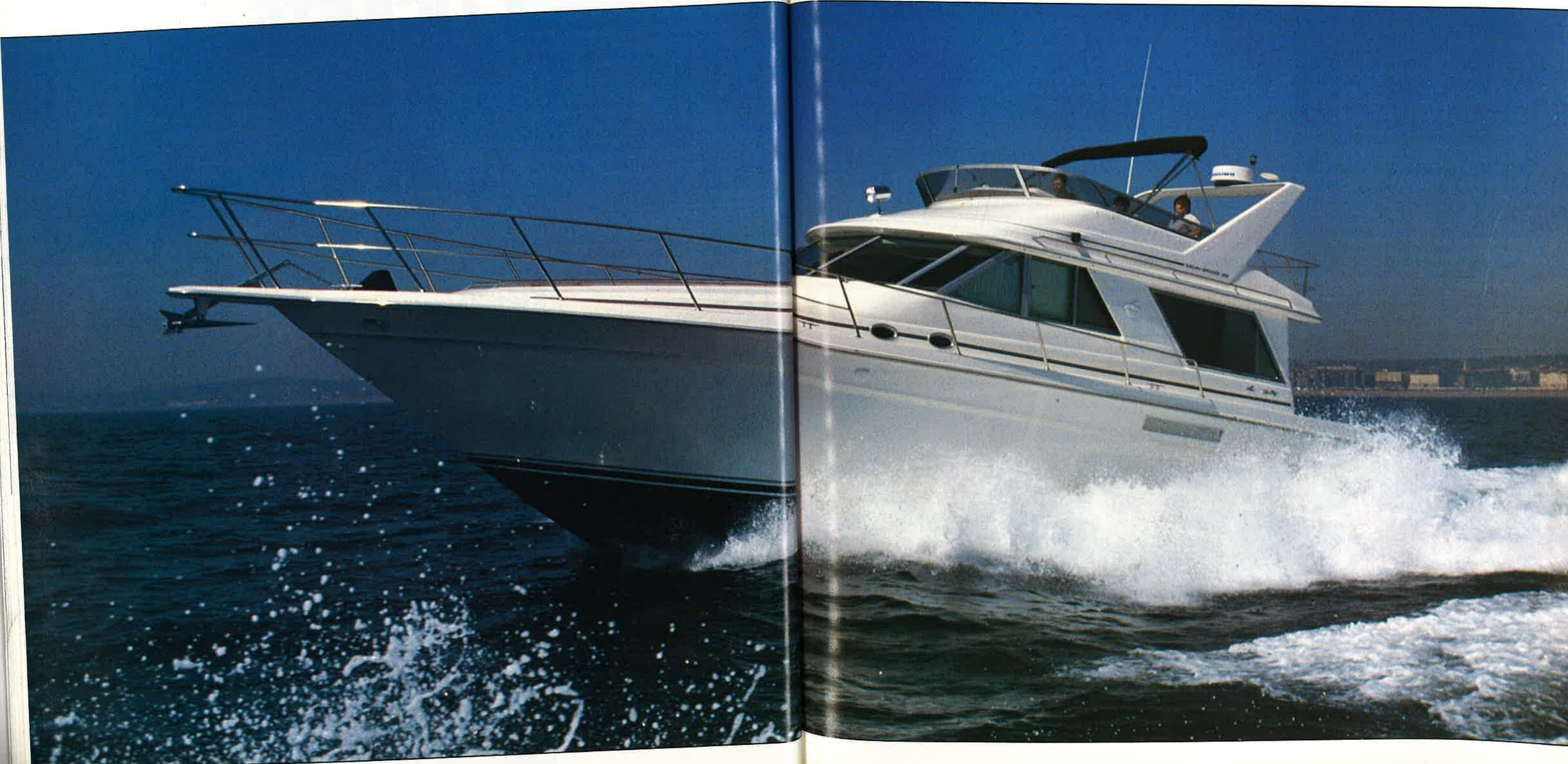


# BOAT REPORT BRUNSWICK'S BIGGEST

## SEA RAY 500



Just a short time ago the European market held little appeal for American builders, but a slump in home prospects has changed their interest, and consequently their designs. Sea Ray's flagship is riding high on the new wave.



