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FACTFILE
Zodiac N-20
LOA: 22ft 7in (6.9m)
PRICE: from £37,010
TOP SPEED: 38 knots

FACTFILE
Zar 73
LOA: 23ft 11in (7.3m)
PRICE: from £64,850
TOP SPEED: 36 knots

Cabin RIBs

What happens when you take the proven qualities of a RIB and add in sleeping accommodation for two? We take a closer look at four of the best to find out **REPORT BY CARL RICHARDSON**

Carl says...



It's pretty simple – I don't want to lose any of that fantastic RIB practicality, I just want to gain a useable cabin.

We love a RIB. Every single person that has ever been on a RIB – and not just those who have been rescued by one – will be free with the kind of praise normally reserved for blockbuster movie billboards: "awesome", "amazing", "thrilling", "the best romcom of the year". Well, maybe not the last one but you get the idea.

It's easy to understand why RIBs are so popular. As long as the hull and engine are rightly balanced, the simpler a boat is the better it tends to perform on the water. A classic RIB design consists of a flat, deep deck, a few seats and a console to hide behind. There's little to rattle or break, and nothing to compromise its boating purity. Better still, there's a huge lump of rubber running around the whole rig, alleviating that most stressful element of boatownership – coming alongside in a stiff wind in front of a crowded yacht club bar. With the tubes also delivering stability and protection, the whole RIB package adds up to a very safe and secure experience for those on board. And if you're confident with a boat, then you're far more likely to enjoy the hell out of it.



But there is one problem. For all a RIB's on-water prowess, they often fall down on one very important element – creature comfort. Like most of you, we at MBM like a cabin, a cup of tea and enough shelter to get changed and perhaps even overnight – something your classic open RIB design doesn't offer. Enter the cabin RIB. Surely this is the pinnacle of popular boat design? Taking the proven qualities of a RIB and adding a family-friendly



BOAT REPORT
CABIN RIBS

FACTFILE
Shearwater 860
LOA: 28ft 3in (8.6m)
PRICE: from £52,597
TOP SPEED: 48 knots

FACTFILE
Marlin 29
LOA: 29ft 6in (9.04m)
PRICE: from £96,000
TOP SPEED: 34 knots

shelter should potentially create a near-perfect boating package. Unfortunately though, instead of being something useable for the many, most cabin RIBs to date have been supercharged racing machines built for the few, with a cost equivalent to a conventional sports cruiser twice their size.

To us, this is illogical. It's like a car manufacturer coming up with a station wagon design – perfect for shopping, pets and excursions to grandma's house – and then sticking a 300hp engine in it and charging a price no one can afford.

Thankfully things have progressed of late and common sense has prevailed. With the launch of Zodiac's first ever cabin model, the smart and keenly priced N-ZO, we are starting to see a small but interesting group of cabin RIBs appear on the market. These boats, the ones we have here in fact, do not cost twice as much as the equivalent sports cruiser but simply set out to offer a great mix of RIB ability with a bit of cruising comfort – and we applaud them for it.

The boats

Starting with the 22ft Zodiac and running up to the 30ft Marlin, this is clearly not a comparative test, but a reflection of what could be one of the most exciting emerging boat designs to hit the water in recent times.

Each of our four RIBs is trying to do a different job and should appeal to different kinds of boaters. The **Zodiac N-ZO** is a straightforward daycruiser alternative – not surprising given that the man who created it, Vittorio Garroni, is also responsible for the design work on much of Jeanneau's model range. The N-ZO comes in three different levels of fitout all running single

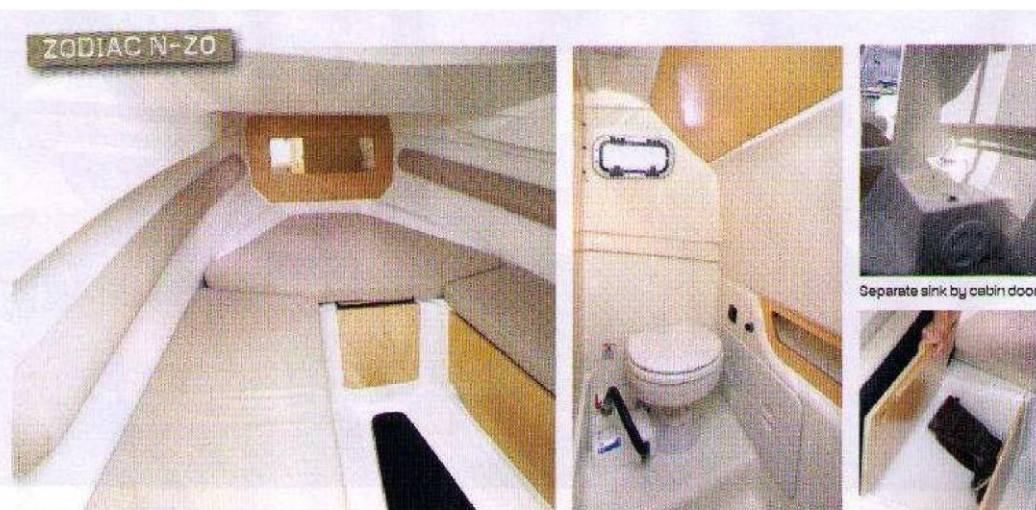
outboard engines: Base, Optimum (as tested) and Premium. You also have a choice of blue, olive and grey tubes.

Then we have the slightly larger, more expensive and mischievous-looking **Zar 73**. This Italian-built RIB is available in two levels of fitout and comes with inboard or outboard power. We tested the higher-spec Limited version with an inboard diesel, which is packed with detail and cruising options. And although it is in a similar market to the Zodiac in terms of

size, its price makes it a more considered purchase. It is also the only boat here not to offer all-around tubes – the sponsors disappear into the forward sections leaving a solid GRP bow naked of inflexible insurance.

Next up is the Isle of Wight-built **Shearwater 860**. The racer of the group, this boat is simply a top-drawer performance RIB with a subtle cuddy-style cabin added on. It's for the RIB fan that wants it all – blistering performance and a bit of comfort for family and friends.

Last but not least we have the mighty **Marlin 29**. At just under 30ft in length and carrying a vast beam, this is a big RIB by UK standards but no more than average in its native Italy – a country that thinks nothing of building 60ft twin-diesel inflatables. Its size and weight make this the boat for those looking for extended cruising, a fact borne out by its separate toilet compartment as well as a cabin. In fact, the size of this boat makes it one of the few cabin RIBs available where the accommodation makes little or no impact on the deck layout. An open version of the boat is available with an outboard engine but the cabin version is an inboard stern-drive.



