

A high-angle, close-up photograph of the bow of a white inflatable boat with a black hull. The boat is moving through clear blue water, leaving a white wake. In the background, a green shoreline is visible under a clear sky. A large black graphic overlay is positioned in the upper left, containing the text 'Orange Crush' in orange. The word 'Orange' is in a smaller, sans-serif font, and 'Crush' is in a very large, bold, rounded font with small orange leaf-like shapes scattered around it. The boat's name 'SIMR' is partially visible on a white cap in the upper right.

Orange Crush

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review
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**Smuggler Strata 900
Centre Console RIB**

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Smuggler Marine's latest model presents the usual craftsmanship and while the slightly unusual colour scheme chosen by the customer's wife may not be universally appealing, it's undeniably striking.

T

he heavy-duty Hypalon tubes in two-tone grey, the white centre console, the gleaming pair of silver/black 250hp Evinrude E-TEC outboards, the teak-coloured Deck King flooring and the Tek Dek boarding platform are all pretty standard.

But it's the orange supports for the grey and black hardtop, with matching orange rod holders and even an orange trim strip on the Evinrudes, that grabs the eye. And rather than the usual stainless brightwork, the owner's elected to have it all powder-coated in bright orange.

Which makes this a very distinctive boat that certainly stands out from the crowd. Not that Dave Pringle, owner of Smuggler Marine, needed to do much to make her conspicuous. At 9m LOA and a beam of 3.3m, she's a big boat that will turn heads in any colour. And those twin outboards deliver enough speed to leave most competitors far behind.

Although centre consoles are often considered 'day boats' with little in the way of shelter or overnighting capability, the Strata 900 has enough space to overcome some of those limitations. The centre console unit is big enough to contain two berths, with the removable squabs providing access to the electric toilet and storage space underneath.

A freshwater tank supplies a handheld shower as well as a plumbed sink unit under the helm seat. That same unit also has a two-burner gas hob, giving the boat an overnighting capability for two on warm summer weekend trips.



ABOVE Those strakes do a superb job of keeping the RIB steady and true.

RIGHT & OPPOSITE Pretty flash helm station for a RIB, and check out the built-in sink and cooker.



Centre consoles are all about space, and the Strata 900 has it in abundance. The forward lounge area has seating for at least half a dozen people, and an under-floor locker holds plenty of gear as well. All deck hatches are water tight, so gear stored there will remain dry regardless of the conditions. The Deck King flooring which runs throughout the cabin floor is comfortable on bare feet and provides a secure footing even when wet.

One of the issues RIB manufacturers face is how to effectively mount an automatic anchor winch without impacting the tubes. Smuggler's solved this conundrum with a remote through-bow anchor mounting. This keeps the anchor well away from the soft tubes while offering the total convenience of an automatic anchor winch. Inside the bow area the anchor locker is accessible under the forward squabs.



At 9m LOA and a beam of 3.3m, she's a big boat that will turn heads in any colour.

The boat is, of course, dominated by the large centre console, with a curved carbon-fibre style dashboard. On that dash a massive Simrad NSS16 Evo3 touch-screen MFD takes care of plotter, chartfinder and radar duties, and with twin transducers this is a boat that will find fish. A Simrad AP44 autopilot with its independent display means the boat can even drive itself.

Inside the cabin part of the centre console is that electric toilet and twin squabs, and while snug it's certainly adequate for a good night's sleep. The fibreglass hardtop – with its orange-coated stainless supports – carries the Simrad 4G radome, aerials and a double-row rocket launcher holding up to 11 rods. If that's not enough, the rear support for the double helm



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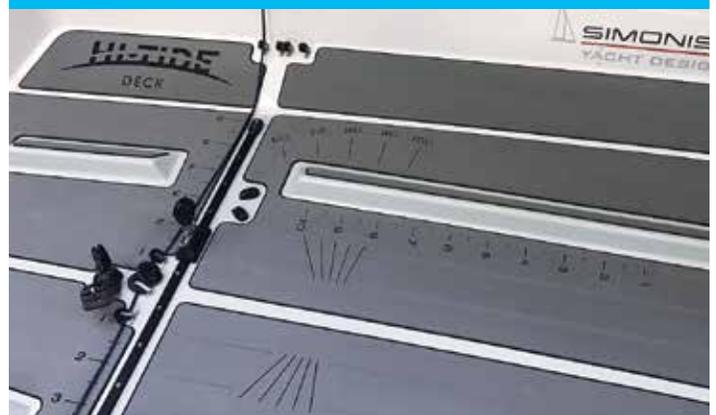
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...another beautiful boat from Smuggler Marine, with eye-watering performance.

