

The Seaforce 530 Mate

**WORLD
FIRST TEST!**



by Michael Rendle

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The rules are simple; if there is a test of a Seaforce model in the offing, we get to do it first. The reason is also simple; we have forged a very good working relationship with Ric Lawrence and his team at Seaforce Boats. That included the magazine boat project we shared as well as a number of boat tests since. Ric knows that we will give an honest and constructive critique of any vessel he builds. Mind you, we do that on all the tests we run; what makes it different with Ric is that he reacts so quickly to suggestions and potential improvements. It is so refreshing.

The new vessel has been in planning for four years. Ric brought me into his confidence at that point, in fact I remember the exact moment. It was at the Boat Show Awards evening of that year and the Seaforce 600, more importantly our magazine boat, had just won its category for the first time. (It did the same the following year). Being informed that he intended to build a pontoon boat I remember at the time visualising something that looked like a series of 200 litre drums joined together. What he has produced couldn't be any further from that picture. Instead, he has built something pretty special that has already claimed its first Boat Show award and is in fact a world first; the first and so far the only, fibreglass pontoon boat in production. Not only that, it is actually unsinkable and not for lack of trying.

Preliminary

The problem with small boats is lack of stability. Water ballasting is one way to improve that, another is to build a pontoon boat. Alloy pontoon boats are generally less than pretty. Don't get me wrong, I think they are fantastic because I look at the fishing/seakeeping potential. But let's be honest, if you are at a boat show to purchase a boat and the family are involved with the decision then a pontoon boat of any brand isn't going to look as good as a Buccaneer/Haines Hunter/Tristram/Rayglass etc. Many of us have had to make the family compromise and that's not necessarily a bad thing. My father's first purchase of a family-type half cabin boat catapulted my interest. Look what that did...

The Mate 530 boat, by any measure, is a good-looking craft. Not only that but it has the Seaforce 'style'. It's not until you start to inspect closely that you realise that you are

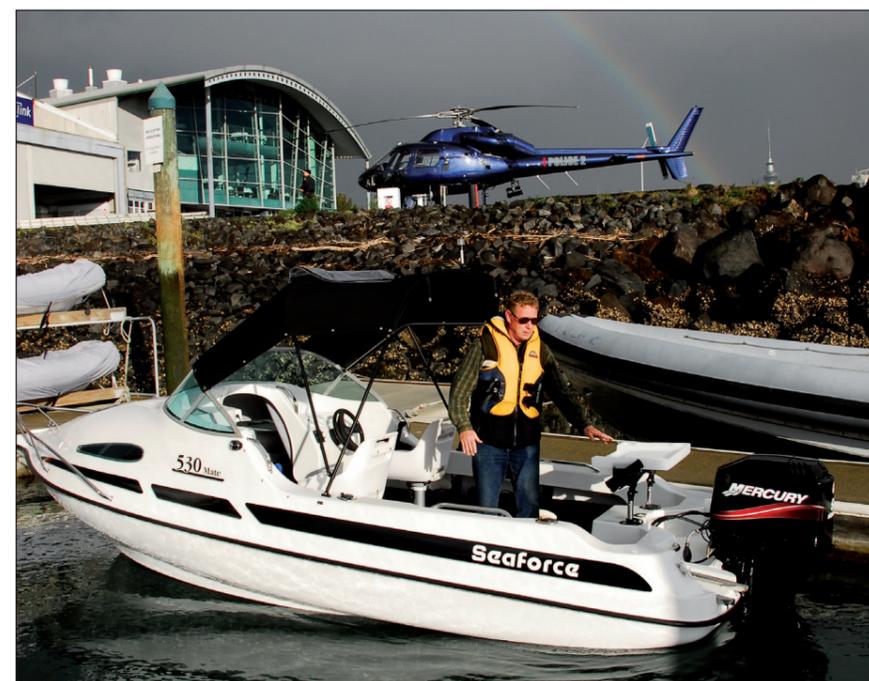


looking at a genuine pontoon boat.