For a 23ft boat the cabin space is good, delivering a very useable double berth

Electric flush toilet for the Optimum spec

Lined-out storage lockers

The cabins

Being a cabin RIB review, it only seems right and proper that we give particular attention to the interior accommodation. All of our boats offer two interior berths and a toilet, but only three of them have some sort of galley arrangement. So while they are not on the same level as your average four-berth, 25ft to 30ft sports cruiser, they

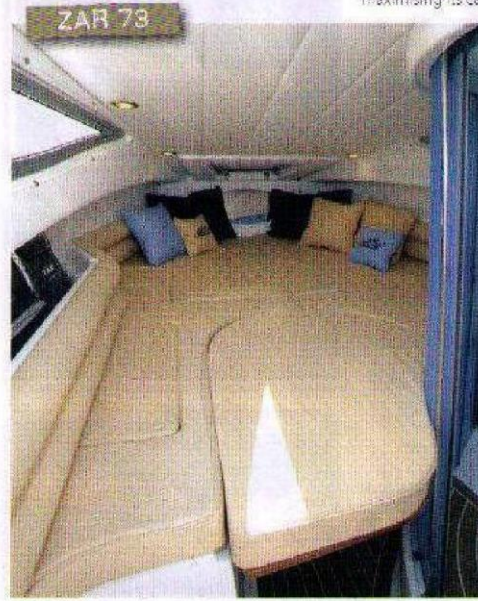
do bridge a gap between out-and-out dayboat and weekendor. Aside from the lack of two separate sleeping areas, which may well be an issue for a family looking to overnight, these RIBs shouldn't feel overly inferior to sports cruisers because the galleys and toilets aboard such vessels are actually rarely used.

Our smallest boat in length, the **Zodiac**, actually feels one of the biggest on board and is also the most intelligent when it comes to maximising its cabin area which will feel

familiar to those used to today's sportsboats and cruisers. Incredibly simple in its finish and design, it is also highly effective, delivering a deep, bright cabin space that is a step up from your average poky cuddy. Light oak panels are used to create a sitting-room-only electric flush toilet compartment with a small sink just outside its door. The same oak adds detail to the cabin seat bases where good quality lined-out bins, rather than simply flow-coated bilges, are found. Overhead lighting and a hatch are included and with the neutral upholstery working with the oak to create a very clean space, you won't mind spending a couple of nights on board this RIB. One silly little oversight is that the cabin door key would snap off if you slid open the door with it still inserted; a simple cut-out would stop this from happening.

In contrast to the Zodiac's intelligent cabin shell, the **Zar** is more interested in packing in the detail, a feature that reoccurs time and time again on this boat. The Zar's cabin is easily the most luxurious and comfortable on test here, sitting somewhere between a sports cruiser and a cuddy cabin. It is slightly larger than the Zodiac's cabin but feels a little more confined due to the intensity of its fitout. Every part of the cabin is lined with stitched vinyl. LED down lights are a sophisticated touch and someone has taken the trouble to fit teak locker doors to even the smallest void. The cabin definitely benefits from the side windows for the light and ventilation they deliver.

The all-important toilet hides behind a blue frosted door and is another sitting-only space



The Zar cabin is packed with detail, a simple infill makes up the double berth



Bright toilet compartment



Teak lockers and trim



Separate sink by cabin door



Lined-out storage lockers



The Zodiac's door key will snap off if opened fully

but you still get an electric flush system, a sink and even a shower (that you will never use unless it's to wash down the compartment and yourself at the same time). Stowage is good with a deep well under the forward seating plus neat side bins and pockets, although these aren't as well finished as on the Zodiac.

The *Shearwater's* dart-like frame means that even though we have some 28ft of boat here, the cabin is fairly narrow and the most cuddly-like of the four boats. A sailboat-style washboard is used as the cabin door, leading down to a fixed step and the cabin sole. The step is left hollow for extra stowage space or it can allow for an up-rated fuel tank to push into the cabin from amidships. The cabin itself features two long bunks that will make up into a complete double berth with an overhead hatch but no side ports. No toilet was fitted to our test boat but a sea or chemical toilet can be optioned in. Overall it's a neat, simple space for an overnight stay, but given that this is a performance RIB, you are looking at more of a compromise when it comes to cruising options. That said, after spending the day doing what this boat is designed to do, and that is having along at 50 knots, its cosy confines would still seem very welcome.

If you do want to spend serious time on board then the *Marlin*, at a similar length to the *Shearwater* but on another level in terms of cruising space, is going to be more for you. The forward cabin is somewhat primitive in its fitout. The cabin walls are simply a flow-coated reflection of the outer GRP tube mouldings, but you do win on space,



The tall, cuddly-like interior will make up into a double berth. An optional chemical toilet is also available

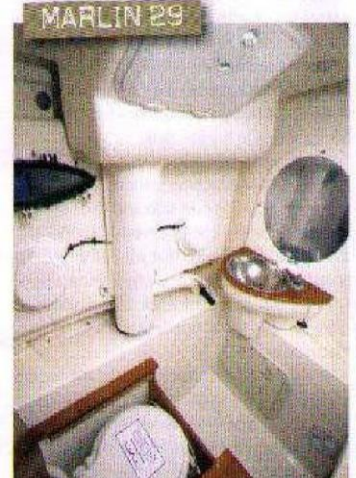
Deep, wide and bright, this is a cabin in which you really could spend time, swing cats and not feel claustrophobic in. An overhead hatch provides light and air, while solid leak-louvered cabin doors allow additional ventilation.

Although the much larger *Marlin* delivers a far larger cabin, you still don't gain an interior galley – something all of these RIBs have in common. The *Zar* delivers arguably the best tea and breakfast-making facilities with its under-helm hob, sink and fridge. The *Zodiac* does a similar job with its sink and optional hob, but the *Shearwater* doesn't even attempt to make breakfast a

possibility. The *Marlin* offers an optional hob and it scores extra points for its toilet and shower cubicle set into the forward section of the helm console. This deep void is accessed via a hydraulic hatch and is one of the only boats in this class to offer standing headroom.

Overall, these four RIBs offer comfortable, sleeping cabins with very different takes on finish. Galleys are clearly not a priority and toilets – the *Marlin's* aside – are for emergency use only. This isn't such a massive issue, given that most owners of sub-30ft craft would probably opt to use the marina's facilities anyway. However, the ability to make a cup of tea in the morning is something that any boat with a cabin should be able to do. >>>

The Zar delivers the best tea and breakfast-making facilities



The smallest, cheapest boat here also happens to have the best and most social seating plan



Simple helm leaves room for a large central plotter



Lots of chunky grab rails



Neat fuel filler access



A gas hob can be added under here too



The flat, safe foredeck doubles up as a large sunpad

The decks

For the sheer thought and effort that have gone into its cockpit, we must start with the *Zar 73*. Stepping over a comparatively slender D-section of tube they are full-D-sections but you only get to see the outer bit and into a deep deck, you do feel safely within this boat rather than perched on it. Set around you is an array of seating and a forward swept stainless steel arch

for navigational toys, which will hinge easily when towing. The aft cockpit offers up a wealth of loafing possibilities while a teak table adds some class to proceedings. An under-helm galley includes a proper fridge as well as a sink and hob.

