

review

Senator 500

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MIX & MATCH

How much can there be to write about a small, open boat built from aluminium? Well, quite a bit, as it turns out, because Senator's new 500 side-console has a whole raft of cool stuff going on.



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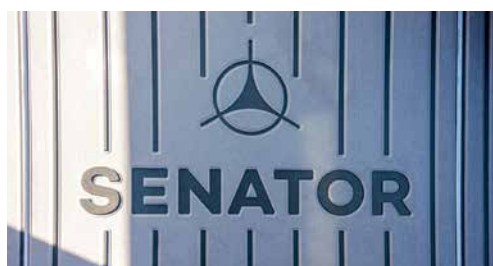
he latest from Napier-based Senator Boats, the award-winning 500 is a sturdy aluminium pontoon design – what Senator calls a chamber boat – in a practical side-console configuration with a raft of features unique to the brand. These include the

boat's angled 'wave breaker transom', designed to discourage waves coming in over the stern during beach launches, and a modular system of add-on features that allow the boat to be blinged up from the factory or upgraded later.

This boat, wrapped above the chines in burnt orange 3M vinyl, is Senator's demonstrator, so it's loaded with every

module and option the builder offers. The boat currently resides at Fishing Boats NZ's spectacular new yard, covered showroom, service centre and trailer fabrication complex in Hobsonville, Auckland. Fishing Boats NZ is aiming to be New Zealand's largest Senator Boats dealer.

The modular idea is clever. Senator allows owners to spec the boat however they want it, starting with a base, but very comprehensive fitout and adding features from a long list that includes a drum winch, bait board, live bait tank and washdown, hydraulic steering. Electric trolling motor mount, underfloor fuel tank, various seating and storage options, a portable toilet, nav lights and more.



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As a company demonstrator, this boat has all the add-ons – possibly more than I would want for my own boat, but I get the point. Certainly, the bow rail-mounted rod holders would annoy me after a while, especially since I'm not a bait fisher. But Senator has fitted Railblaza ports everywhere on this boat, which also boasts a range of Railblaza accessories, including a phone bracket, EPIRB bracket, swivelling rod holders, removable navigation lights, cupholders, electric motor brace, and more. It's something of a showcase for Railblaza's brilliant New Zealand-designed-and-built accessories.

As a keen angler myself, I'm a big fan of this style of boat. It's ideal for lure fishing, especially, with the small casting platform in the bow (plus optional side platforms/seats to either side, both with storage underneath) combined with the superb stability of a chamber boat.



ABOVE The Yamaha F70 four-stroke is a good fit for this hull, though a 75hp would supply a bit more urgency.

OPPOSITE Comfortable seating with adjustable seat bases, a well laid out side console, the electric's lithium battery tucked up under the casting platform, and Railblaza accessories of all sorts.



Anglers can cast from anywhere and follow fish right around the boat – and to prove a point, I circumnavigated the vessel by walking around the coamings. My 85-some kilos precariously balanced as far outboard as was physically possible while I shuffled around the boat's perimeter elicited virtually no list. The boat's deck area is a remarkable 4.9m², so there's room to fish, but also to accommodate the family, especially with the optional side seats in the bow.

The bait station aft is well designed, with a decent-sized live bait tank equipped with an electric pump, plus a static feed, two tackle box storage slots, a filleting/cutting board and a washdown nearby on the port side. The bait board and tackle storage section rotate to starboard to access the live well – clever, and a good height, too – and the battery and switches are tucked away off the floor in transom lockers. A dive/boarding ladder on the port side is standard, as are aluminium bollards aft and amidships.

The boat can be ordered with tote tanks for simplicity, or with a 90-litre underfloor fuel tank as reviewed. The underfloor tank becomes useful underfloor storage if customers opt for tote tanks. Also optional are the side-seats forward of the console, available in short or

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With the optional hydraulic steering, turning is effortless and the boat is very responsive to helm and engine trim inputs.

