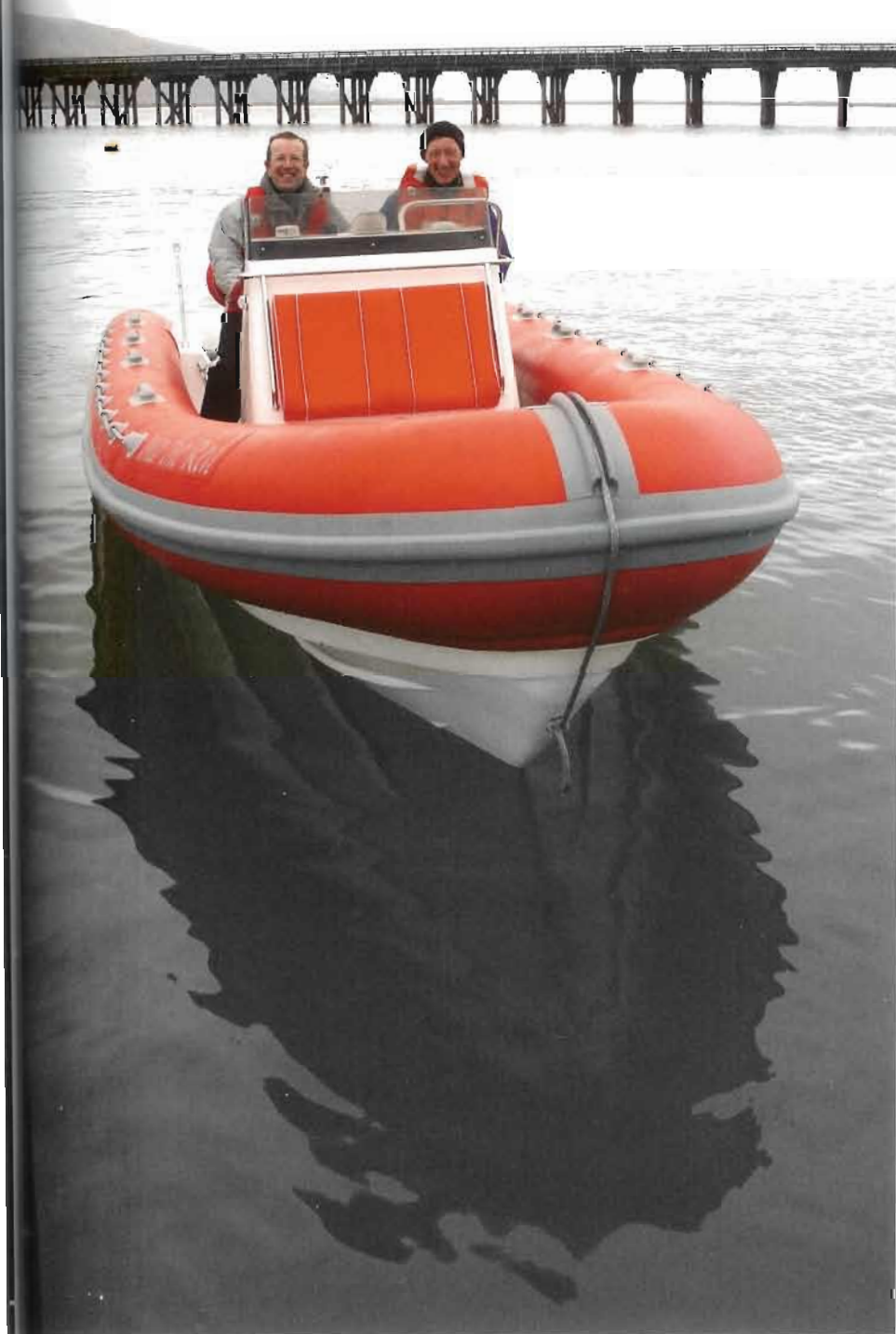


Vipermax

Osprey may be one of the less famous British RIB builders but the ferociously capable Vipermax deserves all the fame it gets. Alex Smith reports.



Who do you think of when you ponder the famous British RIB builders that have honed their craft on the race circuit? Revenger would be there.

Scorpion and Pascoe too. Perhaps even Sorcerer, but the chances of many of us putting Osprey at the top of that list are slim. And yet they have been building boats in the UK for more than 20 years now, enjoying considerable success both as race craft and as general-purpose utility boats.