# BOAT REPORT

STATISTICS about American boatbuilders make mind-boggling reading. In 1988, the total turnover of the industry was \$18 billion, and a dozen or more companies had outputs in excess of 1000 boats. Compare this to the UK, where the turnover was a mere £400m and our largest motorboat builders only averaged around 400 boats.

Two companies, Sea Ray and Bayliner, dominate the US market, with production of 30,000-80,000 boats per year each, and just to put the final cap on it, in 1986 they were both bought by the Brunswick Corporation, owners of Mercury, Mariner and Mercruiser.

Both companies have been active in the export market, with Sea Ray even opening its own production facility in Ireland, building boats in the range up to 27ft. The subject of this month's test, though, is all-American: the flagship of the Sea Ray range, the 500 Sedan Bridge. First introduced to the American public at the 1989 Miami Boat Show, it made its European debut later in the same year. We took our test boat out from Brighton Yacht Brokerage on a sunny day last month.

## Design and construction

Sea Rays have gained a reputation for detail finish, high standards of equipment, and an overall modern styling, both inside and out. Underpinning this has been an emphasis on quality of construction and engineering.

Attention to detail shows with such features as a new laminate material which gives the same strength as woven rovings but with 20% less weight, epoxy coating of the bottom combined with a new gel coat to reduce the risk of osmosis, and gelcoating of the inside of the hull to prevent ingress of water into the

laminate. Foam-filled underfloor compartments reduce the risk of flooding in the event of hull damage.

Sea Ray, as with many US manufacturers, were reluctant to divulge any technical details of the actual hull design. However, from the inspection and measurements we were able to make, we found a conventional medium-vee hull moulded with two pairs of sprayrails, underwater sections showing an almost constant deadrise of 18° amidships to the transom.

## Accommodation

The layout of the 500 provides three double cabins — one with en-suite bathroom — spacious saloon, aft cockpit and a huge flybridge. The concept is a boat that can be used for entertaining on the grand scale, or for serious live-aboard cruising. In this it is not alone, and has several rivals on the market. However, where the Sea Ray sets new standards is in the development work that has gone into achieving these requirements, and the styling and design of the interior.

Forget your pre-conceived ideas of what a boat of this class looks like inside. Gone are the expanses of joinery, and the conventional, easy-to-make settees and seats. In their place is a bold use of modern materials and finishes, together with shapes and curves that break with tradition but overall have a practical purpose and function.

We will pick out the features that most caught our eye, but this is one boat where the pictures tell it far better than mere words. Entering the saloon, the first items you see are the table and chairs, moulded and crafted in clear perspex. These are matched by two bar

# SEA RAY 500

## Sea Ray 500

**Engines:** twin S&S 6V-92TA diesels, 530hp at 2300rpm, 9005cc V6.

**Conditions:** wind Force 3, sea slight. **Load:** fuel 25%, water 25%, crew 3.

rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range	trim	Sound levels dB(A)			
							saloon	fwd cab	ckpt	flybdg
1000	8.0	7.5	34	1.07	535	0.5	70	72	83	73
1200	10.2	10.7	48	0.95	475	1.5	72	73	83	74
1400	12.1	14.0	64	0.86	430	2.5	75	74	83	75
1600	17.3	22.3	101	0.76	380	3.5	78	78	85	77
1800	20.9	30.4	138	0.69	345	4.0	80	79	87	78
2000	23.9	41.0	186	0.58	290	4.5	82	80	89	78
2200	27.7	50.0	227	0.55	275	4.0	82	82	93	81