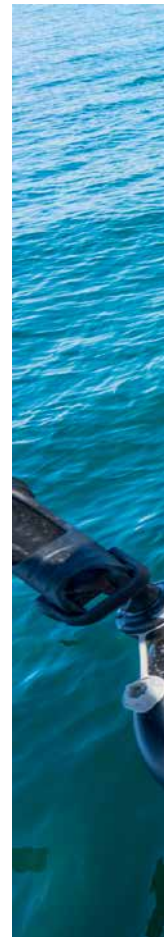
long. These provide not only seating, but also extend the bow platform aft and serve as useful storage, in this case for the canister toilet under the starboard seat. These are modular bolt-in features that can be added at any stage in the boat's life. On the port side a three-position rod holder is fixed across the back of the side-seat for useful vertical rod storage.

Also bolt-in is the passenger seat, a padded swivelling model identical to the helm seat with the same alloy base able to accommodate a 70-litre chilly bin. Rod storage, and storage for other long items, is good in the carpet-lined side-pockets, as well as several through-coaming combination rod and cup holders, though these are more useful when fishing than they are when travelling. As noted, there are also three Railblaza rod holders which can be positioned anywhere there is a Railblaza port.

Senator has fitted Railblaza track rails to the boat's sides, just under the side shelves. This provides an extremely versatile mounting system for Railblaza accessories – simply slide on a Trac Loader Side Port and add any accessory you like, such as a gear caddy or additional rod. Railblaza suction cup ports under neatly secure poles and gaffs under the gunwales. As part of the boat's modular system, the seat bases, which slide fore and aft for comfort, are secured to the rails as well.

This boat is wrapped inside as well as out – an attractive white for the sides, contrasting nicely with the black-painted console and luxurious grey and black U-Dek used for the flooring and on the gunwales, bow platform and front seats. The large-diameter bow rails and well-positioned grab rails are powder-coated in black. All in all, the colour scheme looks very smart.

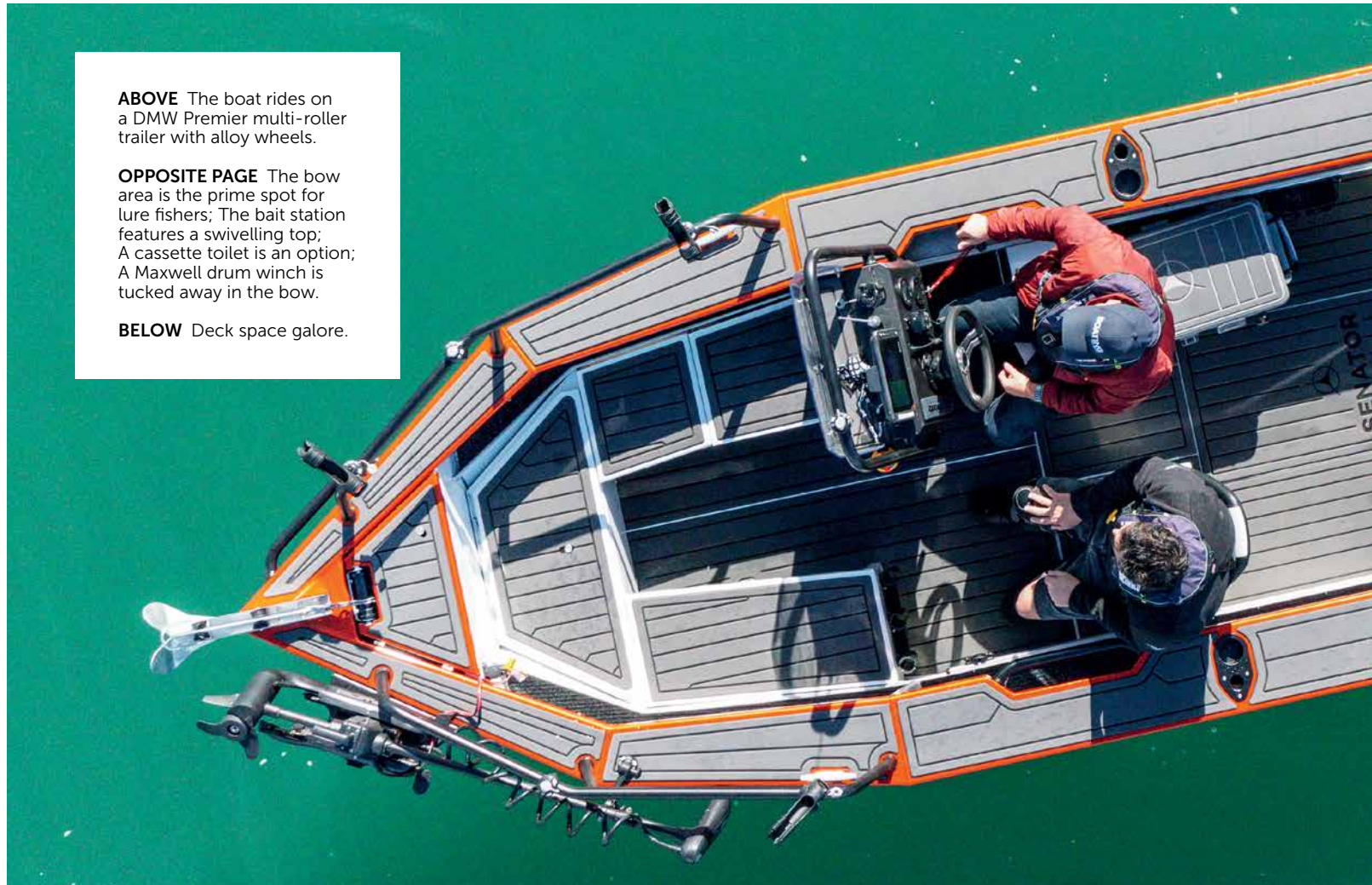
The boat handles pretty smartly too. Power is a super-quiet,