With the PNM five-cylinder inboard diesel taking up most of the space under the aft seating, the deck stowage is limited to two seat bases and a few small lockers set into the coaming. An outboard-powered version would hand this large engine room over to useful

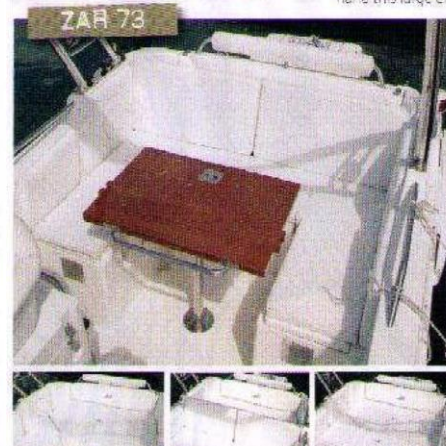
stowage space. Plus, seeming as an outboard is £20k cheaper to buy and faster to run, it seems far and away the more attractive proposition.

Like its interior, the *Zodiac's* wide cockpit is simple, ordered and very tidy. The Optimum package seems to offer most of what you need, the only major difference with the Premium boat being a T-top above the helm, which some may want as there is no option for an A-frame.

Borderer by huge tubes, the N-ZO's seating runs centrally from an aft L-shaped bench on to a small bench with a tall helm position. Under the helm seat is a small galley. Our boat came with just a sink and an icebox but a gas hob can be supplied. A huge stowage locker is found under the forward seating with a false floor giving access to the fuel tank.

Access across the *Zodiac* is good. From the tidy transom and bathing platform, the cockpit sole runs down the port side, and leads on to a foredeck area that comes covered in upholstery as standard. This means that you can enjoy a full sunpad forward without having to mess around with the seating aft. Under all this cushioned glamour lies a useful foredeck and a standard 1ft electric windlass.

Although it doesn't feel as solid as the *Zar*, the *Zodiac* is still impressive in terms of its fitout. It has stainless steel grabrails set into the tubes, the fuel filler is hidden under the side-deck step and a three-section stowage box under the aft bench conceals the battery master switches.



Useful bits tray at the helm



Marlin does is deliver the same sort of idea, without being clever – it's so big it doesn't have to be. At almost 11ft wide and 30ft long this boat has the luxury of space. It manages to fit in a bathing platform, a fixed sunpad, cockpit bench seating (which is on the tight side) and a forward cockpit that includes a rather scary looking anchor platform-cum-ramming spike.

And it's not just the boat that's big, the build is also mighty. Due to an engine issue on a new Marlin 29, we looked over a five-year-old model too and it still looked solid. Given that these 40-knot boats are going to be used fairly hard, it was impressive to note that not a single bit of start-racing had appeared on even the most aesthetic of mouldings. Beneath the sunpad, accessed via a beery hydraulic arm, the bay shows the sort of lay-up not normally found on leisure craft. This boat might look Med-casual, but it's built to take a pounding.

Another boat destined for a hard life is the Shearwater 860. Completely different from the Marlin, this inline racer features a simple deck layout with an aft wrap-around bench, plenty of open, synthetic teak-laid deck, a bolster seat helm and forward console seat. This last single seat set into the helm console is sometimes referred to as the Jesus Christ seat. To understand why simply try sitting up here when travelling at 50 knots. Actually, it's a fine spot, providing plenty of support. The 860's

“The Marlin is on another level when it comes to space”

only downside is the wide helm console, which makes access forward rather tight, even along the wider port side. But this is a narrow sporty boat and the builder had to push the console out to win space for the cabin within.

Shearwater offers a vast range of colours for its tubes and upholstery and its custom-build policy means that, within reason, you can have whatever you want in terms of finish and options. The sprayhood on the test boat does, however, provide a practical feature should the weather turn for the worse.



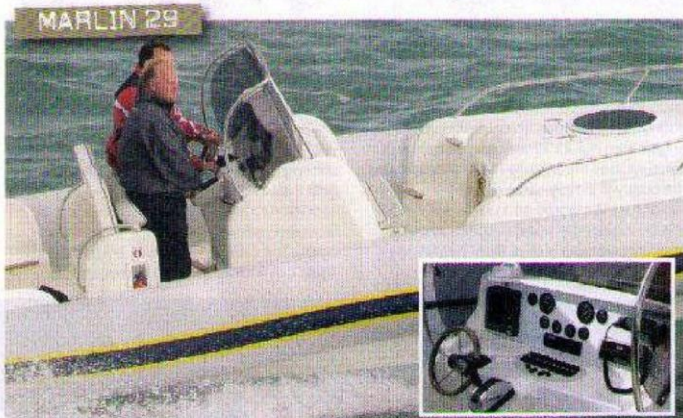
A vast range of tube and upholstery colours add to the Shearwater's cockpit cool



The wings of the cabin moulding make you feel protected



Fancy some fun? Try this seat at 50 knots



Lift the helm seat set into the console to access the WC. Opposite that lift the GRP section to enter the cabin

CONVENTIONAL BOAT OR CABIN RIB?

As mentioned before, one of the biggest problems with RIBs is cost. A basic, open deck RIB package will set you back significantly more than a sportsboat, and we know most cabin RIBs cost more than an equivalent cruiser offering significantly more

interior accommodation. So why go RIB?

Well, the boffins tell us that, on average, most of us will spend just one night aboard at a time. In fact, it's statistics are to be believed, we usually dayboat, regardless of how many cabins and showers we have. This near-saver might not need all the space we are buying into, and it makes a cabin RIB look all the more sensible with its mix of fun but convenient ride and the option

of a place to rest your head. Running single engine and being a more simple craft in terms of on-board equipment, means RIBs should prove cheaper to run, too. Add in the fact that some experienced RIB manufacturers are offering better-value products and it is starting to look like an open and shut case.

A Jeanneau or a RIB?



An obvious example of this is Zodiac's now £23,000 N-20. Aimed squarely at the day-cruiser market, this RIB owns about the same as traditional market leaders, such as Jeanneau's Can Camarat G35WA. Of course, if you plan to spend weeks aboard then a cabin RIB isn't the boat for you. But if the odd night on board and some scintillating performance sound right up your street, then a cabin RIB is definitely worth considering.

Zodiac's now £23,000 N-20. Aimed squarely at the day-cruiser market, this RIB owns about the same as traditional market leaders, such as Jeanneau's Can Camarat G35WA. Of course, if you plan to spend weeks aboard then a cabin RIB isn't the boat for you. But if the odd night on board and some scintillating performance sound right up your street, then a cabin RIB is definitely worth considering.



The performance

If you want to truly experience the wonder of driving a RIB, then Shearwater's 860 is a perfect place to start. Rarely have we experienced an engine and hull so in tune with one another. The four-cylinder, 300hp supercharged Verado outboard pulls beautifully, taking the Ring-roes great hull to a top speed that easily hits 48 knots. But it's the helm feedback lower down the rev range that almost impresses more.

