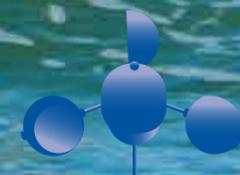


A need for speed

New Zealand-built, high-performance RIBs are turning heads in parts of the globe that appreciate superior quality craftsmanship. *Trade A Boat* thinks it's about time we started paying more attention here at home. . .



Words and images by Steve Raea



Weather conditions

Average wind speed	20 knots SW
Sea state	Moderate



Very smart and functional dash layout. The Evinrude "fly by wire" controls are a delight to use.



Rear passengers get to ride in comfort but they might want a raincoat at speed

Once the domain of commercial operators and sea rescue services, rigid hull inflatables are now part and parcel of the recreational trailer boat scene, and, in some ways, they set the benchmark for convenience, performance and pace.

While not everyone's ideal platform for relaxed family boating, the inherent advantages of the rigid hull inflatable design are such that they're now beginning to displace the conventional cuddy cabin cruiser as the boat of choice for general recreational boating.

Lightweight, easily driven and providing the high levels of safety that are characteristic of multi-chamber inflatable tube construction, inflatables are an ideal compromise for those looking to downsize without giving up on performance or function.

While there are persuasive arguments both for and against RIBs, their load carrying capacity and reduced requirement for "horses" makes them a cost-effective alternative for those that are on a set budget for their boating.

Being comparatively light, they're also a much easier option for beach launching and don't generally necessitate the additional expense of a heavy 4WD vehicle or tandem-axle braked trailer, and the on-going maintenance and expense that these invariably require.

While comfort has not traditionally been a "tick box" selection on RIBs, today's boats are a lot more sophisticated, both in terms of their design and optional features available.

Enter Smuggler Marine

One manufacturer that firmly believes in the future of RIBs as the contemporary boat of choice is Auckland-based Smuggler Marine, an innovative company that has progressively stamped its mark on inflatable

Top quality hull construction married with state-of-the-art tubes



boat design and performance since 2004 – in what is fast becoming a crowded space.

Headed by partners David and Pauline Pringle, Smuggler Marine has developed a range of RIBs from 4.5m to 13m, based on the same deep-V fibreglass hull moulds used in the production of Smuggler's cuddy cabin cruisers. Early on, Smuggler Marine elected to take the manufacturing high road, focusing primarily on build quality and aesthetics, pitching its mid-size RIBs as the tender of choice to the superyacht fraternity.

This is clearly illustrated in Smuggler Marine's Strata 630, one of three six-metre RIB designs developed and optimised specifically as tenders, with the option of a diesel inboard, jet drive or petrol outboard engine.

Pringle says that central to the success of its mid-range tenders is the company's ability and willingness to accommodate customers' unique build requirements, in terms of exterior dimension and internal seating and layout options.

Since Smuggler Marine's first foray into the inflatable market, with the debut of its Strata 450 in 2004, RIBs have become an increasingly significant part of the business with more than 150 RIB sales across the Strata range.

"This year, RIBs represent about 70 percent

“Hell, this boat's good... in fact, it's better than good – it's bloody awesome” Trade A Boat says...

of our business. In previous years, it has been as high as 90 percent and never below 50 percent. That's pretty convincing evidence that RIBs are making big inroads into the recreational boating market," says Pringle.

He says RIB buyers that come from conventional trailer boats, tend to use their RIBs more often because they're easier to launch and retrieve, easier to trailer and park and are often less expensive to run: "Above all else, they're a hell of a lot of fun and they have a big performance edge that appeals to a new generation of boatie that wants to get there and back fast."

Strata 630

Falling midway between the Strata 600 and the Strata 670, the Strata 630 features a solid GRP laminate hull, with internal one-piece GRP liner, and can be specified with an outboard, diesel inboard or jet drive unit.

Internal layout options vary according to the intended use, with inboard-powered RIBs

providing additional scope for Smuggler's innovative, full-width transom with integrated boarding ladder for convenient stern boarding access.

Designed principally for "boot" stowage on superyachts, the Strata can be optioned with Tek Dek flexible teak decking for improved aesthetics, and a variety of seating and internal console options.

Pringle is passionate about quality. Having served his time as a boat builder with Salthouse Marine he knows that quality is more than skin deep: "Flashy graphics and cheap stainless might look good initially, but it's not the measure of a quality RIB. Quality starts at the design stage, and it is here that we believe our products are a step up on our competitors.

"All mid-size Strata RIBs are based on the same proven hull, with 23-degree transom deadrise. This ensures the boats are capable and predictable in a variety of sea states, and are not prone to pounding in short,



On-the-water performance is close to faultless

He always smiles like that just before putting the hammer down

Visit www.tradeaboat.co.nz and type "Smuggler" into the search bar to view this and other Smuggler models for sale. While there, visit our "reviews" section where you will find previous Smuggler tests.

choppy conditions. "Stability is also very good, something that is a key consideration for superyacht owners who value passenger comfort and safety above all else. Our Strata tenders are all built to CE export certification," Pringle adds.

Quality fit-out
Fitted as standard with 500mm tubes for easy container transportation, the Strata range can be specified with 600mm tubes, but these, says Pringle, offer no real advantage and tend to make the RIBs look bulbous.