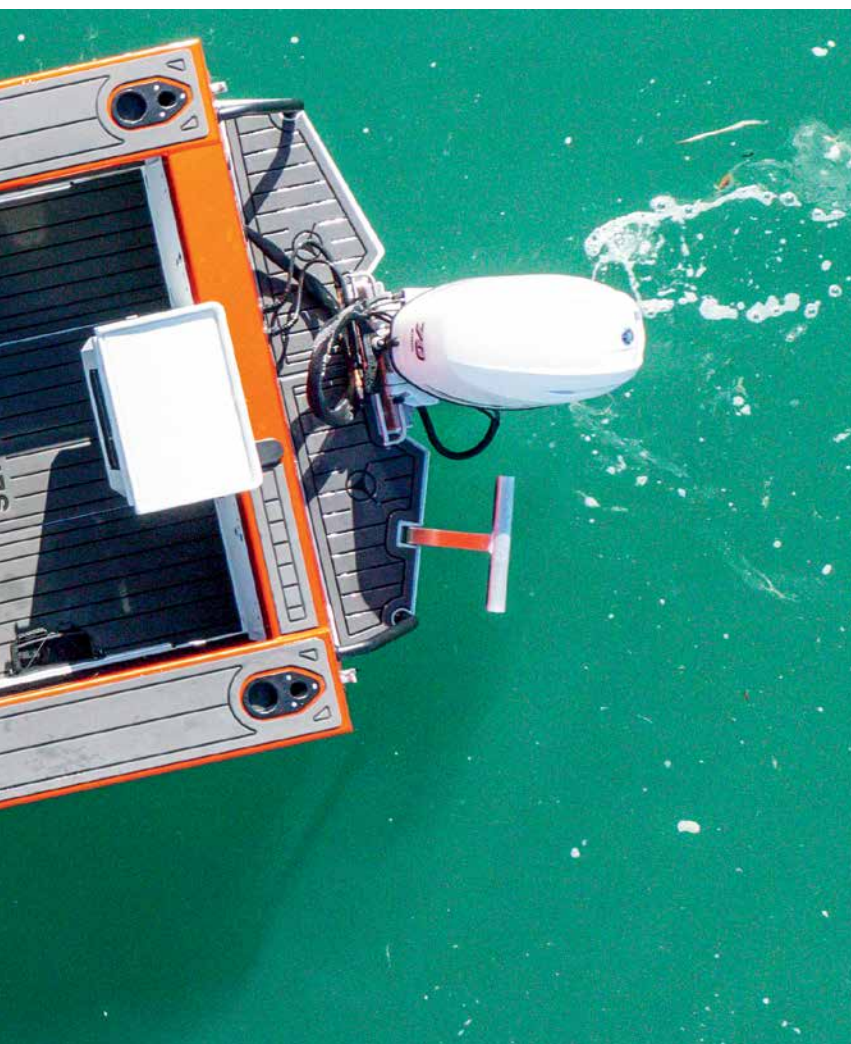


ABOVE The boat rides on a DMW Premier multi-roller trailer with alloy wheels.