With the electronic throttle giving smooth, precise control, the Shearwater moves to 20 knots in just three seconds and 40 knots in a little over 10 seconds. The hull likes some engine trim but it's all very easy to handle. You can turn in as hard as you like at 40 knots and the boat will simply carve a poetic arc with no slip or fuss. We would go as far as saying that this boat grips the water as well as anything we have tested. From behind the

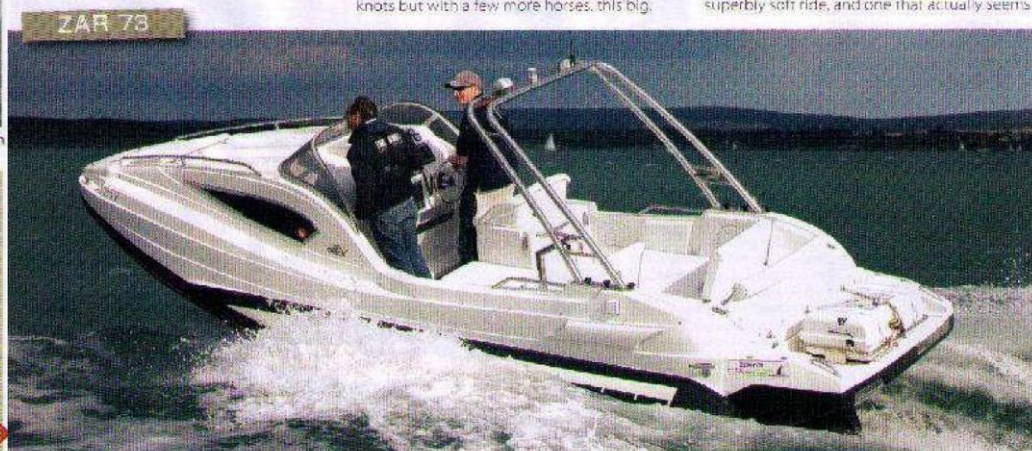
helm, the standing bolster position feels right, but if you do choose to sit down you can still see forward through the tinted screen.

Moving from the 28ft, 300hp Shearwater to the 23ft, 225hp Zodiac sounds like a fairly even trade-off between size of boat and power but it proved a different experience on the water. Before we get into the handling it should be noted that Zodiac intends to increase the recommended engine size for the N-20 from the 225hp here to 300hp, which pretty much says everything you need to know about the boat we tested – it's underpowered. As an easy-to-access boating package, the idea of offering one engine option makes sense but only if it's the right engine. Here the acceleration and pull through the turn was lacklustre, a shame given the boat's obvious ability. The 225hp engine was still good for 34 knots but with a few more horses, this big,

beamy hull's surprisingly soft ride could be elevated with some sporty intent.

Having said that, on the choppy and blustery test day the Zodiac did perform well, and was certainly superior to most of the conventional GRP daycruisers it will be competing against. On these boats, you would expect to receive a good deal of slam, but on the N-20 not a single chime-slap was heard nor a jarring landing felt. Sitting at the helm, the dash area makes room for an bin plotter while a chunky, seamless steel bar snakes around the windshield. The steering was heavy though, which might be an issue for novice boaters.

Not unsurprisingly, given its fitout and inboard diesel engine, the Zar did feel heavier on the water than the Zodiac. Delivering a solid, cruiser-like ride quality that will give you the confidence to take on longer passages, the boat sat happily at 25 knots, returning 3.5mpg. The Zar's unique, sharp-entry hull coupled to a deep-vee really delivers on the water with a superbly soft ride, and one that actually seems





to improve the faster you go. At 35 knots the Zar is perfectly stable and very easy to control, even if it is a little sluggish off the line.

From the helm the fixed single seat will be used as no more than a leaning post but all of the controls and instruments fall easily to hand. The boat doesn't respond particularly well to leg trim, which could have something to do with the fact that it is fitted with a Bravo I MerCruiser

outdrive leg, rather than the longer Bravo III. But in truth the Zar is a naturally well-balanced craft, and is one that

happily lets you get on with the job of riding the waves, leaving you to steer and smile.

That leaves us with our biggest boat of the day. The Marlin we tested came with a 300hp diesel engine and when you're sitting behind

this RIB's broad and tall helm console you are immediately aware that you've made the leap from fun boat to big boat. As we moved out into the Solent the whole rig felt less RIB-like than the others on test, and more like a conventional cruiser. But as the throttle was eased forward the fun started to fight back.

We managed 35 knots on test, but the boat

will sit anywhere between 22 knots and 30 knots and return an extremely comfortable and surprisingly agile ride, holding its speed well through the turns. When you consider that the ranks of Marlin 29 owners include

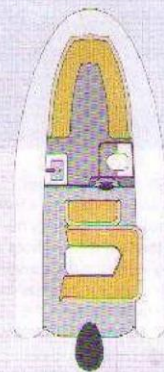
one Jonson Button it shouldn't come as a surprise to find out that this Med-friendly RIB possesses bags of on-water ability.

The extra size, weight and accommodation of the Marlin make it a cruiser rather than a racer, and therefore it's an obvious candidate for

those looking to cover greater distances. Our only two issues with the boat are a fairly hard upwind ride caused, no doubt, by its monster beam and the view forward from the helm when standing. Although the console delivers excellent wind protection it has you peering through the break between the Perspex shield and the grabrail surround, which drove me mad.

At the start of this test, the one element we wanted to see from these accommodating craft was the exhilarating on-water ability that RIBs are renowned for. And while the levels of outright performance altered from boat to boat there were some impressive and important similarities too. All four delivered a very smooth, confident ride over what were very typical choppy conditions. The larger Marlin had a few more rattles perhaps, but not one RIB slammed on test, nor did they ever feel unbalanced or unstable – and that counts for a lot with newer boaters or those looking to sell the dream to their loved ones.

Zodiac N-ZO



LENGTH OVERALL	22ft 7in (6.9m)
BEAM	10ft 5in (3.2m)
WEIGHT	1700kg
ENGINE	225hp Honda Boyl outboard

PERFORMANCE		
rpm	knots	mpg
5300	38	2.31
4000	28	3.5

PRICE (Optimum) from £37,610

ENQUIRIES Zodiac

www.zodiacmarine.co.uk



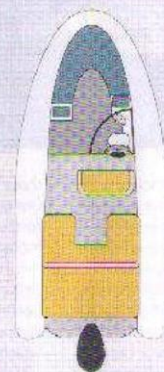
CONCLUSION

FOR Affordable, masses of deck and cabin space for its length

AGAINST The N-ZO deserves more power and it will get it

VERDICT This could be the one to take cabin RIBs mainstream. It has everything a 23-footer usually has but it does most of it better

Zar 73



LENGTH OVERALL	23ft 11in (7.3m)
BEAM	8ft 4in (2.5m)
WEIGHT	2000kg
ENGINE	250hp FNM 50yl diesel Bravo I MerCruiser drive

PERFORMANCE		
rpm	knots	mpg
4200	36	3.2
3000	24	4.0

PRICE from £64,650

ENQUIRIES Powerboats Ltd
Tel: 023 8021 2112

www.powerboatscompany.co.uk



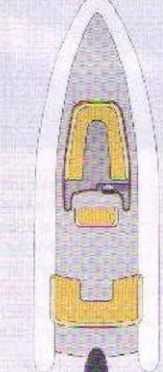
CONCLUSION

FOR Cockpit options, lots of room for cruising kit

AGAINST High price for an Inboard engine

VERDICT Incredibly keen to impress, packed out with detail and cruising specifications