**Acceleration:** 0-20 knots, 11.4 sec.

<b>Loa (inc platforms)</b>	55ft 4in (16.87m)	<b>Displacement</b>	18 tons
<b>Hull length</b>	49ft 11in (15.22m)	<b>Fuel</b>	500gal (2270lt) in 3 tanks
<b>Beam</b>	15ft 0in (4.57m)	<b>Water</b>	170gal (760lt)
<b>Draught</b>	4ft 2in (1.27m)	<b>Price ex VAT</b>	standard £315,650 as tested £355,000

### Builder

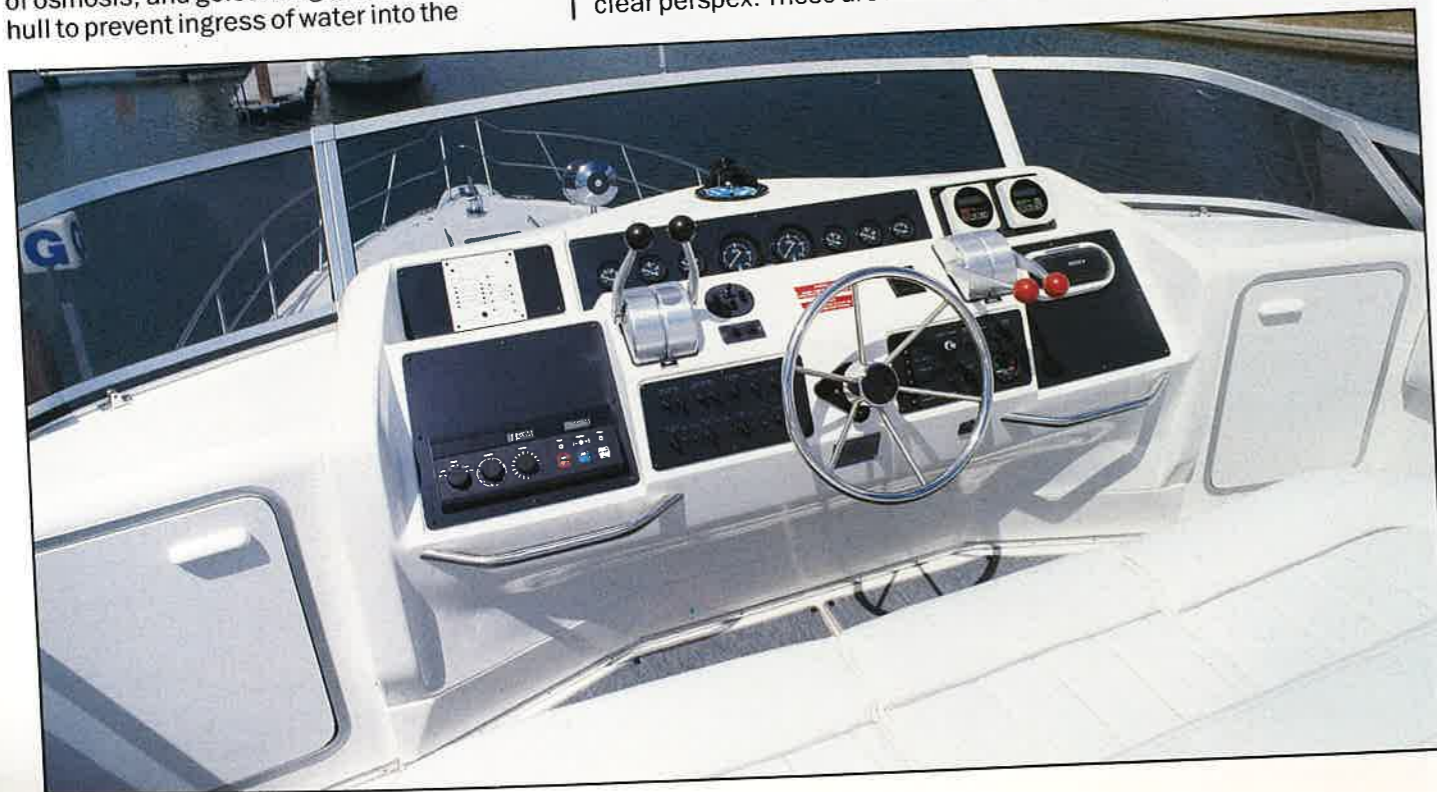
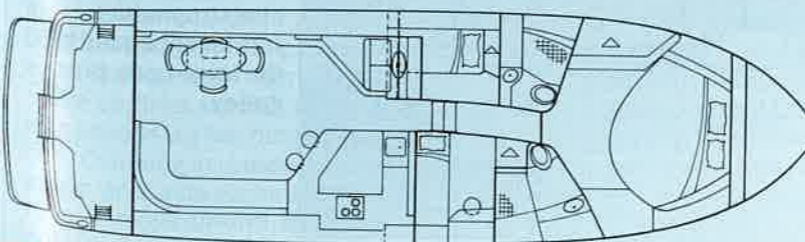
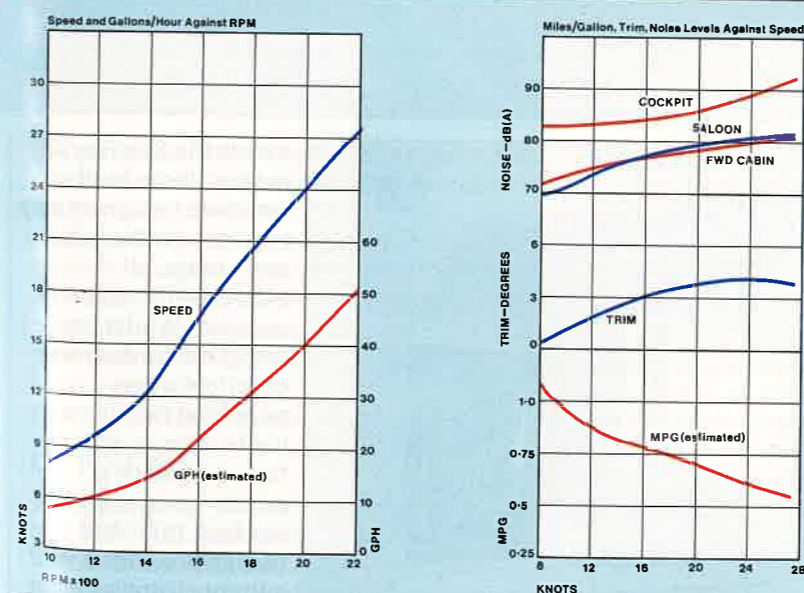
Sea Ray Boats, 2600 Sea Ray Boulevard, Knoxville, Tennessee, USA 37914.

