

>> Senator RH650

TEXT & PHOTOS BY MIKE ROSE



*Baby
we
were
born
to run
fish*

IN ONE OF THE MOST CROWDED SECTIONS OF THE ALLOY BOAT MARKET, THE SENATOR RH650'S COMBINATION OF GOOD LOOKS, PERFORMANCE AND SHEER FISH-ABILITY ENSURES THAT IT WILL STAND OUT.

I'm sure it won't come as big news to anyone but, as a pretty general rule, aluminium pontoon boats are not the marine world's prettiest creations. Their very nature requires that their hulls protrude outwards from where even the most basic of aesthetics insist they should be; and the sheer bulk of those hulls makes it almost impossible to attractively get from the width of the transom, around the cabin sides to the pointy end of the bow. That said, some pontoon boat manufacturers make a much better job of it than others. And, in this humble scribe's opinion, Senator Boats is one of the very best. That view was further enhanced when I first saw the new Senator RH650 on its tandem trailer in the Half Moon Bay Marina carpark early one March morning. Perhaps it was the fact the sun was only just thinking of getting up, perhaps it was the 650's black hull. Regardless, this did not look like a typical pontoon boat. Sure, there were clinker-like strake lines along the sides but where were the ugly bulges, the balloon-like pontoons? The simple fact is, they are not there. Even after the sun was well over the horizon and I was standing on the wharf at Motuihe as the 650 shot past below, it was difficult to reconcile what I was seeing with the expected view of a pontoon boat. Rather, the RH650 has an almost sleek look, especially when viewed from the aft corner. Further forward, it is true, the hull makes two reasonably sharp turns on its way to the bow. Nevertheless, partly due to its shiny black finish, the overall effect is undeniably impressive. On board, there is no doubt that this is a boat for fishing. The cabin is definitely of the cuddy variety (although a couple of clever bunk extensions mean overnighting is possible); the

hardtop is compact (covering the helm and most of the seating area and not much else) and the rest is cockpit, gloriously uncluttered cockpit. There are other clues, too. In the cabin, a large plastic hatch in the forward bulkhead (opening into the anchor locker), is flanked by half a dozen teal-coloured sleeves. These are actually Tenob rod holders, designed to hold game rods, keeping them safely out of the spray and yet close at hand when needed. In the coamings, on the back of the baitboard and in the rocket launcher, are another nine dedicated rod holders.

Powered with a Mercury 150hp EFI 4-stroke, top speed was 34 knots.



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Workboat heritage

My guide for the day, Matt Keys from local Senator dealer Auckland Marine Centre, says one of the things their customers like most about the Senator range is their "work boat heritage."

I think he is referring to the boat's robustness and the fact owner Wayne McKinley has been building his Senator range for the best part of 30 years. He is certainly not referring to the way the boat has been finished or presented. There is, for example, virtually no bare aluminium to be seen anywhere in either the cabin or hardtop; the few exceptions are the hand rails and foot rests, the base of the cuddy seat modules and the passenger king/queen seat base. Not only is everything else fully carpeted, it is done so to a very high level. It has also been done with an eye on the future: the carpeted panel on the starboard window strut, for example, can easily be removed should one wish to add more electronics to the dash.

Another strong selling point for the Senators is the company's willingness to customise its boats. As Matt explains, few of those ordering a Senator, especially one of this size, are first-time boat buyers. Most are either previous trailer boat owners wanting something a bit bigger or moored boat owners seeking the greater flexibility and ease of handling that an aluminium trailer boat offers.

The little cuddy, almost certainly the least used area of the boat, nevertheless provides good examples of both Senator's innovative thinking and its willingness to customise. Not wanting to waste valuable cockpit space in such a little-used area. McKinley and his design team have sensibly kept the bunks relatively short. However, recognising that there may be times when a tallish bloke wants to stretch out and relax, they have found a clever way to extend them, too. By simply removing the pins holding them upright, the footrests on both the driver's and the passenger's side can swing down, ready to accommodate a brace of padded squab extensions.

There are also options for that otherwise dead space under the squabs and between the seats. On our demonstrator this was left clear but Matt explains that owners can choose to add a small return (to stop gear stowed here from sliding back into the



The cuddy cabin and cockpit blend well together.



The RH650's transom is an impressively practical affair, with not a square millimetre of space wasted.

cockpit) or, even (as already selected by one owner) a dive tank rack.

