tournament fishing, the difference in running costs between a high windage fly bridge and these low profile hulls amounts to serious money. Very serious money. Upkeep, mooring fees and fitout, to say nothing of initial purchase price, adds up to even more serious money.

I feel that more and more boats like this one are going to find their way onto the water in the years to come, and you couldn't find a better example of the virtues of the breed than this XT800 SpaceCraft.