OSPREY TODAY

Osprey currently produces a range of boats from 3.6 to 9.2 metres and, because they are all built in the UK, you can have an enormous amount of input as to how you want your boat to be. The Vipermax range goes from 5.5m to 7.5m and represents the company's most popular boat. The key to that success is its versatility. You can pick any combination of seating you like, along with four different consoles and, as the builder is not tied into any specific engine manufacturer, you can mount pretty much anything you want on the transom.

Osprey obviously has its preferences for each craft but it is not in the slightest bit precious about how you choose to customise your boat. You can take the easy route of buying a complete boat package ready to launch or you can buy just the bare hull and tubes and set about rigging the craft yourself.

THE TEST BOAT

The test boat reflects the personal preferences of Roy, the man at the helm of Osprey sales in the UK and, to that end, it's been rigged for some pretty dedicated sport. On the transom sits a fearsomely potent Evinrude E-Tec 250HO. In this modern age of stringent emissions guidelines, it is about as responsive and sporting an option as the market has to offer.

You could certainly get more than the 57mph top end but the vigour of the throttle response is a real joy with the current set-up



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The layout is also very sporting. There are no sunbeds or lounging pads here, just that spledid symbol of a driver's boat, the jockey seat with lateral wings to lend support in aggressive conditions. There is also a thick metal grab rail for the navigator on the port side of the dash, plus substantial handles on the backs of the jockey seats and on the tube tops.

Another excellent feature of the Vipermax is its brazen disdain for the concept of the

radar arch. Instead, what we have here is a dedicated ski pole firmly embedded in the centre of the deck exactly where the pull ought to be. That way, you get less manipulation of the boat's attitude as the pull comes on and far more regular and consistent grip while towing a skier through a turn.

The fact that a radar arch is often a stylistic centrepiece of a boat, like the enormous wing on the end of a boy racer or an umbrella in a happy hour cocktail, seems to hold no weight at Osprey. Arguably it should, because as often as not it is the non-essential trimmings that seem to hold sway in the buying process but, either way, you have to admire the honesty of a boat building ethos constructed around the provision of those things that really work.

AT REST

The Vipermax is not an exciting looking boat. As I say, there is no pretty A-frame to look at and no extravagantly raked console or screen. Similarly, the fixtures and fittings are robust rather than stylish but she's a very pleasantly proportioned craft, with subtly tapered tubes and a simplicity that the traditional Ribster will very much admire.

She looks fast too, even at rest. Her tubes sit quite high, elevated from the water's surface and, while that does little for stability when you make your way around the stationary boat, it suggests that the tubes will keep out of the way until called into service to steady a turn or to provide buoyancy and stability under a heavy load. Both in terms of efficiency and practicality, that's precisely what you want. ➤



Are you lookin' at my foulies?

ALSO FROM OSPREY

Aside from Osprey's Viper and Vipermax ranges, the company offers several other ranges. The 5.15 is an 'introduction to serious boating'. Above that, the 5.2m Sparrowhawk is rated to 90hp and will carry six fully kitted divers. Further up the scale, the 5.6m Eagle, a hard-nosed sea boat, is designed to be a small, multi-purpose leisure craft, for water skiing, diving and general cruising. The 6.6m Seaharrier with its deep V hull and fibreglass bow has previously won the 'Round Scotland Gold Cup' RIB race with only twin 60hp motors. At the top end, the Lynx (8.0 and 8.5m) is a specialist race-proven craft for those whose priority is speed and handling. It usually comes with a pair of racing seats and is designed to cover large distances rapidly. Expect speeds of around 57 knots.



There's a lovely sense that your throttle hand, the engine noise and the boat speed are all directly linked, without delay or mediation



HO HO HO...

Evinrude's High-Output (HO) version of the ETEC 250 sees displacement increase from 3279cc to 3441cc. It also gets a beefed up gear case, a factory tuned high-performance prop shaft and sound-proofing improvements (double-lined cowling, a sound box at the exhaust and a reworked air intake) that help bring this direct injection two-stroke even closer to the industry leading refinement of the modern four-strokes.

The benefits of the HO upgrades are supposed to include better torque at the bottom end and in the midrange and, for most applications, that is precisely what the average boater needs.