Admirable hardtop

There is also a lot to admire in the RH650's hardtop. There is a large flat area in front of the passenger seat that runs right across to the helm station. Carpeted, it is a great spot to store things that are likely to be needed in a hurry or, for those who still prefer the paper variety, to spread out charts. There is



The RH650's cockpit is a real fisher's and diver's dream.

also more carpeted stowage in open lockers along both sides, with the port one running right up to the forward bulkhead and being deep enough to easily accommodate the rolled up rear canopy.

The other noticeable feature of the hardtop is its height. Although it does not look overly large or out of proportion from the outside, within it is very spacious; I am 185cm (6' 1") and the top of my head was nowhere near the roof.

What one chooses to fit in the way of electronics, gauges and the like is, as always, very much an individual choice.

For its demonstrator, Auckland Marine has kept things relatively simple. There are the standard Mercury Smart Craft gauges (which, among other things, offer a full suite of engine and fuel information), an attractive black-fascia-ed Furuno TZ-9 GPS/Fishfinder, a couple of BEP DC switch panels and controls for the Quick windlass and the Electrotab trim tabs. In addition, a Fusion stereo, a Uniden VHF and a cabin light are centrally mounted on the ceiling.

The windscreen is a two-panel affair, fitted with tinted safety glass. There is also a single opening window (on the driver's side), which will help with airflow on hot, windless days (although I can't help wonder if another over on port wouldn't be a good idea, too).

Although king and queen seats are listed as standard, on the Auckland Marine Centre demonstrator, the driver's one has been replaced by a Softrider pedestal model.

There are two separate open lockers under the passenger seat. The upper has been used to stow towels and the like while the bigger one below has a fire extinguisher and, on the demonstrator at least, is also home to mooring lines.

The RH650's cockpit is a real fisher's and diver's dream. The chequerplate floor is further protected with optional PVC tube matting (I think it's a must) and everything else is tidily tucked away in either the spacious sides or the well-designed transom. On side decks attractively fitted with anti-skid panels are a brace of Nacsan rubberised foam rod holders. In even further evidence that this is a serious fishing craft, safety lanyard eyes are also fitted alongside all of the gunwale rod holders.

The RH650's transom is an impressively



Plenty of room for all your gauges and instruments.

practical affair, with not a square centimetre of space wasted. In the centre and to starboard are two raised enclosed lockers, home to the boat's twin batteries, their various switches, a pair of CTEK battery monitors and the pump for the livebait tank. This latter lives under the step to the duckboard and comes complete with a forward-facing window.

Having "the services" high out of the way in their own lockers means there is space underneath for tackle bags or boxes, gear bags or even tote tanks (although, with a 210-litre underfloor fuel tank, the latter are unlikely to be needed very often). Over on the starboard side, there is also a Maxwell circuit breaker panel for the windlass and a coiled salt water washdown hose.

Although transom-mounted bait stations have now become fairly common, the one on the RH650 has some notable features. Not only is it, like the rest of the vessel, rather nicely finished, it also comes complete with its own pull-out tray (under the bait table) and a baitboard pre-etched with measurements (ideal for checking if that fish, cray or scallop is big enough to keep).

The Auckland Marine Centre demonstrator also has a sturdy pair of tuna tubes, complete with external pumps, which can be removed for winter fishing.

The other noticeable feature in the cockpit is the large underfloor locker in front of the fuel tank. Owners can choose to use this as a kill tank (it has its own bung) or use it for stowage.

Quiet performer

Two things are immediately noticeable as we head away from the marina and out into



There are two separate open lockers under the passenger seat.

the Hauraki Gulf: the RH650's large windows and windscreen ensure excellent panoramic visibility, even in the pre-dawn half light; and, despite this being an alloy pontoon boat, there is virtually no sound from either the engine or from the hull moving through the water. Neither of those advantages is diminished once we are on the plane, either, and remarkably for a pontoon boat, the Senator rides surprisingly flat (in my experience, the majority of pontoon boats tend to have a quite pronounced bow-up attitude when underway).

Unfortunately, despite cyclone Lusi being forecast to arrive in just two days, there is little in the way of sea conditions to test the

650. Nevertheless, the way it copes with the sometimes-confused chop supports Matt's contention that good seakeeping and a soft ride are among the biggest selling points for Senator's pontoon models. He attributes the vessel's comfortable ride to the company's trademark harder chines and fine entry (26 degrees of deadrise at the bow, flattening to 18 degrees at the transom).

