



Fast forward

The smallest of the Bonito range has had an extreme makeover.
John Eichelsheim likes her sleek new looks.

Photos: Mike Hunter

Boat Review: Smuggler Bonito 500 Sprint

Smuggler Marine in West Auckland – run by Dave and Pauline Pringle – are continuing with their ambitious programme to update the Bonito range of trailer boats.

The Bonito 500 Sprint is their latest offering, based on the old Bonito 485. It is the smallest Bonito in the range, and uses the same hull but the Sprint incorporates a number of improvements. These include new deck, transom and liner mouldings, new windows, windscreens, graphics, and the addition of a proper bowsprit.

The boat is a step up in both the standard of construction and the level of finish.

"We've tried to pull them (Bonito boats) all into line by ensuring we spec' them to the same standard our customers expect from our premium range of Smuggler boats," Dave Pringle explains.

The extra attention to detail shows in the provision of teak trim on the 500's swimsteps, teak capping on the coamings, good quality stainless rod holders, bow rails and other stainless work, and a much higher standard of finishing than was usual for the old Bonito boats.

"We haven't compromised on quality for the sake of a few dollars," says Pringle, and that's why the 500 features good quality, plated, cast bronze fittings, and classy pop-up cleats in the aft corners.

It's also why the boat is supplied on a top-quality DMW Premier trailer.

"A good trailer makes all the difference to a customer's enjoyment of their boat," says Pringle.

Good looker

The differences between the original 485 and the new 500 are considerable. While the typical Bonito hull remains unchanged – fine entry, a wide reverse chine, three moulded strakes and a 19° deadrise at the transom – Smuggler has totally redesigned the bow.

They have cut off the 485's snout and added a moulded fibreglass bowsprit, stainless fairlead and polished stainless rubbing plate.

The new bowsprit totally changes the look of the boat, making it less snub-nosed than the old model. Getting the looks right was a challenge – this is a short, wide, little boat, so it can tend

to look rather tubby from some angles, especially with the canopy up. The new bow has really improved the 500's lines, making it look sleeker, and better balanced.

For the first time the boat also has a proper liner; actually, a modified liner from the Bonito 550, which tidies up the boat's interior and helps with sound insulation.

Pringle and the team also spent considerable effort on the transom, which is new. It features a deep well, with the fuel filler for the 80l underfloor tank safely outside the boat, high up in the well. Corner seats can be removed, allowing access right into the corners, and there's a nice stainless steel and PVC bait station (optional) over the outboard well. A stainless ski-pole replaces the bait station as required, clipping neatly into one of the side pockets for stowage.

The battery box lives under the outboard well, protected by a padded vinyl cover, and there's a bilge pump in a sump aft. The battery isolation switch protrudes from the inboard side of the outboard well where it's easily reached.

The Bonito 500's helm station received some attention from the fibreglass moulders too. New cubby holes either side of the boat offer handy, dry storage, there's an attractive new carbon-look fascia, and carpet on the dash to stop items sliding around (although there's no dashboard lip).

The fascia is just big enough for the usual engine instruments, with matching switch panels fitted below, either side of the wheel, which means the Eagle Fish Elite 640 GPS-plotter-sounder (optional) has to be bracket-mounted on the dash to the left, where it's easy to read but out of the driver's direct line of sight.

The cabin has also benefitted from the Smuggler touch. Upholstered in luxury-feel grey fabric, rouched on the seat backs, it benefits from Smuggler's new addition of small wedge-shaped side windows. The bulkhead opening is large, making access a snap, and the familiar, over-size Bonito front hatch ensures easy access to the ground tackle. A capstan is an option. Stainless steel bowrals have been added, largely for aesthetic reasons, but they are also useful for manhandling the boat at the ramp.

BONITO BOATS

SPRINT 500



STING 550



PROFISHER 600



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"For a small boat... it picked its way through the nasty stuff with precision."

Over and above

Although it is still a reasonably basic, entry-level boat, the Bonito 500 is well-equipped compared to some of its peers. Smuggler fits its boats out at the factory to a specification level Pringle is happy with, rather than leaving the fit-out to a dealer. This includes switch panels, compass, LED navigation lights, two drinks holders, graphics, and a decent wheel connected with non-feedback Ultraflex cable steering.

"Our boats are advertised fully spec'd, ready to go, and are priced accordingly," says Pringle. He points out that prices advertised by dealers and manufacturers are often not the prices customers actually pay once boats have been equipped to their requirements.

"We can offer a Bonito 500 Sprint, fully spec'd, for under \$40,000, which we think represents good value," he says.

