



BOAT REPORT
SEACORAL
536

From Southampton to Ipswich, an easy test for this Caterpillar-powered semi-custom Seacoral flagship.



SEACORAL are unusual as boatbuilding companies go. Most start with small craft and gradually increase the size of the models in their range. Seacoral moved straight in six years ago with a 42-footer, then a year ago added a 53 and another 42, and recently a 39. They achieved these shortcuts by the simple expedient of using or modifying existing hulls which were moulded under sub-contract, and just fitting them out themselves.

Their first boat, the 428, was a modification of the original Powles Super 38, and is still made to order as the 420. The second, the 536, is based on a John Bennett-designed Colvic-moulded hull, as is the latest member of the family, the 395.

The present-day operation is part of a group of associated companies. Seacoral themselves build the boats, at Reedham in Norfolk; Coral Island Yachts at Hythe, Hampshire, are main agents for the range in the UK (they also handle the Ocean Alexander boats from Taiwan, as well as brokerage); PRD Marine & Leisure, also based at Hythe, are a charter company with a range of craft, who also operate a sea-school using mainly Seacoral boats.

Design and construction

Prolific naval architect John Bennett has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity over the past few years.

In the 1970s, his designs dominated the British production cruiser market, proving ideal for the engine powers and speed requirements then in place, but the 1980s saw his position challenged, and his name seen less often. Now he is back in demand, particularly in the 40ft-plus market, both the Broom 44 and the Sealine 450 providing recent proof of the breadth of his abilities. At the same time, he has drawn a complete family of designs that are being moulded by Colvic for other companies to fit out, and the top of this line is the Seacoral 536.

The boat has a medium-to-deep-vee hull, with a variable deadrise of 24° amidships, 20° at the transom. In line with Bennett's usual thinking, the bottom sections are convex in form, intended to give stiffer panels and a softer ride. Again in line with his normal practice, only two sprayrails are incorporated, and these are short — little more than 40% of the length — giving a spray-

Seacoral's choice of layout, fabrics and finishes for boat number one. Staff from the company spent a considerable amount of time living aboard during 1991 and have compiled a long list of further options and alternative designs for future builds. All cabins, including the guest twins, benefit from individual services such as air conditioning controls and radio/cassette units. The dinette is sensibly located high at window level, allowing a good number to share the view. The three-tier interior helm console has enough dash space to accommodate all instrumentation close at hand.



deflecting effect where it is most needed but with minimum increase in wetted-surface area.

A shallow keel runs to within 20% of the distance from the transom, giving directional stability and some protection to the sterngear. A chine flat runs the full length of the boat, while two pronounced knuckles in the flared topsides stiffen the panels and break up the profile of the boat.

Accommodation

The 536 was drawn in a variety of layouts, to suit various applications. Thus it can be a comfortable liveaboard boat for owners and two guests, or a more expansive craft for entertaining more people, or ultimately a charter vessel with up to nine berths and space for a skipper and workshop. Flexibility has been achieved by using a basic internal tray moulding, which can have bulkheads placed on it in whichever locations are required.

This flexibility proved ideal for Seacoral, who were looking for a boat that could be produced in a semi-custom manner. They had identified a need in the market, for a craft that broke away

from the rigid layout and limited finishes offered by the major production builders but did not carry the price tag of a one-off design.

The layout of our test boat was the standard version, with three double cabins and a single crew cabin amidships. To this is added a split-level saloon.

To port in the saloon is an L-shaped settee which would seat six comfortably. As standard, this does not convert to a double berth, but this can be specified. To starboard is a large sideboard. This contains storage lockers, all well finished inside, plus an icemaker, a fridge, a cocktail locker, a recessed television and video. Good fiddles around the top keep loose items in place, while corner cut-outs simplify cleaning. The woodwork here is in ash, trimmed with mahogany, but this is an option the owner can specify. The standard of finish is generally competent, neither the best nor the worst we have seen.

Ahead to starboard, three steps lead down to the galley. This is a good size and well equipped, with a ceramic hob, a large sink, a combined microwave and conventional oven neatly recessed out of the way, and a fridge. One medium-sized locker and five smaller ones provide the stowage, while an attractively tiled worktop provides the serving area. We liked the rubbish bin cleverly located in the worktop.

Three further steps down lead from the galley to the crew cabin, which runs athwartships under the saloon. Here there is a single berth, full standing headroom and several lockers. Alternatively the space could be used as a workshop, a store or children's playroom. Beside the entrance to this cabin is a small electrics and electronics cupboard, with a full panel of breakers for AC and DC circuits.