OPPOSITE The twin Evinrudes deliver 500hp. Generous storage lockers abound..

RIGHT Only problem is that once you've tasted the exhilaration, you might not want to stop.

seat has a further six rod holders, and to round things off the bait board in the transom adds another seven.

The helm has a full-height windscreen, so the two helm seats are fully-protected from wind and rain while the hardtop offers shade. There is plenty of storage space on the dash itself, while lockable glove boxes provide further secure storage. Hella LED lighting is fitted throughout so the action need not stop when the sun goes down.

Elevated twin helm seats with bolsters and armrests, plus footrests on the console, will accommodate most occupants, with almost limitless options for driving position. Under the helm seat are additional storage options. A rear-facing queen seat provides a further two seats, and lifting that squab reveals the sink with tap and twin-burner hob.

The transom has yet more seating, with a squab in each corner acting as a step over the transom onto the boarding platform. The custom bait-board sits in the middle of the transom, allowing access both from within the cockpit and from out on the boarding platform. A livebait tank with viewing window is built under the port side seat, with a couple more rod holders each side.

Clearly this is a serious fishing machine, and it's helped by the vast cockpit space. Centre console layouts have become very popular with soft-bait fishermen, who allow the boat to drift and cast forward into the current then walk down the length of the boat as their bait drifts into the zone. The Strata 900's perfect for this, with an unimpeded passageway from the bow to the transom.





Stepping over the transom gets you to the massive boarding platform, and despite a pair of 250hp outboards there is still plenty of space to walk or stand between the engine cowlings and the transom. This is helped by the very neat cabling serving the engines – the single cowled tube exiting from the sides does not impinge on the transom walkway.

A Tek Dek trim on both sides ensures that swimmers coming up the boarding platform don't slip, while a stainless boarding ladder on the starboard side makes it easy to get back on board.

DRIVE TIME

Those Evinrudes really look the part on this boat, with their new-generation angled engine covers and colour-matched panels echoing the black, grey and orange of the rest of the boat. With the total output of 500hp we expected this boat to produce some fireworks, and it didn't disappoint.

Evinrude's electronic controls are fantastic, smooth and easy. The sync feature allows you to operate both

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HIGHLIGHTS

Impeccable
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Those adrenalin-
releasing Evinrudes

Liveability –
pretty damn
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SPECIFICATIONS

hull length 9.00m

External Beam 3.3m
(Tubes inflated)

deadrise 23°

construction GRP hull,
decks and cabin, with heavy-
duty Hypalon tubes

Engines 2 x Evinrude E-TEC
250hp Gen2

fuel capacity 600 litres

towing weight 3100kg
(approximate laden weight,
including trailer and fuel)

WATCH IT



engines with one lever – very simple and smooth. For close manoeuvring they can be operated independently. The boat's open layout means you hear the engine noise a bit more than with an enclosed cabin, but being far enough away from them the noise was never excessive. Opening the throttle hard gave a satisfying kick in the back from the seat bolsters, and she leapt out of the hole.

The owner intends to use her for serious fishing trips (ergo, the number of rod holders) and he doesn't want to take too long getting to prime spots like Great Barrier Island. We had her at around 45 knots in the conditions on the day, although Pringle says she tops out over 50. In a boat like this anything less than 30 knots feels like a crawl.

Handling the big Strata was textbook Smuggler – in a word, superb. The pontoons act like shock absorbers, while the deep vee hull cuts through chop and waves. There would be no issue with blasting out all the way to Great Barrier, which at that speed would take less than an hour from Westhaven Marina to Tryphena Wharf.

Those pontoons also keep spray well away, although like any centre console it could get wet in adverse conditions. Skipper and passenger

would remain dry and sheltered behind that full windscreen.

We flung the boat around and did our best to get airborne, but the 23° deadrise and dry weight of over two tonnes meant we cut through just about everything. Trim tabs are fitted but were unnecessary, and in most conditions won't be required. Although there are plenty of handholds on the hardtop and seat supports, mostly she heeled over perfectly so even in tight turns there was no risk of falling over.

The Strata 900 Centre Console rides on a heavy duty multi-rollered trailer, with dual axles and stainless steel electronically-actuated brakes. Her beam is over-width for towing, but by deflating the pontoons she reduces to less than 3m and can thus be towed with the appropriate signage and subject to other road usage regulations. At an estimated three tonnes laden trailerable weight, she is a serious towing proposition.

So, another beautiful boat from Smuggler Marine, with eye-watering performance. If you don't like the colour scheme conventional colour options are also available. Single engine packages start from \$185,000, with twin engine packages starting at \$229,000. **BNZ**