UNDERWAY

You really are planing from the moment the power goes down and you find yourself achieving that with a virtually unaltered attitude. There's no perceivable hump, no nose pointing skywards, just an immediate rising from the water, flat and level as the water begins to flow across the spray rails. Reign in this boat's natural inclination to gather pace and you can consider yourself on the plane from as little as 10mph, with just 1950rpm on the clock and 12.7 litres per hour burning in the cylinders.

Add another 250rpm and the efficiency of the plane sees 14mph for just an extra 1.5 litres per hour. The wake is very flat, even to the point of being non-existent, so it's not a natural winner for advanced boarders but for the rest of us, these running characteristics make it a very



useful water sports boat indeed.

As we ease out from the sheltered skiing zone towards the banks at the entrance to the estuary, the swells heap up in great steep chunks of green water. When you're among them the faces look precipitous and yet, once we have sufficient space to get the throttle down, nipping up and over the tops, while

the deep troughs roll untroubled beneath us, is a useful indication of just how capable a sea boat this Vipermax is likely to be.

Once out in the less aggressive deep water rollers, Roy shows off the immense controllability the trim tabs provide. They allow us to supplement the engine angle and pin the nose hard down even into the

Yes, the bow space is underutilised but remember that you can have any configuration you choose



The first ski of the new season tends to hurt a bit . . .



most aggressive head sea. And even then, the Vipermax remains ferociously responsive at the throttle, as though she's just itching for you to unleash her. But that's not to say that the Osprey is a handful. On the contrary, she has the feeling of a boat that is enormously capable but is content to take you under her wing and look after you until you're up to the task.

In the turn, for instance, as the boat heels in, you can actually feel the angle finding its resting point on the aft part of the tube and the pronounced spray rails, and then resting there with the utmost solidity. Once this is done, you can take your hand off wheel and throttle and, even as the seas wash across your beam, the boat stays planted with the same pace, the same angle of heel and the same rate of turn until you take positive action to alter it. Despite the enormous poke on tap, that

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makes this a much easier boat to drive than you might imagine, rewarding boldness with what feels like exponentially increasing levels of performance.

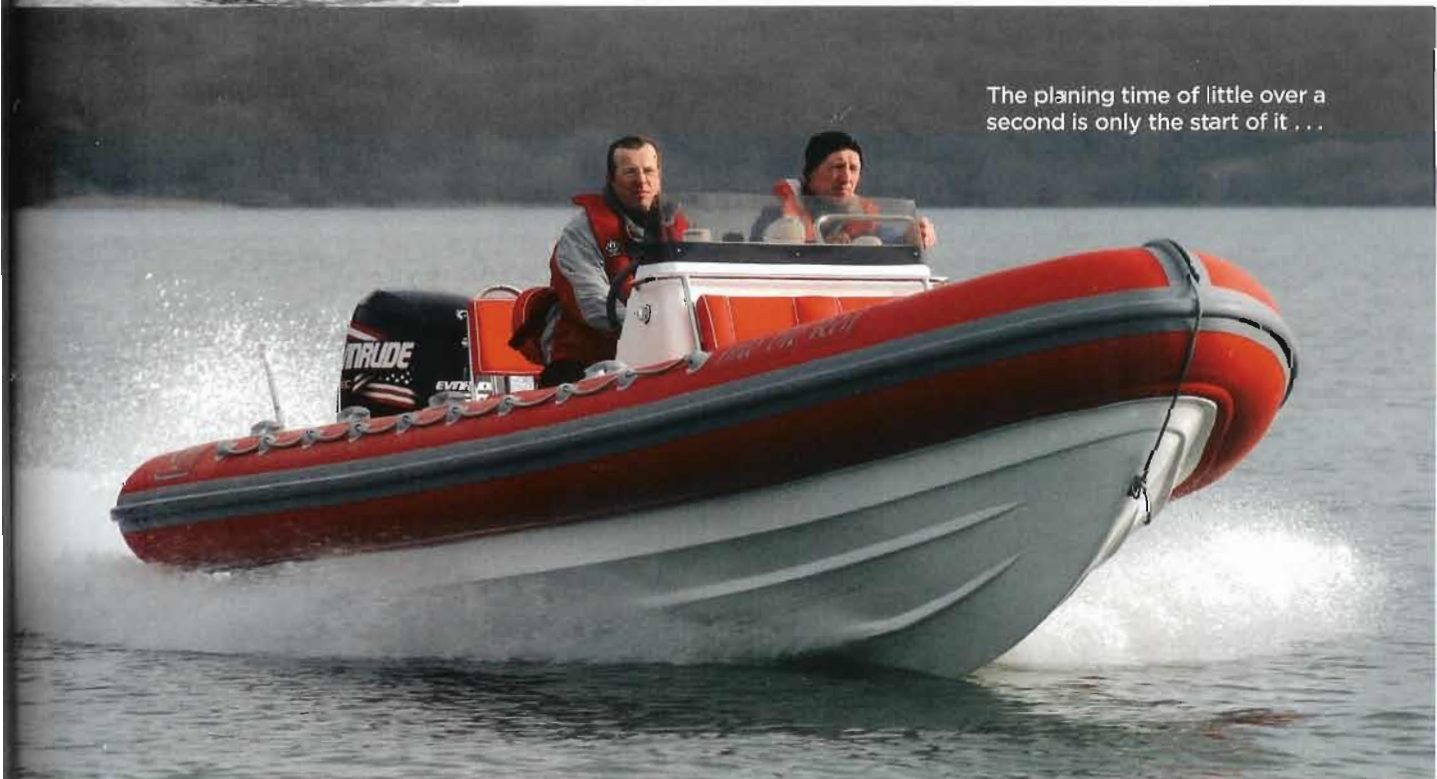
Straighten her up, bury the throttle and the hull lifts, flat and level, absolutely launching you on with a vigour that is controlled and progressive rather than wayward.