Back up in the saloon, the raised level forward has a four-person dinette to port, with a comfortable settee around a table, and a good view out through windows which slide for ventilation or for communication with the crew on deck duties.

To starboard is the lower helm position. At present, the two-person seat has limited headroom over it, but this will be improved on future models. Instruments are well laid-out in three tiers ahead of the wheel, while either side of it are the radar and chart plotter. Ready-use switches are well placed in touch-sensitive panels on the second tier.

The engine controls are worthy of note, being Micro Commander electric servo units which give fingertip control of throttles and gears, both here and on the flybridge. These units may have a high initial price, but they are the ultimate system for smoothness, and contribute to the manoeuvrability of the boat.

Five steps lead down from the saloon to the cabins ahead. To starboard is a guest cabin, whose double berth runs athwartships with the foot under the steps from the saloon. A full-height hanging locker and lockers under the berth provide storage space. To port is a twin-bedded cabin, with good room between the berths, one of which can serve as a daytime settee; alternatively, this cabin can be fitted with a double bed.

Ahead of the starboard cabin is the guest toilet. This is spacious, with plenty of room to move

around and three good lockers, but surprisingly it is not en-suite with either guest cabin. The worktop here is in marble-effect Avonite, a moulded material with a finish that is both practical and attractive.

Forward is the master stateroom. This is a spacious cabin, with a fan-shaped double berth filling the full width of the bow. Headroom at the aft end is a generous 6ft 6 in (1.98m). A single full-height locker provides the only hanging stowage, with drawers under the berth for storing other clothes.

The en-suite bathroom is equally roomy, with a separate shower stall and lockers for toilet gear. Marble-effect Avonite is again used for the

worktops, together with mirror surrounds and all the other fittings, providing an unusual but attractive finish. Both this and the guest bathroom have extremely efficient extractor fans — ducted forward into the anchor chain locker to avoid unsightly vents in the deck and the possibility of water ingress.

Noteworthy features throughout the accommodation include a central vacuum-cleaner system, with outlets that switch on as soon as the hose is inserted. We were also pleased to see fire-extinguishers in every cabin, and individual radio/cassettes too. The test boat was fitted with optional reverse-cycle air-conditioning, with separate controls in each cabin.

The flybridge enjoys markedly low noise levels, thanks in no small part to sensible use of soundproofing below. The upper helm position will be subject to further work, including the provision of more storage space and a flap to cover the instruments.



Engines

Power on the test boat was provided by a pair of 425hp Caterpillar 3208s, though various options are available up to 600hp each. The engines are mounted under the saloon.

Normal access is via a hatch at the forward end of the cockpit, with steps leading down to a small space flanked by the freshwater tanks. A door then leads through the forward bulkhead, though this obstructs the steps when open.

Headroom at the rear of the engineroom is crouching only. This increases as you move forward, though the siting of the electric junctionboxes between the engines makes it difficult to get right to the front. Access over the top of the engines is good (a function of the low height of the V8s), as is space outboard of them.

Access to the inlet strainers aft is excellent, as it is to the fuel filters to starboard and to the fuel change-over valves. As far as we could see, it is possible to switch the valves to allow each engine to draw from either tank, but you cannot change over the returns, something which could cause a problem if you ran this way for some time. We thought the fuel supply lines looked small, particularly if both engines should be drawing through one line.

The engines are carried on massive steel bearers supported between the forward and aft bulkheads. The space underneath them is self-contained, to prevent the spread of oily water through the bilges, and has its own pump-out system. The rest of the boat is divided into three watertight compartments, each with its own electric pump; there is a manual back-up in the cockpit, linked via a manifold and change-over valves. Access to the electric pumps for clearing them is good, through hatches in the aluminium treadplate sole. Similar hatches give good access to the sternlands.

A comprehensive electrical system comprises two 24V banks of batteries, each of 200Ah, for engine start and domestics, plus a 12V 260Ah bank for lower-voltage items of electronic equipment, supplied by its own alternator. The batteries are mounted on a substantial stand to port, high enough to be clear of any bilge water should the boat be holed.

Sound insulation on the 536 is worthy of note, consisting of 2in (50mm) Marglass Turbo, specifically designed to reduce the high-frequency emissions of turbocharged engines. This is applied to all surfaces, and proved significantly effective in operation. At the same time, care has been taken to mount the likely sources of noise, such as the generator, at the aft end away from the sleeping and living areas.

Exterior

The cockpit is a large area which, perhaps surprisingly, has no permanent seating.

The sole has four hatches set in it: forward is the access to the engineroom, port and starboard aft are smaller hatches to storage boxes (one will take the liferaft, the other has room for covers or ropes), and centrally located is a large hatch leading to the lazarette. This already contains the generator and air-conditioning units, plus the steering gear, and the fact that all this equipment is open and exposed reduces the usefulness of

the space for further stowage.