### UK Suppliers

Brighton Yacht Brokerage, Village Square, Brighton Marina, Brighton, Sussex BN2 5UU. Tel: 0273 673232.

Penton Hook Marine Sales, Penton Hook Marina, Staines Road, Chertsey, Surrey KT16 8PY. Tel: 0932 562211.

Lewis Marine, 59 High Street, Wanstead, London E11 2AE. Tel: 081-989 2265



stools in the same material, with the theme continuing through the boat in handrails and fittings. Opposite, to starboard, a huge L-shaped settee seats up to eight people, on cushions that are shaped from layers of varying density foam to give good comfort.

Forward to port is the angled entertainments centre, with an extensive array of equipment available as an extra. Opposite, to starboard, the galley is designed to be an integral part of the saloon, with the dividing unit acting as a breakfast bar whilst giving a useful worktop area and additional locker space. Equipment includes a three-burner electric hob, microwave, double fridge/freezer and sink with mixer tap. Storage space is extensive, provided by lockers under the spacious Corian worktop and in an overhead unit.

The lower helm position is sensibly laid out, with well-located hydraulically-operated twin-lever controls, plus a comprehensive selection of instruments and dials, for example individual switches for the three windscreen wipers and washers, plus de-misters and de-icers. We were less happy with the siting of the radar, down by your left knee, whilst the aesthetics of the pink GRP console left something to be desired.