Shearwater 860



LENGTH OVERALL	28ft 3in (8.6m)
BEAM	8ft 10in (2.7m)
WEIGHT	1950kg
ENGINE	300hp 4cyl Mercury Verado outboard

PERFORMANCE		
rpm	knots	mpg
5800	48	2.2
4000	31	3.3

PRICE from £52,597

ENQUIRIES Shearwater RIBs,
Tel: 01863 872617

www.shearwaterribs.com



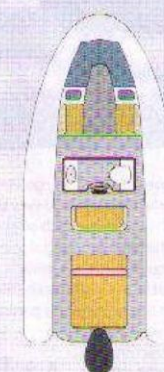
CONCLUSION

FOR Awesome handling

AGAINST Limited cabin options

VERDICT This is the perfect RIB for those who don't want to grow up or trade down. A pedigree performer, with a smart cockpit and a useful cabin

Marlin 29



LENGTH OVERALL	29ft 8in (9.0m)
BEAM	10ft 9in (3.3m)
WEIGHT	2200kg
ENGINE	300hp 60yl MerCruiser 4.2lt diesel Bravo III drive

PERFORMANCE		
rpm	knots	mpg
3800	34	2.5
3000	23	3.2

PRICE £95,000

ENQUIRIES Marlin RIBs,
Tel: 023 8045 5459

www.marlinribs.com



CONCLUSION

FOR Solid build and separate cabin and toilet

AGAINST A serious step up in size and price

VERDICT A cruising RIB with a big boat attitude and accommodation to match

MARLIN 29





If spending the night on a sports cruiser is widely recognised as a pleasure, doing the same on a small RIB has so far failed to catch on. In order to buck this unjustified trend, Alex Smith reports in the dead of night from the inside of an open boat somewhere in arctic Essex.

UNDER COVER

As I packed my thermals for a sub-zero night in Brightlingsea, I was astonished to get a ring from the Missus. She wanted to know what time we should get going if we were to be there before sundown.

This was good. Not only would she keep me entertained while I got slowly drunk, but she'd also keep me warm in a way that very few manmade devices can match.

As I mused on the splendour of womankind in general and my girlfriend in particular, we arrived at our destination, whereupon she immediately looked less keen. I think she'd envisioned a glistening monument to man's engineering prowess; a floating hotel decked out in walnut and leather, with a state of the art entertainment system and a cocktail bar; a boat where opulence and exclusivity oozed from every soft-lit, velvety pore.

What she got was a 5.3m RIB with a big white canvas stretched over the top, and at first sight I think she was less than impressed.

I pre-empted a smack in the mouth by insisting this would be so much more than just a night in an oddly shaped tent. I was of course lying, but I figured that if I got her down the pub for the next four hours, bedtime might render her somewhat less hostile to the idea of a winter's night in a polvthene baz.



The boat

The ZAR 53 is a smaller version of the boat Tom Isitt tested (page 45), and the bloodline shows. The 53, like the 65, is a RIB with a big internal beam. More importantly from the camping perspective, this breadth extends so far forward that barely an inch of the boat's length is wasted on tapering V shapes.

As a result, once the all-over camping canvas is erected, the space is astonishing. With a metal arch that spans the foredeck, the rest of the fabric is anchored over the top of the screen rim and the radar arch, and stretched down to the outside of the tubes where it hooks beneath the lip of the rubbing strake on tension straps that keep the whole construction taut.

Partners are vital camping accessories – they'll keep you entertained while you get drunk, and warm when you pass out

With the canvas in place, the main access is over the transom through a zipped flap. It's a bit tight but what greets you inside is worth the effort. With the helm seat opened flat and inflatable cushions inserted you'll find sizeable sleeping platforms both forward and aft of the console.

What you have here then is essentially a long, low-ceilinged bedroom with straps, windows, partitions, multiple access points and the space to sleep about six. Sad though it may sound, while my girlfriend pursed her lips, I hopped about touching stuff like a child with a new toy. I was virtually beside myself with the joyous novelty of it all, and I swear, any adult with even a modicum of childishness in him will feel the same.

Bed time

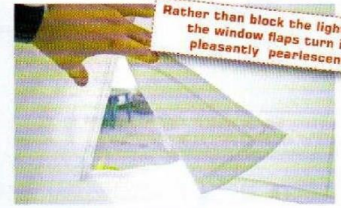
With bellies full of curry and beer we slipped under cover at around midnight and true to form, a bit of sustenance and a warm sleeping bag had cheered her up. I plugged a low-energy lamp into the 12V socket and hung it from one of the many ceiling straps before settling down with a hot chocolate and a notepad.

First thing's first. With canvas and cushions in place, unless you prop yourself against the front of the helm console, the foredeck is a place to lie down and sleep. Sitting up, particularly in the forward part sees you rubbing your head on canvas.

I sat back aft in the cockpit where the fabric was most elevated and, despite the



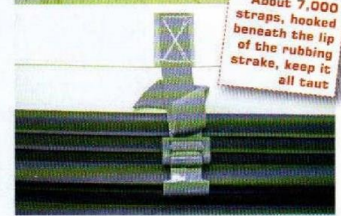
Take an energy-efficient lamp and plug it into your 12V socket for atmospheric nightclub glow



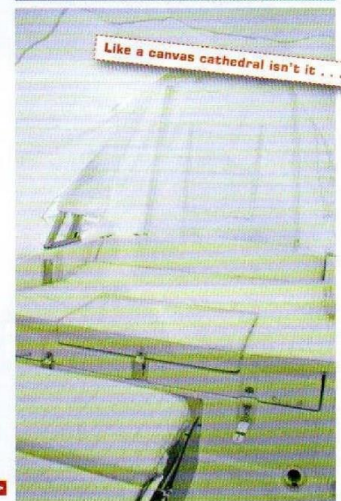
Rather than block the light, the window flaps turn it pleasantly pearlescent



That massively broad forepeak and GRP frame makes the bow a fine place to sleep



About 7,000 straps, hooked beneath the lip of the rubbing strake, keep it all taut



Like a canvas cathedral isn't it ...

cold I felt very comfortable. It was a breezy night though, and the aggravating flappity-flap as the canvas sucked and smacked against its supports took a bit of getting used to. The fabric could have been made even tighter by adjusting the straps, but when the wind is blustery, there's only so much you can do to keep things quiet.

Versatility

Despite the simplicity of the concept, this is a very versatile product. It's got windows with velcro panels to admit or exclude natural light; it's got a zipped foredeck panel for frontal access or to admit some sunlight and a through-draft; it's got a central privacy partition, allowing two separate camping

compartments forward and aft of the helm (particularly handy if you invest in a porta potti); and on top of all that, it's got the aft headroom to sit up and entertain under cover while those in the foredeck doze off.

Despite its modest length, it's also got the space to sleep about as many people as familiarity permits. With practice, it's easy enough for an idiot to erect in about 15 minutes and it packs down small enough to store without seriously limiting the craft's storage capacity.

The one thing it seems to lack is mosquito panels for the two main access points, but even if these aren't available as an additional option, they are certainly a simple job to put together yourself.