The RH650 also seems unfazed by the point of attack: upwind, downwind or beam-to the sea makes little or no difference to the ride angle. The RH650 does not require a huge amount of additional trim, either. Once dialled in, the tabs can pretty much be left alone, except, I imagine, in a strong cross wind



The cuddy provides good examples of innovative thinking.





A The Auckland Marine Centre demonstrator had sturdy pair of tuna tubes, complete with external pumps, which can be removed for winter fishing.

A A great place for the live bait tank.

when they will be needed to counteract the windage of the hardtop. Otherwise, it seems best to forget them altogether and simply use the engine's trim control to get onto the plane and then balance the ride. Tight turning at either speed, off the plane or in reverse are all completely effortless as well: the RH650 rightly comes fitted with hydraulic steering. Powered with a Mercury 150hp EFI 4-stroke, our demonstrator was fitted with a 17" pitch EnerTia propeller and this gave a top

speed of 34 knots at 5700rpm. Of course, fuel economy is never good at the top end and those travelling at WOT can expect to use 53 litres per hour. At cruising revs, the Senator RH650/150hp Mercury combination delivers 18.8 knots at 3500rpm (and 21.7 L/h), 22.5 knots at 4000 (26L/h) and 26.1 knots at 4500rpm (38L/h). Those wanting greater speeds can rest assured: the RH650 hull is rated for outboards up to 225hp. Knowing how conservatively manufacturers rate their hulls,

even bigger horsepower engines would probably not be out of the question (a friend with a just-under-6m Senator pontoon boat ran it with a high output 200hp 2-stroke with no problems at all).

Conclusion

Matt says the end of 2013 and the first few months of 2014 have been "very good" for Auckland's Senator dealership. He adds that much of the interest in models like the RH650 has come from word-of-mouth recommendations from existing Senator owners. "Those considering buying, respect the opinion of their boating mates and, because they are generally experienced boaters themselves, they like sitting in our demonstrators and planning what their new boat will look like. "The high level of customisation that Senator is willing to do for them is a big plus too, as is the company's build quality, the boat's solid 'work boat' feel, the ease with which electronics and the like can be retro-fitted and, of course, Senators' outstanding seakeeping." Also appealing are the relatively short build times. At most times of the year the gap between ordering and delivery is just 8 weeks and even in the hectic run-up to Xmas it is still only 10-12 weeks.

TECHNICAL

Make & model: Senator RH650
Manufacturer: Senator Boats
Packages from: \$75,990
Price as tested: \$97,990
Type: Aluminium pontoon
Construction: marine grade alloy.
 Hull: 5mm; pontoons: 3mm
LOA: 6.75m
Hull length: 6.5m
Beam: external: 2.38m; internal: 1.86m
Deadrise: 18 degrees
Height on trailer: 3.1m
Trailerable weight: 18800kgs (dry)
Test power: Mercury 150hp EFI 4-stroke outboard
Propeller: Inertia 14.5 x17
Top speed: 34 knots
Power options: Outboard, inboard on request
Power range: 100-225hp
Fuel capacity: 210 litres
Trailer: DMW tandem axle braked trailer

This boat could be protected against the effects of corrosion, oxidation and discolouration
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Notable Standard Items on Test Boat: Safety glass windscreen.

Notable Options on Test Boat

Hydraulic steering, tuna tubes, salt water washdown, typhoon bait board, gaff racks, cockpit spotlight, stereo, VHF radio & aerial, bunk extensions, windscreen wiper, remote capstan & ground tackle, Furuno TZ-9 GPS/fish finder, canvas back drop & clears.

Boat Supplied by

Auckland Marine Centre, 247 Ti Rakau Drive, Pakuranga, Auckland
 Ph 09 578 7981, E: sales@aucklandmarine.co.nz

Contact:

www.senatorboats.com

PERFORMANCE DATA

RPM	Speed knots	Fuel lph
1000	4.4	2.9
1500	5.7	4.8
2000	7.0	7.6
2500	10.2	12.0
3000	14.8	16.6
3500	18.8	21.7
4000	22.5	26
4500	26.1	38
5000	31.2	48
5700	34	53