Soft pile carpet, Alcantara suede upholstery, pale cream vinyl wall coverings and blinds on all the windows and doors contribute to the overall appeal of the saloon. The subtle tones of pink and grey blend to give an effect that is cool on the hottest day, yet welcomingly warm on a chilly night.

Four steps down lead to the cabins. To port is a twin-bunked cabin that can be used for children, extra guests or the crew. In here you find the laundry centre with an optional washing-machine/drier. You can also specify a central vacuum cleaner system, with its stowage under the sole. Overhead, a hatch gives access to the back of the helm console, and reveals the high standard of wiring and installation that continues throughout the rest of the boat.

To starboard, a generously sized main guest cabin has a large double berth matched by plenty of lockers and drawers. Here, as throughout the accommodation, individual controls allow you to adjust the air-conditioning, fitted as standard. We also liked the light switches, which have small green indicator lights in them, allowing you to find them anywhere in the boat. Lighting throughout consists of both a 12V system, run from the batteries, and 240V.

The guest bathroom is located opposite, to port, with a door leading off the lobby. Space in here is limited, with a correspondingly tiny sink, though you do get a small separate shower stall.

The master stateroom is forward. Here you find a huge fan-shaped double berth, matched by full-length wardrobes port and starboard, plus a dressing table and many lockers and

# BOAT REPORT

# SEA RAY 500



Inside the Sea Ray's main saloon, built-in furniture has given way to a loose table, chairs and stools, all attractively crafted in perspex. Whilst these might not be deemed practical when punching through a lively seaway, we failed to make anything move during our boat test. And the design provides a very suitable living area for the worst of claustrophobics, further enhanced by the large open-plan galley.



drawers. The lockers are lined in cedar, the current fashion in the USA, imparting a soft fragrance to any clothes kept here.

To starboard is a good-sized en-suite bathroom, again with separate shower stall and plenty of lockers. A perspex handrail is a useful feature in a boat designed to be used at sea. Perhaps surprisingly, the master cabin has no portlights, the only natural light and ventilation coming from an overhead hatch.

## Engines

Standard power on the 500 is supplied by a pair of 550hp Stewart & Stevenson marinised Detroit Diesel GM 6V92TAs. These give a claimed 28-30 knots, though we recorded only 27.7 on our test. For a couple of knots more, and another £43,000, you can specify the 650hp 8V92TAs, though we would think the extra cost is hardly warranted.

The engines are mounted under the saloon, with access via two hinged hatches at its aft end. Climbing in is aided by some well-placed steps, and once you are in there is plenty of room to move around, both between and outside the engines. Excellent floor panels of

GRP 'treadplate' help considerably in this respect, together with well-placed handrails and supports. Our only criticism in this area is the lack of a guard over the exposed section of the port shaft and coupling which you might step on as you move forward.

Access to all service and maintenance points is superb, including huge seawater strainers at the aft end and the stern-glands. The 5ft headroom between engines enables you to reach the fuel management system on the forward bulkhead easily, and here you find double fuel filters for each engine, with a bypass valve allowing you to change one filter with the engine still running — an excellent safety feature which should be standard on all vessels of this size and sophistication.

Similar attention to duplicating the safety systems is shown in the bilge-pumping arrangements. Here you find no less than eight heavy-duty electric units, with the engine room having three (two of which have float switches set at different levels in case one should fail or get jammed). All piping on these pumps and the other systems is heavy-duty, wire-reinforced, with double clips. A

# BOAT REPORT

comprehensive Halon fire-extinguishing system completes the safety items.

A 15kW Westerbeke generator is mounted at the aft end of the engineroom, though we were surprised that a sound shield for this is listed only as an extra. Three separate electrical circuits are used on board, 24V for engine start and the heavy-duty electrical gear, 12V for electronics and some lighting, and 240V for cooking, air-conditioning and mainlights. An earth-leakage protection system is fitted, and all the underwater gear is bonded to anodes to prevent electrolytic corrosion.