Other than that, there are just four things missing. A loo, a shower, a fridge and a cooker. So take an electric cool box (£350) and a transom shower (£270) from the options list. Then buy a potti and a stove from the chandlery. Job done.



Morning brings with it alcohol induced pain of apocalyptic proportions

Once bedtime came, I leapt about like a child with a new toy, almost beside myself with the joyous novelty of it all

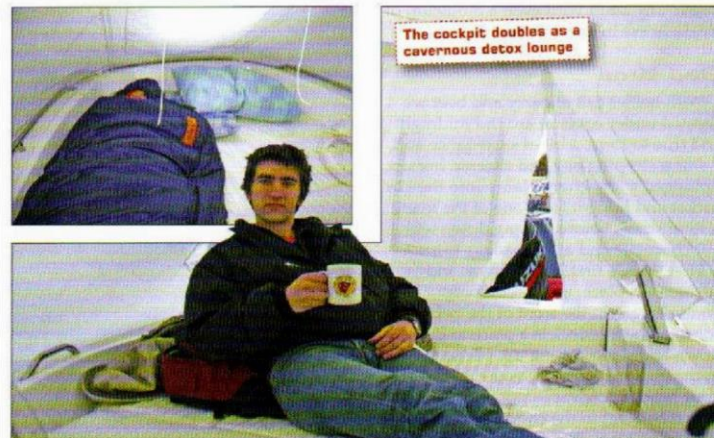
As I finally lie down with my head in the blunt forepeak, it strikes me there's not much vertical space up here. As the canvas is secured to the outside of the tube that's pretty much unavoidable, but the tightness is by no means problematic. On the contrary, the GRP-encased tubes provide a deep 180-degree headboard, and despite the fact that mere canvas separates you from the outside world, you feel tremendously snug and protected.

Home time

The next morning arrives much as it does in your average bricks and mortar bedroom. And as we pack up our gear, fuelled by a heady cocktail of sweet tea and bacon, it seems to us (well, to me) that a cruiser is an excessive luxury.

True, it gives you a quieter night, slightly better security and more homely facilities. It's convenient too because the roof doesn't require erecting every night. But if that extra luxury sets you back thousands of pounds, you might well consider it decidedly inconvenient.

After all, a modern marina provides facilities like showers, toilets and hot food to a more civilised standard than most boats. And even if a small marina doesn't provide all of that, you can simply add it to your camping list as a batch of portable extras... makes you think doesn't it



The cockpit doubles as a cavernous detox lounge

Zar 65

TEST TEST

Zar 65



But in recent years there has been a distinct movement away from pared back practicality towards a more Mediterranean style of boat. There are still people out there with woolly hats and woollier beards who want a boat that looks like one of Greenpeace's cast-offs, but increasingly people want their RIBs to be a little more stylish, and a little less like a Hypalon skip.

I'm all in favour of this shift. I don't want to look like the safety boat for the local dinghy sailing club. I want to look like Cary Grant or David Niven, being whisked across to Cap Ferrat for lunch with the Rothschilds, the warm Cote d'Azur breeze rippling the Baie de Whatsit as we skim across the waves,

She's got a conk like a ski slope
but I reckon she's a bit of a looker



Introducing the ZAR 65, a new Med-style leisure RIB from Italy aimed squarely at the recreational RIBster. By Tom Isitt.

Italian heavyweight

There is an established world order in RIB-building. The British make utilitarian RIBs in grey or orange that have jockey-seats and look like something the Special Boat Service would use.

The Italians make RIBs that have bench seats and sun loungers and which look like something that was craned off the back of a super-yacht in order to take one's nieces ashore to have their hair done in Saint Tropez.

And the Scandinavians make RIBs that combine bomb-proof build-quality with exquisite design and big price-tags to create boats that Arne Jacobsen would be proud of.

I don't know what it is about British RIBsters, but the more our RIBs resemble a Series 1 Land Rover the happier we are. We love the functionality, the no-nonsense approach, and the fact that this is a "proper" boat, not some fair-weather plaything.

And once we've bought our "marine 4x4", we then equip it with every conceivable navigation aid and safety device known to mankind so it ends up positively bristling with high-tech gadgetry. ▣



'While men with woolly hats and woollier beards want a boat that looks like a Greenpeace cast-off, the rest of us want a bit more style'



At first glance, 200 looks a bit jolly for a boat of this size but she's a solid little thing

Kylie laughing and smiling at me from the forward sunpad, the soft sea breeze plucking at the hem of her skirt, affording me brief glimpses of . . . Anyway, the point I'm making is that you don't get that kind of fantasy in a Halmatic. Capable though they undoubtedly are, all you get is an ugly bloke in a drysuit snuggling up behind you on a jockey seat as you pound through the grey waves of the North Sea. Not for me.

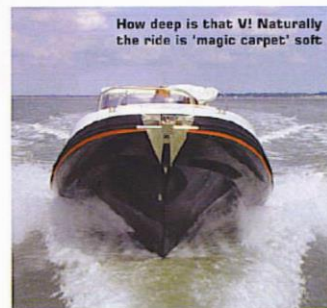
If you want to feel like Cary Grant or David Niven, being whisked across to Cap Ferrat for lunch with the Rothschilds, a ZAR may help

So, some manufacturers are now putting serious thought into the styling of their RIBs. For family RIBing, bench seats and sunpads are needed, along with a more versatile layout. Things like cockpit tables are essential for family boating, and at over six metres in length, it's perfectly possible to accommodate them.

To the point

And so to the ZAR 65. Typical of this new breed of recreational RIB, the Italian-built ZAR looks more like a superyacht tender than a traditional British boat. The layout of this 6.5 is fairly standard fare. A wide centre console gives protection to a twin helm seat, but with an internal beam of just under five feet, there's still enough room to move about unimpeded.

At the bow there's an anchor locker, with a padded bench seat facing the centre console. On the front of the console is another bench seat facing forwards. As is increasingly common these days, the whole of the bow section is made from GRP, with the tubes integrated below it, and this gives the best of both worlds.



How deep is that V! Naturally the ride is 'magic carpet' soft.



Zar 65

It means that the bow can support stainless-steel handrails and cleats, but you still get the stability and protection of the inflatable tubes. Instrumentation at the helm consists of the stock Suzuki dials for the 200hp outboard, showing speed, revs and fuel. There's also a ZAR-supplied panel of lights and switches for things like nav lights, bilge pump, anchor windlass, fresh-water shower, and so on.

This model was fitted with various Navman nav aids and a VHF unit, but you can pretty much spec what you want (assuming there's room to fit it). Like all RIB manufacturers, there's almost no such thing as a standard-spec because each is built to the customer's specification, so you can have as much, or as little, instrumentation as you want.

Aft of the helm position is a cockpit designed for sociable loafing. C-shaped seating is arranged around a cockpit table that will seat four people comfortably. Flip the backrest of the twin helm seat forward and you can seat at least six. Again there's a GRP stern section that sits over the tubes, so you actually feel more like you're in a traditional sports boat than in a RIB.