In a beam or following sea, if you let the nose drop, it's quite easy to allow that finely angled bow to start manoeuvring your direction through the wave shapes. Yes, she will cleave a head sea with gracefully judged skips and will tend to reward greater pace with greater dynamic control but in most other conditions the ride (not to mention the economy) tends to benefit from trimming the boat out a touch.

The forward facing seat on the front of a console tends to be a bit of an afterthought but here the seat has been subtly improved. For a start it has room enough for two and it's framed by sturdy handles but best of all, it's been angled back and upgraded with some lumbar support to provide quite the most perfect bow seat you could imagine. True, at 57mph it feels about as safe as roller skating on a cliff edge, but that's just the nature of this exposed position on a boat.

What the bow seat really illustrates is the extraordinary refinement of the Osprey's ride. Roy is a man who, for all his love of fast boats, wishes to leave the harsh impacts of racing well in the past. What he wants these days is a boat that takes care of his delicate old back and, driven well, this is exactly the right boat. ▶

The planing time of little over a second is only the start of it . . .



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The grunt of this thing could pull an elephant on a lolly stick

VERDICT

Roy tells me that every single person who has done a demo in this boat has bought one and I am very much inclined to believe him because, from the driving perspective, the Osprey Vipermax 7.0 is as beautifully judged a combination of sporting aggression and real world refinement as you are likely to see. Not since I raced a Thundercat in 2008 have I driven such an immensely immediate and intuitively responsive boat and yet you can sit down without hurting your back, chat without raising your voice and cruise without frying your overdraft. It's a hell of a trick. ■



WHY YOU WOULD

- Extraordinary throttle response
- Rock solid build
- Fine rough water handling
- Fantastically soft ride
- Surprising efficiency

WHY YOU WOULDN'T

If frills are your thing you should probably look elsewhere

RPM	SPEED	FUEL FLOW	RANGE	ECONOMY
1000	3.7mph	2.9 lph	252.6 miles	0.78 lpm
2000	11.1	13.7	160.4	1.23
3000	23.5	28.5	163.2	1.21
4000	39.4	45.9	170.0	1.16
5000	52.9	85.9	121.9	1.62
5800	56.7	103.0	109.0	1.82

SPECIFICATIONS

- Length 7.0m
- Internal length 5.65m
- Beam 2.55m
- Internal beam 1.63m
- Tube diameter 0.46m
- Weight (boat only) 750 kg
- Deadrise 22 degrees
- Load capacity 1800kg
- Passenger capacity 16 people
- Fuel capacity 220 litres
- Max power single 250hp or twin 115hp
- Engine Evinrude E-tec 250hp High Output
- Price (as tested) £38,000 inc. VAT
- Price for self-build from £8,000 for hull and tubes



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