OPPOSITE PAGE The bow area is the prime spot for lure fishers; The bait station features a swivelling top; A cassette toilet is an option; A Maxwell drum winch is tucked away in the bow.

BELOW Deck space galore.





four-cylinder Yamaha 70hp four-stroke outboard, a good match for this rig. According to Senator Boat's MD Grant Simmonds, the model performs adequately with 60hp, but this heavily optioned boat is carrying a fair bit of extra weight, not least the Haswing electric trolling motor in the bow and its top-spec lithium-ion battery under the bow platform. While the lithium battery is lighter than an equivalent lead-acid battery, it still weighs several kilos, as does the Maxwell drum winch tucked away in the bow locker. Fishing Boats NZ co-owner Rhys Sutton reckons a 75hp would provide a bit more urgency, but we found the boat performed well, the 70hp giving a top speed approaching 30 knots and brisk hole shots.

The hull planes easily and holds the plane down to 12 knots or so. With the optional hydraulic steering, turning is effortless and the boat is very responsive to helm and engine trim inputs. This is a very 'chuckable' little boat, composed in the turns with no handling quirks we could identify. Indeed, the handling inspires confidence, and while the sea was flat, we were told the ride is impressive for a small boat, which I'd expect from a Senator.

The helm console works well, too, the acrylic screen providing reasonable protection for the driver. A bracket-mounted Lowrance Elite 9 MFD provides GPS and sonar data, alongside a Railblaza cell phone bracket. The rest of the console's real estate is taken up by a switch panel, GME VHF radio, Yamaha smart gauges and the remote anchor control. An EPIRB is mounted on the side of the console.

I found the helm seat comfortable enough to drive the boat sitting down – the ability to slide the seat back and forth allows you to find the best driving position. A plush faux-leather steering wheel feels nice to the touch. The passenger seat is equally comfortable but gets no shelter from the console. This

is generally a dry boat, but I still managed to cross our wake at just the right angle to douse my passenger with spray on a cold winter morning – sorry Rhys!

The Senator 500 is impressive for a boat of this type. It certainly impressed the judges at the Hutchwilco NZ Boat Show this year, winning its category. Stable, spacious and well laid out, with features galore, it's also quiet and capable. It feels like a bigger boat.

It is larger than its name suggests. I couldn't help comparing the 500 to my own most recent boats, both similar designs by another manufacturer, but smaller. The Senator 500's overall length is 5.2m (as opposed to my boats' 4.6m and 4.42m) and it's beamier too at 2.0m. So, no surprise that it outperforms and out-features them. Size does matter!

But it's not just about size. The 500 is strongly-built with 4mm hull plates, 3mm pontoons and lots of structure under its welded floor. Safe too, with more than 1,000 litres of sealed buoyancy. The chambers are foam filled as well, for extra insurance and safety should a chamber be breached. The hull comes with a five-year warranty.

Rather than injecting expanding foam, Senator uses closed-cell foam blocks shaped and inserted into the chambers during manufacturing process. As well as safety benefits, foam-filled chambers result in an amazingly quiet ride – something we all commented on. This boat exhibits none of the metallic plinking and booming you tend to expect from small aluminium vessels.

The Senator 500 is carried on a DMW Premier Series multi-roller trailer with smart alloy wheels and LED lights. Towing weight is around 700kg, 750kg as reviewed. [BNZ](#)



ABOVE A Haswing electric trolling motor is mounted on a custom bracket.

BELOW The Senator 500 is eminently 'chuckable'.



Senator 500

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HIGHLIGHTS

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Secure handling,
good ride

Super-quiet underway

Railblaza accessories
add value

SPECIFICATIONS

loa 5.2m

beam 2.0m

draft 0.4m

deadrise 18°

construction aluminium, 4mm

bottom, 3mm chambers

towing weight 700 kg

fuel capacity 90 litres

engine Yamaha F70

cruise speed 24 knots

top speed 30 knots

WATCH IT