Round the boat there's a surprising amount of room. There's stowage everywhere, and both the forward and aft seating areas can be transformed into good-sized sunbathing platforms in the

event of the sun actually putting in an appearance. Build quality appears to be good, if not exceptional. You'll struggle to find any rough edges.

The 65's hull is a very deep V at the bow, reducing to a shallower V aft, topped off by wide spray rails. Tube material is a well-proven neoprene-Hypalon cocktail used by most RIB builders. There's a tremendously thick D-section rubbing strake with a pair of hefty rubber cleats on each side, as well as stainless-steel cleats at the aft end of the rear seating unit.

She certainly won't be to everyone's tastes but for many it will be a breath of fresh air

On the transom the test boat showed off a fuel-injected 200hp Suzuki four-stroke outboard. This is the biggest engine that can be fitted to this boat, and given that this boat is on the heavy side for its length (all that GRP increases the weight significantly) you wouldn't really want to consider anything smaller.

In the benign, if rather muddy, waters off the Essex coast the ZAR performed faultlessly on our test. The Suzuki outboard is whisper-quiet at tick-over, and offers absolutely masses of get-up-and-go once you get beyond the harbour limits. Nailing the throttle from a standing start rockets the 65 forward, with a plane time of just a couple of seconds and very minimal bow-lift.

That's just as well, because the ZAR has one BIG bow. At displacement speeds the sheer bulk does limit your forward vision more than on most RIBs. It also gives it a decidedly peculiar profile, compared to the sleek lines of most other Med-style RIBs. It certainly won't be to everyone's tastes but for many it will be as refreshing as it is distinctive.

Out on the water you're less concerned with how she looks, and more concerned with her performance, and I'm happy to say it's pretty good. Throttle-response is brisk, steering response is precise and reasonably light (light being a relative term), and she pretty much goes where you point her. Running flat-out, with two men and the boat light-loaded, we achieved 42.3 knots in a little over 20 seconds. It's a very respectable speed and one at which the ZAR feels utterly solid.

In the turns the 65's hull bites hard and the ZAR rides pretty flat. Trimmed right in there's no sign of prop ventilation or hull-skip when throwing it into tight turns with the power full on, and you get the feeling that this is a very forgiving and well-behaved boat.

Summary

At £34,676 including VAT for the basic boat with a Suzuki 200 on the back and a twin axle Streamline trailer, the ZAR65 represents pretty good value. For that money, you're getting a very accomplished and beautifully built recreational RIB that is perfectly suited to family boating. And if on the odd occasion you like to have your tear-ducts blown through in a 45mph gale, you may yet find some joy. [www.zarboats.com](#)

Specification

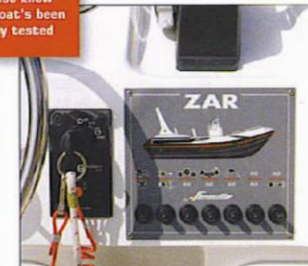
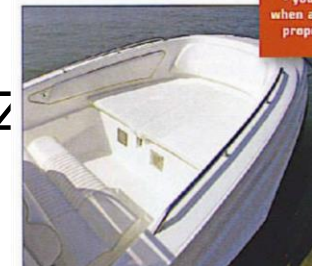
LOA	6.5m
Overall beam	2.55m
Internal beam	1.5m
Tube diameter	53cm
Tube compartments	6
Seating capacity	12
Dry Weight (boat only)	880kg
Maximum Power	200hp
RCD category	B
Price	£34,676 inc VAT (boat, Suzuki 200, and a trailer)

Contact

White Water Craft
275A Lymington Road
Highcliffe
Christchurch
Dorset BH23 5EB
Tel. (01425) 279312
Email: sales@whitewatercraft.com
Web: www.whitewatercraft.com



Safety, quality and common sense - you just know when a boat's been properly tested



ZAR 5.3

It's always satisfying to come across a craft that offers style, character and good handling, but it's even more so when you're not even expecting to be on board the boat in question. Irving Stewart reports.

Rarely do the sea gods smile and allow everything to come together resulting in a boat test that's particularly memorable, and a joy to undertake. Such was the case when I visited Powerboats Ltd in Shamrock Quay to try the newly introduced and beautifully finished Prinz 33 Open cruiser. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, not a breath of wind, the sun was burning hot and the Windwatch showed the temperature to be nearly 30 degrees. In vain I tried to convince my son, who'd joined me for the day, that these weren't normal Boat Mart testing conditions!

After a round of cold orange juice (honestly!) our host for the day, Dan Cross of Powerboats Ltd, ushered us aboard the Prinz and we prepared to cast off. "What about a camera boat?" I enquired.

2 FOR 1

"Oh, that's all arranged," Dan said. "Nik will be here in a few minutes with one of my new ZAR RIBs. You can test that as well if you like."

I was soon to discover that this was an offer that simply couldn't be refused!

With all ropes and fenders stowed the cruiser was gently moving out of the marina when the unmistakable sound of a Suzuki DF115 outboard announced the arrival of our camera boat. This highly unusual black hulled ZAR 5.3 RIB boasted white tubes, a hard nose and was piloted by a stunningly tanned and vivacious young lady. She was nonchalantly driving standing on one leg and kneeling on the pilot's seat in the manner of a relaxed and confident ribber - the day suddenly became far more interesting!

Once out in Southampton water we took full advantage of the conditions to take pictures. Having explained what we needed, and with my son aboard the RIB, Nik shot off to make a few close passes of the cruiser. Then I asked for some 'tight turns' and was rewarded by the sight of my son, his usual composure in tatters, hanging onto the windscreen grab rail with his body at right angles to the boat as the ZAR pulled several 'Gs'. Nik, however, was perfectly composed

behind the wheel and grinning from ear to ear - a highly amusing sight!

ON BOARD THE ZAR

Then it was time to climb aboard the RIB and photograph the cruiser (which will be a story for another day) before leaving the big boat to its own devices, whilst I recorded some ZAR performance figures.

It's nearly always a problem, when working with an unfamiliar driver, to convey exactly what's needed when carrying out performance tests. Young hot blooded males behind the wheel of a RIB tend to instantly grow demonic horns and set out to prove their boating skills, or simply try to deposit this old hack in the sea. Nik simply asked what was needed, located a couple of buoys to use as waypoints and then did a couple of perfect practice runs.

In half the normal time all the figures required were safely recorded, my paperwork was still perfectly dry and it was time to swap places so that I could get the feel of this Italian RIB.

The ZAR 5.3 has an unusual medium Vee hull with almost gull-wing chines, which the manufacturers claim entraps air and gives lift at speed. It's a fairly beamy boat with low set tubes that appear to sit firmly on the water when at rest, so the static stability is superb.

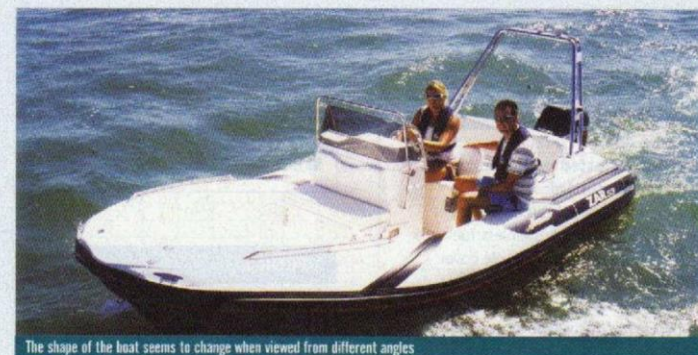
NOT WHAT YOU MIGHT THINK!