The cockpit has high coamings, making it a snug and secure area. A walk-through door gives access onto a large moulded GRP bathing platform. Plinths are moulded low down on the back of the transom for davit mountings, a useful feature that will keep the weight of the tender low.

Two steps up lead to the side decks. These are 12in (300mm) wide, with a raised coaming aft, and a lower gunwale lip as you move forward. Substantial guardrails, 3ft (0.9m) high and 1½in (32mm) in diameter, start about 3ft (0.9m) forward of the cockpit, matched by well-placed handrails on the cabin side, but there is a somewhat unprotected area at the key point as you step out of the cockpit. At least some extra inboard handholds should be placed here.

The cabin itself has a good inboard slope, making moving forward easy. The moulded non-slip of the side-decks continues over the coachroof, which has a recessed sunpad area.

The foredeck has plenty of room for working, though the electric windlass stands up very noticeably. A large locker here is reached through a clear perspex hatch, and has plenty of room for fenders and ropes, with the anchor chain stowed forward of a half-height partition, keeping it out of the way. The vent fans for the toilets are mounted here, larger units than would normally be the case if they had to be fitted in the headlining.

A particular feature of the Seacoral is its stainless steel work. Supplied by Carisbrooke Engineering, this is all to a superb standard, including some very neat custom-made items such as the bollards on the aft quarters, tailored to the radius of the coaming. These are matched by two more substantial bollards amidships, and one forward on each side of the boat.

The flybridge is a spacious and attractive area, reached via a steep ladder which has an awkward heel-catching top step. At the forward end you will find back-to-back contoured bench seats, with room for three people each. The forward seat faces the helm position, which was not in its final layout on our test boat, but will be improved in future with a flap over the instruments and more stowage lockers. The rear seat faces a matching cocktail bar, which has two armchair seats flanking a wet-bar with sink, fridge and icemaker.

Aft of the bar is an open walk-round area which could presumably be cushioned as a sunlounger. Alternatively, with the goalpost radar mast replaced by a single pedestal mast, this area could take a crane and provide stowage space for the tender.

Handling and performance

The first 536 made its debut at the 1991 Earls Court Boat Show, going straight from there to the sales base at Hythe. It was then scheduled to appear at the East Coast Boat Show in May, and we took the opportunity of accompanying it on its 200-mile passage around the coast to Ipswich to give us a better appreciation of all its features.

Regrettably, the weather did not play ball. We had only moderate or calm seas all the way round, though we still got the message of how good a long-distance cruiser this craft is.

Departure time from Hythe Marina Village was 0600, and as we passed through the lock the sun

rose ahead of us like a great peach in a spectacular glow of yellows and reds.

The forecast was a westerly Force 2-3, veering SW, and the sea conditions were mostly calm. Quickly we settled down into our passagemaking routine, with the flybridge being the most popular conning position as a beautiful day unfolded. We set the engines to 2400rpm, 400 down on their rated maximum of 2800, which gave us an indicated 22 knots on the log.

After an hour underway we did the first check around the boat. The port engine was making more noise and vibration than its partner, possibly due to slight misalignment of the shaft. Neither motor needed any oil, and the water levels were both fine. The generator had stopped, due to its cooling water being sucked out of the system when the boat was underway; this will be cured by adding a scoop to the outer fitting.

The engineroom is supplied with air by a bank of 12in (300mm) fans, which do an excellent job, and it is possible to work down here even after several hours' running time without overheating yourself. We quickly appreciated the clean layout of the engineroom, with all service points easily reached even in a seaway, and such bonus items as 240V sockets to run drills and other power tools for maintenance.

Back up in the saloon, the effectiveness of the soundproofing quickly became apparent, with comfortable conversation possible even at speed. Out on the flybridge, the forward screen gave reasonable protection from the wind. The Autohelm was doing its job well, with only occasional course-corrections being needed.

By 0940 we were passing Beachy Head, having completed 70 miles in 3¼ hours, an average of 21.5 knots. Half an hour later we passed Dungeness, with Dover coming up at 1220. As we headed for the South Goodwin light vessel the sea picked up a little, but nothing to make the 536 check its stride. After North Foreland, we set course for the Sunk lightship off Harwich. Just under two hours later, we had crossed the Thames estuary and reached our mark. We had done 190 miles in just under 9 hours, at an average of almost 22 knots, and the two Cats had not missed a beat.