Foil-faced foam soundproofing is applied to the bulkheads and overhead, completing an excellent and comprehensive installation.

Stepping out of the saloon into the cockpit, a hatch gives you access to the lazarette, where you find the rest of the engineering systems. For some incomprehensible reason this hatch has no hinge or struts to keep it open, a strange omission on what is generally a well thought-out boat. Down in the storage space you find two huge GRP silencer boxes, which do a good job of reducing the bark of the big GMs, at least at marina speeds. Also here are the air-conditioning units, holding tank and batteries. These are held down by the fiddliest of covers which you would never be able to refit in anything but a flat calm. Access to the steering gear was good, though the absence of a cover over this meant that loose items were already threatening to jam the system.

## Exterior

In the cockpit you find seating for up to eight people. A walk-through transom door gives access to the bathing ladder, but no fender stowages are fitted as standard. A side locker contains the shut-off and change-over valves for the main engine and generator fuel supplies.

Neat recessed ladders give access to the side-decks, and climbing out is further aided by a well-placed handrail. From here on though things are not so good, with no guardrail for some 8ft, no lip on the deck edge, and the overhang of the flybridge catching you just at shoulder height. Walking forward with a fender in your hands is no easy task.

By the front of the wheelhouse, matters are much better, with solid guardrails with a lower rail, a gunwale lip, and wide decks with moulded non-slip that continues over the coachroof. A good foredeck working area is matched by an electric winch, and a Danforth anchor that self-stows in the stemhead platform.

Steps up from the cockpit lead to a flybridge big enough to host a party. The helm position is forward, with a three-person bench seat, excellent repeater instruments and stowage lockers under the apron. The centrepiece of the bridge though is its entertainment area.

This is comprised of a curved settee facing a table and cocktail bar, together with two single seats. The table has strategic cut-outs to keep your drinks in place, with an optional ice-maker to keep them cool. Behind is room for sunbathing, with the whole flybridge well protected by tall guardrails.

One criticism we have to make about the outside of the Sea Ray is the difficulty of getting on or off board. The side decks are a full 5ft 9in above the waterline, making for a long drop when coming alongside the pontoon. Climbing back aboard is even harder, with no step anywhere in the topsides. Walking across the bathing platform is made difficult by the passarelle stowed here, and this is clearly an area that should be looked at.

## Handling and performance

Hydraulically-operated throttle and gear controls help make the 500 an easy boat to manoeuvre in the marina. Out at sea the boat moves smoothly and quickly onto the plane as is borne out by our trim curve and the excellent 0-20 knot acceleration time of 11.4 seconds. Top speed we recorded was 27.7 knots, coming right on the button at 2200rpm.

At this speed, our estimates show the 6V-92TAs consuming 50gal per hour, giving an mpg figure of 0.55, and a maximum range of 275 miles. Dropping to 2000rpm gives figures of 24 knots, 41gph, 0.58mpg and 290 miles respectively, while 1800rpm still produces 21 knots, 0.69mpg, and 345 miles.

Noise levels in the saloon and on the flybridge were good, at a maximum of 81dB(A) each. Out in the cockpit, proximity to 1100hp inevitably pushed things up to 93dB(A), but you would not be spending much time here at full speed.

Our day in the 500 threw up nothing in the way of waves to try out the hull, so we will have to look for another occasion to put the Sea Ray design work to the test.

## Conclusion

Anyone looking for a 50ft offshore cruiser is sure to give the Sea Ray an inspection, and they will find few other boats that match its interior style. If they are of a mind to look underneath the surface, they will also find few craft that match its attention to engineering detail or design thought.

Certainly we found points to criticise, but on a boat of this size that is only to be expected. In typical American style the extras list can get confusing, with the starting price quickly increasing by £40,000 to cover items most owners will want, but the Sea Ray is not alone in this respect. Without a doubt, the company have to be congratulated on a bold initiative in this class of boat. ■