Set-up for general recreational boating, the Strata 630 reviewed here is optimised to provide comfortable seating for up to 10 passengers with the optional forward seating console and enclosed anchor locker.

This moulded GRP unit creates a layout similar to that of a conventional bowrider but with the addition of an enclosed anchor locker and optional built-in chilly bin.

Moving aft, the 630 is fitted with a one-piece, GRP-moulded centre console that provides an additional forward-facing seat with upholstered backrest and dry storage locker underneath. The helm station is configured with a double bench seat and reversible upholstered backrest that, again, offers dry storage options.

Strata hulls also carry a five-year warranty, and the Hypalon fabric pontoons are backed by their New Zealand manufacturer – Southern Pacific Inflatables – for six-years, adding up to, what Pringle says, is the best warranty provision on today's market. "The strength of Smuggler RIBs is inherent in the way they're put together. We've developed a unique flange in the GRP hull that effectively increases the bond strength between the hull and the inflatable pontoons. This ensures that the boats are robust and strong while also creating a channel between the hull and pontoon that effectively funnels wash down away from the RIB. The faster the RIB travels the more effective this channel becomes," says Pringle.

Being outboard-powered, the RIB has a pair of forward-facing jump seats in the transom on either side of the outboard pod, and a useful split boarding platform with boarding ladder and stainless steel handholds.

A custom-made, removable stainless steel bait board, with four integral rod holders, fits like a glove over the transom, and beneath three enclosed transom lockers there is dedicated stowage for the RIBs battery, switches and automatic bilge pump.

While the fit-out has traditionally counted for little in RIBs, Pringle's attention to detail is evident at every turn, with perfect mouldings and a level of finish that is befitting of a superyacht tender, without giving away anything to practicality.

Aesthetically, the Strata 630 oozes appeal: two-tone grey and white striped UV-resistant upholstery; splashes of synthetic Tek Dek decking; and striking graphics, all set off with colour-matched inflatable pontoons.

Ergonomics have also received careful scrutiny: there is easy walk-around access throughout the RIB; and a solid, sure-footed sole with aft underfloor locker, designed to carry up to four dive bottles.

Playtime

Fitted with Evinrude's latest small-block 2.5-litre V6 150hp outboard, the power to weight ratio leans towards excessive, but ensures that those with an appetite for excitement won't be left wanting.

It's quick – damn quick – and tops out at just over 50mph, but what's really impressive about this up-sized combo is the way it gets there: it's super responsive, to the point that even minute adjustments on the throttle will sit you firmly on your backside.

Fortunately, the Strata 630 shows no signs of "flight or fright", and settles into its work in a predictably stoic manner, answering its hydraulic helm with the comforting precision of a 4WD on a windy gravel road.

If you've a need for speed, then this is your ride. You'll have to push really hard to lose it, something my colleague and editor will testify to having done when attempting to find this RIBs Achilles heel during a test on the choppy Waitemata Harbour: "Hell, this boat's good... in fact, it's better than good – it's bloody awesome. And I couldn't break it... that's something I'm pretty good at..."

Little wonder Pringle couldn't get back on-board soon enough, but in Ed's defense, we were assured that this RIB is bulletproof – and also largely idiot-proof.

While speed is one thing, handling is another, and one without the other is a surefire recipe for a whoopsy. However, there are no concerns on this front, as the solid GRP hull digs into corners with gusto.

Crosswind tracking is up to scratch too, with the inclusion of Bennett trim tabs. Even the slightest trim on the engine puts the RIB firmly on the water and prevents any likelihood of steering by the bow when marching downwind.

In a nut shell

All in all, this certainly is a machine. And, as odd as it might sound, it was a whole lot drier tucked in behind the RIB's half screen than it was pounding our way home in an ageing cuddly with a full screen and bimini top. Top marks to Pringle for proving that balls-out power, F1 handling and relative sea-going comfort need not be mutually exclusive.

RIBs do have their shortcomings, and they're not for everyone, but if grace and pace float your boat then you owe it to yourself to get behind the wheel of a Strata. ⚓

For more information contact Dave and Pauline Pringle at Smuggler Marine, ph 09 838 9024, email info@smuggler.co.nz or visit www.smuggler.co.nz.

WE LIKE

- Quality materials and build
- Seating and stowage options
- Precise handling
- Transom platform
- Race performance

WE DON'T LIKE

- Not having the dollars to own one

SPECIFICATIONS	
SMUGGLER STRATA 630 RIB	
LOA	6.3m
Beam	2.4m
Weight	1000kg (approx)
Fuel	160L (built-in)
Trailer	DMW multi-roller
Engine	Evinrude 150hp V6 2.5
Recommended hp	110-180
Warranty	5 years (hull); 6 years (tubes)
Price as reviewed	\$79,990

Price as reviewed NZ \$79,990

TO OWN THIS BOAT:

EXAMPLE BASED ON	
Purchase Price of	NZ\$79,990
Deposit	\$24,000
Final Balloon Payment	\$16,000
Term 60 months	
MONTHLY PAYMENT	\$1055*

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