We slowed down to harbour speed as we approached Felixstowe, and prepared to make our way up the River Orwell. Felixstowe and Harwich are busy ports, and we were soon passed by a pilot boat dashing out to its next customer. Two motorboats with Dutch flags were encountered sailing erratic courses near the entrance — they were probably both going to the Show themselves, and eventually tucked in behind us on the assumption that we knew these waters better than they. To starboard we passed an enormous Elder Dempster boat unloading containers, to port the new Shotley Point Marina.

We were now down to the regulation 6 knots, a speed limit which makes it a long haul up to Ipswich, especially against a strongly ebbing tide. A couple of sailing boats were trying to make the same trip, but with the dying wind they could do little else but fill the narrow channel. As we approached from astern they appeared oblivious to our presence, so a short warning hoot seemed a sensible precaution. All this generated was a curse from the crustacean at the helm, but this was better than a bill for a new pushpit. At the



same time, the Micro Commander controls gave us the ability to stop on a sixpence with the minimum noise and fuss.

This facility was appreciated all the more as we nosed out from under the Orwell Bridge and spotted the buoys marking the entrance to Fox's Marina. Turning slowly into the channel, we were minded to give a wide berth to the marker posts with their clusters of barnacles and weed, but at low water the channel hugs close to their feet, so we inched our way in with the controls working overtime.

Ten minutes later we were safely secured alongside. If the voyage sounded uneventful, that's the way all the best ones should be.

Three months after this passage we ran our customary trials on the boat.

With its bottom freshly scrubbed, the Seacoral should have been pulling maximum revs, but we could only reach 2650rpm on the dials, as opposed to the rated maximum of 2800. Caterpillar assure us there is nothing wrong with the units, so we can only assume the boat is overpropped, and our results should be read with this in mind

Top speed we recorded was 24.3 knots, with 70% fuel, 50% water, and five crew. At this speed the engines should be drawing around 40gph (182lph), giving a consumption of 0.61mpg and a maximum range of 255 miles. Drop down to 2400rpm, and these figures improve to 0.75mpg and 315 miles respectively, while at 2200rpm they are even better at 0.88mpg and 370 miles. Acceleration, at 13.0sec to 20 knots, was acceptable for a boat of this size.

The noise levels were good, with a maximum of 80dB(A) in the saloon at full speed, 78dB(A) at 2400rpm. Up on the flybridge the boat whispers along at 70dB(A), though in the cockpit matters are a noisier 85dB(A) due to the proximity of the exhausts.

Conclusions

The choice of boats available in the over-50ft range is a narrow one, and this Seacoral has been a welcome addition. The standard of finish is satisfactory if not exceptional, while the opportunity to choose between layouts and styling, or even alter the interior completely, will make the boat attractive to many owners.

The 536's performance with the standard engines is more than adequate, hopefully with another couple of knots to come with the engines up to scratch, and the higher power options give a claimed 35-knot maximum. The styling is modern and sleek, and the hull would appear to be well suited to the boat's needs.

Seacoral 536

Engines: twin Caterpillar 3208TA diesels, 425hp at 2800 rpm, V8.

Conditions: wind W Force 3, sea moderate. **Load:** fuel 70%, water 50%, crew 5.

rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range	trim	sound levels dB(A)			
							saloon	fwdcab	ckpt	flybdg
1000	7.3	—	—	—	—	0.5	66	61	75	65
1200	9.3	—	—	—	—	1.0	69	64	76	66
1400	10.3	—	—	—	—	1.5	71	67	77	66
1600	11.2	7.9	36	1.42	595	2.5	72	67	79	68
1800	13.1	14.5	66	0.90	379	3.5	72	68	80	69
2000	15.1	17.1	78	0.89	374	4.5	74	70	80	69
2200	18.4	21.0	95	0.88	370	4.0	75	71	81	70
2400	22.0	29.5	131	0.75	315	4.5	78	75	83	70
2650	24.3	40.0	182	0.61	255	4.5	80	77	85	71

Acceleration: 0-20 knots, 13.0 sec.

Loa	53ft 0in (16.15m)
Waterline length	44ft 0in (13.41m)
Beam	15ft 6in (4.72m)
Draught	3ft 9in (1.14m)
Displacement	dry 15.5 tonnes loaded 18.25 tonnes

Fuel capacity	2x210 gal (1910lt)
Water capacity	175gal (790lt)
Designer	John Bennett
Price ex VAT	as standard with 425hp Caterpillars £280,000 as tested £320,000

Builders Sea Coral Yachts, 19 Station Road, Reedham, Norfolk. Tel: 0493 701260.

Suppliers Coral Island Yachts, 15 Shamrock Way, Hythe Marina Village, Hythe, Hampshire. Tel: 0703 207101.