There's also a comprehensive range of options: electronics, LED transom lights, a stainless steel dive ladder, good quality canopy and clears, side pocket rod stowage, bait station, fire extinguisher, capstan, saltwater washdown and more, many of which are fitted to this boat.

The Bonito's build quality was already sending all the right signals, but I was interested to see how this little boat

handled the steep wind-against-tide Waitemata chop. With 15 knots of south-westerly blowing down the harbour, and some big, confused pressure waves, it would be a stern test for a small boat.

We elected to head up-harbour to avoid a long slog back against the wind, so this meant heading upwind first. With a 90hp Evinrude E-Tec on the transom, the Bonito 500 was plenty lively enough. The engine is a 25-inch shaft model running the V6 gearbox and a meaty 17-inch stainless propeller, so there was plenty of torque on tap and the boat felt very responsive.

The ride was a pleasant surprise. We tackled steep head seas – and more confused water where the tide was really racing – with aplomb. For a small boat the 500 felt very composed, landing softly and picking its way through the nasty stuff with precision. It was fairly dry too, except for a bit of spray sucking back into the cockpit, a function of having the canopy up with the windows closed.

The Bonito 500 Sprint is fun to drive and feels a much better balanced boat than the Bonito 485 I reviewed years ago. It certainly handled the conditions we experienced without exhibiting any handling quirks. It also turns crisply, and holds its line admirably.





Pringle believes moving the fuel tank aft helped the boat's handling.

"There's lots of buoyancy aft, so it was logical to shift the fuel tank back," he says. "It's now a better balanced boat."

In the flattest stretch of water we could find, Pringle squeezed 40mph from the rig – we could possibly have gone quicker, but it was impossible to keep the propeller in the water. Pringle thinks the 500 would perform just fine with a 75hp, while a 115hp would be a blast, but probably too much of a handful for the average customer.

The 500's helm position is good and the bucket seats offer adequate support. There's a moulded footrest on the driver's side and a bulkhead cut-away for the passenger to brace his feet on, although it did seem to flex rather a lot. A railing around the aluminium-framed windscreen gives good support and there's another grab-rail on the passenger side.

Probably the biggest-selling feature of this boat is its huge cockpit. Because it's so beamy, the cockpit is vast. In fact,

the 500 Sprint has a larger cockpit than the Bonito 550. Nautolex non-slip vinyl has been glued to the fibreglass cockpit sole in sections, and there's a small but useful wet locker under the floor. The boat is stable, too, thanks to its reverse chines. Dave and I could lean over one side of the boat together safely, and comfortably, thanks to padded gunwales and plenty of toe room.

Smuggler has built a strong boat, and that's reflected in the company's five-year structural hull warranty. Four full-length bearers ensure longitudinal stiffness and there's plenty of material in the hull and deck lay-ups.

"We use the same construction spec as we do on the larger Bonito 550," Pringle says. "There are five layers of chop-strand and two layers of 8/10 tri-axial cloth, with 3mm core mat used on the topsides. It's strong!"

For the first time the boat is CPC-accredited, a process Pringle has instituted for the whole Bonito range.

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Smuggler Bonito 500 Sprint

designer	Bonito Boats/ Smuggler Marine
builder	Smuggler Marine
construction	GRP
loa	5.2m
boa	2.23m
deadrise	19 degrees
horsepower range	75-115hp
engine options	outboard
max speed	40mph
fuel capacity	80l underfloor
length on trailer	5.5-6.1m (drawbar options)
height on trailer	2050mm
trailerable weight	980kg, full of fuel
price as tested	\$48,000
packages from	\$40,000
ENGINE	
make	Evinrude
type	E-TEC direct- injection 2-stroke
horsepower	90hp
cylinders	three in line
max rpm	5700
propeller	17-in pitch SS
price	\$15,900
TRAILER	
manufacturer	DMW Trailers
brakes	unbraked
suspension	springs
rollers	multi-roller
features	Premier 450 Series, galvanised, zinc-coated springs, submersible LED lights, jockey wheel

Boating's verdict

The Bonito 500 Sprint is a capable little boat with the interior space of a much larger craft. E-TEC power ensures strong performance, with enough grunt to tow the kids on water toys or for a bit of recreational water-skiing. It also has a cockpit made for fishing, complemented by four stainless through-gunwale rod holders and four more in the bait table.

The much-improved build quality, finish and specification make the smallest Bonito an attractive proposition. That it's compact enough to tow and manage easily ticks still more boxes. Although pitched as an entry-level boat, it's also the sort of craft that could find favour with older folk, or those looking to simplify their boating experience by downsizing. ■