



NEW

Caledonia

The weather might not have suited fishing
but it was ideal for boat testing...



JEFF STRANG

Story and photographs
by Jeff Strang

It seems remarkable that after 20 years in the industry and five testing boats, this was first my first time stepping aboard a Senator.

I certainly knew about them, frequently watching in envy as these Napier-built brick outhouse fishing machines charged by on one occasion or another but the planets had never aligned to allow the opportunity to experience a Senator first-hand.

To be fair, I didn't need to ride on a Senator to discover what great fishing boats these are. Wayne McKinley's been building Senator boats for almost thirty years. He is a fishing fanatic and comes with some considerable reputation on that front.

Unfortunately, on this testing day the weather wasn't going to allow us to put a bend in a rod. But if you are going to test boats, the rougher the better, right?

Brand new *Caledonia*

Wayne Lee has wanted a boat for a long time. Yet, like so many of us he's been too busy working to justify the time such an investment deserves.

When the right time eventually arrived his reasons for approaching Senator were straight forward. They are local, they are all but impossible to break, and they can be customised almost any way a customer desires. To the last point Wayne admits his lack

of boat experience meant he relied heavily on McKinley's advice, which seems to have worked out brilliantly.

Flower of Scotland

The vessel's name *Caledonia*, refers to the original Roman word for Scotland. As any farmer will tell you, it also refers to a particularly stubborn breed of thistle. On the Senator RH780 Hardtop, evoking such tough and indomitable spirit seems particularly appropriate.

With a building, and icy, south easterly ruffling the top of a metre or so ground swell, we headed out past the Napier Wharf breakwater to put the RH780 through her paces.

In the current landscape Wayne's decision to power *Caledonia* with twin 175 Suzukis is a prudent one. The brand offers great value for money and most models in the Suzuki range boast a power to weight ratio that allows many vessels to bolt more horses in place than the buoyancy factor of a particular hull might otherwise cater for. In layman's terms, you can bang a bloody big engine on the back without as much the risk of sinking its backside too far.

Not that the pontoon configuration of the Senator has any buoyancy issues. And with a top speed better than 40 knots the armchair critics of pontoon boat high-end performance can be treated with credit they deserve – zip.





Even more impressive is *Caledonia's* ability to plane on one engine. Yes, in the event of a single engine failure, there's no need to settle in for a long limp home, or worse still, a tow. Just pull the effected leg out of the water and power up to a comparatively sedate cruise of no less than 24 knots.

Our high speed manoeuvres through the building sea couldn't bend the thistle's will either, the boat riding tall, dry and defiant in the face of my efforts to see it show a weaker side. No surprises there, Senator builds enjoy an enviable reputation as all-weather workhorses in the fishing community and are the choice of many commercial and charter operators, including the top flight Epic Adventures business in Whitianga.

But the kitchen sink

Frankly, I'm not fan of boring our readers with an endless dissertation of details and specifications. If you need this substantial list check out the Senator website (Senatorboats.com) or better still call a dealer or even Wayne McKinley himself.

▲ Great hull shapes mean these boats need little trimming to work well at most speeds.

A few points of special note are as follows-

The centrally located walkthrough transom with its adjoining ultra sturdy boarding ladder is a masterstroke. Divers will appreciate how easy this feature will make life, especially given all the grab rails in comfortable reach. It also takes makes boarding the boat as it sits on the trailer a doddle.

The extra wide configuration of the twin Suzukis, which is partly driven by the need to create space for the aforementioned boarding ladder, significantly improves *Caledonia's* manoeuvrability. Paired with Suzuki's proprietary fly-by-wire controls, this feature quickly builds driver confidence in tight situations, like berthing.

▼ Wayne Lee is justifiably proud as punch of his first boat.





▲ Simple touches like the little draw under the bait board (top) are indications of how much fishing intuition goes into the Senator build.

The helm console (above left) is straight forward yet functionally arranged with space for most toys.

Caledonia's customised removable cray pot winch (above right) winch just makes sense.

The cabin is comfortable, roomy and dry with excellent visibility and is supported by a full length bunk forward so with a little planning, overnighters are an option for the hardy.

For fishing's sake

With my fishing hat on a number of features are worth mentioning.

There's the generous live-well built into the dive platform. It self-floods when *Caledonia's* at rest and has a high-volume pump in situ to ensure healthy live baits when underway.

With 21 rods holders on offer – eight in the gunwales, four on the bait-board and nine fixed to the rocket launcher – most serious angler's arsenals are going to be well catered for.

The bait-board itself offers a tidy slide-away utensils draw for all those items which are best kept in arms reach when your hands are covered in bait. It's a simple but well appreciated feature many top boats lack.

Like many Hawkes Bay fishermen, Wayne Lee is pretty keen to set a few

» SPECIFICATIONS

Senator RH780 with twin 175HP Suzuki outboards

LOA: 7.97m

**BEAM
EXTERNAL:** 2.7m

**BEAM
INTERNAL:** 2.11m

**PONTOON
THICKNESS:** 3mm

HULL THICKNESS:
6mm

**TRANSOM
DEAD RISE:**
18 degrees

**APPROXIMATE
WEIGHT:** 2490kg

**WIDTH ON
TRAILER:** 2.7m

FUEL CAPACITY:
280L

LIKED

- High top end performance
- Ability to plane on one engine
- Walkthrough transom and boarding platform
- Generous rod-holders as standard
- The confidence of a top-quality build
- Full customisation

NOT SO MUCH

- An option for a kitchenette would be useful as I would probably want to overnight on this boat

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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craypots when he gets the chance. With this in mind McKinley has customised a removable winch to take the work out of that task. It's pretty slick of work so I suspect it not the first time such an item has rolled out of the Senator workshop.

The overall deck space of the RH780 is generous in the extreme. Wayne McKinley has put special effort into

maximising the width of the deck plate because he knows how important it is for fishermen to be able to get their toes as close to edge of the gunwales as possible. Pontoon boats are often criticised in this area so with certain builds, such as some commercial fishing boats, McKinley actually lifts the floor marginally to squeeze out a few more precious square centimetres of deck space.

This huge deck allows for an equally massive 280 Litres of underfloor fuel space, which by my calculations, should allow for two big days at sea.

The Verdict

Without doubt the Senator RH780 is quality fishing boat built to handle the conditions any recreational fisher could ever realistically expect to encounter. That it comes with a five warranty underlines McKinley's confidence in his products.

As a first boat, Wayne Lee has made an excellent choice and for all the right reasons. Personally, if it were mine, I'd customise this boat more in line with what I would need for big game fishing. Having talked to McKinley about this I am confident there is nothing I would ask that he hasn't done before.

I really enjoyed chatting with Wayne during a quick factory tour post the test. His passion for fishing is infectious and it overflows into his products. If you are looking for x-factor, this this is where it starts. And for my money this application of talent and fisherman's intuition is bloody near as important as the quality of the welds. ☘

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