In theory the hull ought to give a firm ride and, although the craft has a fine bow entry, should tend to ride over a choppy sea and not cut through it. Surprisingly this isn't the case at all!

The ZAR gets onto the plane easily and cruises level with its tubes clear of the water, so the air entrapment hull does produce lift and it certainly deflects spray! In a straight line the boat behaves perfectly responding to the slightest movement of the helm and at speed gives a surprisingly pleasant ride.

When thrown about the RIB does exactly what you want without any unexpected chine hopping or nasty twitches. It copes with high speed turns with total abandon and, when we took full advantage of the inevitable ferry wakes, was more than nappy to get well airborne and land flat and level without causing any concern to those aboard.

For a RIB the ZAR offers a truly unusual concept with its tubes partially covered by a hard deck moulding, a hard nose, stainless steel hull side grab rails and a roomy interior. It's a classic example of Italian styling from the drawing board of someone prepared to buck the current trends. However it manages to avoid the 'prettiness' associated with many so called Mediterranean RIBs and instead portrays a far more business like, yet pleasing, approach.



The shape of the boat seems to change when viewed from different angles

WHEREAS MOST COMPETITORS ARE INTRINSICALLY SIMILAR, THE ZAR IS A BOAT APART. IT BRAVELY BUCKS SO MANY COMMONLY ACCEPTED DESIGN TRENDS - AND YET THE CONCEPT WORKS

UNIQUE & INTRIGUING!

Later, back on dry land, I took the opportunity to study the underneath of this curious craft and discovered that it's quite unique in a number of aspects.

- The hull boasts only four fairly short spray rails!
- The acutely concave chines extend from the bows to the stern
- The hull extends upwards to the tubes and it's the hull, not the tubes, which sit on the water when at rest!
- It isn't actually a snub nosed boat at all - more a round bow, very clever!

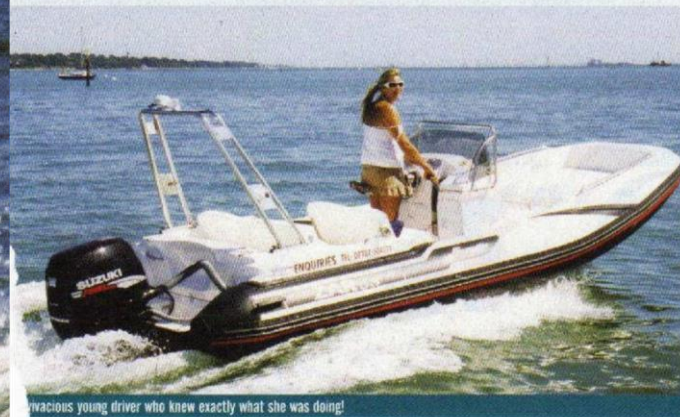
I'm not sure how to sum up this intriguing RIB. Whereas most competitors are intrinsically similar, the ZAR is a boat apart. It

bravely bucks so many commonly accepted design trends - and yet the concept works.

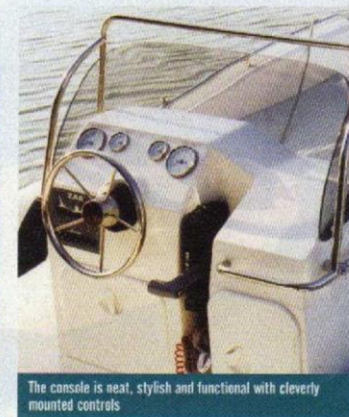
- Theoretically a hull with demure spray rails should be wet at sea and slippery in turns - but it isn't!
- The medium Vee hull should give a hardish ride - but it doesn't!
- Blending white tubes into a black hull should make a stark profile - but it doesn't!

So how does one position such a boat in the marketplace?

As my friend Hugh Fogerty, at Southampton Dry Stack, put it, "This is a classic Guinness boat! It has a jet black hull, a white head and tons of body - striking. People will either love it or hate it." ►►



Vivacious young driver who knew exactly what she was doing!



The console is neat, stylish and functional with cleverly mounted controls

FACT FILE

SPECIFICATION

ZAR 5.3

Bare boat: £12,425

Price as tested with Suzuki DF 115TL outboard: £23,075

This price includes the optional stainless A-frame, stainless fuel tank and custom made console cover

LOA: 5.3m

Beam: 2.39m

Weight (dry without engine): 480kg

OTHER BOATS TO CONSIDER

- Scanner Envy 6.3
- Northcraft
- Ribeye 625 Sport

VERDICT

I liked the ZAR 5.3, but then I also like Guinness! It's a really tough little RIB with bags of character, an unusual style and it handles well – what more could you ask for?

WHO TO TALK TO

Dan Cross

Powerboats UK

(incorporating White Water Craft)

Tel: 02380-212-112 / 07900-693-707

Email: info@powerboatcompany.co.uk

Web: www.powerboatcompany.co.uk

FOR A SIMILAR BUDGET

- Beneteau Flyer 650 Open
- Rancraft Millennium 1820
- Starfisher 670 Sports Fisher

TEST FIGURES

	PLANING	CRUISING	OPTIMUM	MAXIMUM*
Speed	10.4mph	19mph	26mph	36mph
RPM	2,500	3,000	4,000	5,400
Run1	0 - plane: 3.14s	0 - cruise: 5.26s	0 - optimum: 6.15s	0 - max: 14.32s cruise - max: 11.33s stand - max RPM: 11.2s
Run2	0 - plane: 2.85s	0 - cruise: 4.55s	0 - optimum: 5.73s	0 - max: 9.38s cruise - max: 9.38s

*Maximum speed recorded during 16.15 sea miles – 41.5mph

The engine would only achieve 5,400rpm during tests – 45mph should be possible

» Out of the water the ZAR does look radical, even bulbous, but once afloat it's visually very arresting. Personally I like it. As a family craft it's stable, safe, utterly predictable and has a toughness of build and an indestructibility factor that Mc Alpine would appreciate. It looks striking, is comfortable and handles well. Maybe the ride isn't as soft as some of the more 'sporting' RIBs out there - so what, it's infinitely nicer to ride in than the average Chelsea Tractor.

Whether you're seeking to make a style statement, looking for a very functional tender for a motor yacht or simply after a safe and rewarding boat you should certainly put the ZAR 5.3 on your shopping list, or one of its larger siblings up to 7.5m. Rated Cat. B, and with a capacity of ten passengers, this is a craft designed for serious work. It's certainly one of the most satisfying RIBs I've tested in a very long time.

Our thanks to Dan for his hospitality and great patience, to Nik for her RIB driving and to Caen for - well posing! Thanks also to Garmin, Silva and Aquapac for our test gear which, just for once, all stayed dry! ■