The day we went out was only the fourth trip run by the Seaforce 530 Mate so there was much to learn. Following the boat show there were many sea trials booked for the boat so we had to get heavy with Ric's Silverdale dealer, Mike at Mikes Marine and **demand** the boat back. That left us a window of the Friday before Queens Birthday weekend to take it for a run. Ric picked me up at 6am and a fast trip to Auckland saw us at Westhaven between showers in calm conditions.

First Impressions

It would be a hard critic who wasn't impressed with the look of the boat. It's not boxy like some alloy pontoons. The lines are fair and smooth. The first thing you will want to do, like me, is study the hull to see how they've done it. It's not smoke and mirrors, rather it's a clever piece of designing where the pontoon rolls and curves away to leave the deadrise to do its thing at the front without creating massive shoulders to impart drag. It would be all but impossible to replicate the design in alloy, at least without a huge outlay in time



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and labour. There are a number of photos published throughout this test that show what Seaforce have done.

Looking over the outside of the boat, it's typical Seaforce. A high quality gelcoat finish and excellent detail work around the hatches, navigation lights and deck fittings show the thought that has been incorporated. Inside reveals a much bigger cockpit than would initially be believed while still retaining a useful cabin area. The colour scheme matches the Mercury perfectly.

Our plan was to organise a few overall shots around the ramp, find somewhere to take the main pic, slay the snapper on softbaits out toward the Noises, set up a photo shoot and be back in time for the first sea trial of the day. Simple...

The Rig

Many of the elements of the 530 Mate have been stolen from the Seaforce 600. And why not; that boat is a great piece of design with fine lines so it was logical to take its best points to the new hull. The hull though is a different story of course. Some numbers; the hull has a length of 5.3m and an overall length of 5.65m. The beam is 2.22m. Ric explained that, while the internal beam of the boat is standard for the length, the chine beam is equivalent to that of most 7m hulls. The transom deadrise is 17 degrees. Towing weight is in the order of 950kg. The hull carries the NZ CPC compliance rating label. Initial specifications show a maximum horsepower of 115. That should be 90hp as any more could be considered dangerous in inexperienced hands. More about that later.

The boat looked very happy cradled aboard its DMW multi-roller trailer. While a couple of different motors have been fitted to test, we had a two-stroke Mercury of 90hp. A 70l underfloor tank supplies it.

TOP LEFT: From any angle it is a fine-looking craft. LEFT: Excellent detail is obvious everywhere. The boarding ladder is recessed into the duckboard. ABOVE: The cockpit is extensive.

The construction of the Seaforce is a strong selling point. There is no timber used in the hull anywhere. Even in the transom the company laminate up their own solid panels. The use of highest quality isophthalic resins adds to the quality of the hull. There is yet another step coming; Ric intends to be the first to fully injection mould their range.

The boat ran smoothly off the trailer and we were soon underway. We took a few shots around the ramp then headed off to find another suitable backdrop. Note for future reference: the Police and Coastguard base isn't a good option unless you want to be visited by a member of our enforcement agency checking to see if you are an international terrorist arriving by sea. And no matter what they said, there wasn't a sign telling us to keep out that we could see, and we checked on the way out. Conversely, it was very kind of them to allow us to take the photo of the police helicopter lifting off behind the boat. It didn't become the main pic because the cameraman didn't do a good enough job. Actually he didn't have a chance; the down draft was enough to blow the boat from one side of the jetty to the other in a couple of seconds!

Earlier in the week the boat had undergone the sink and stability tests for its CPC classification. The whole area between the hulls is foam filled and the test showed that it is basically unsinkable. The test is conducted with the bungs out and a set amount of weight added into the corners. In the end they tried jumping on the coamings and all sorts of things but they just couldn't get it down. In fact the water was running out! What makes the test even more impressive is that

after they pumped the hull out and pulled it from the water they found the internal bungs had been inadvertently left out, meaning the hull had even further exceeded its requirements! In the US there is a boat brand called the Boston Whaler which is generally regarded as unsinkable, in fact they have been known to advertise their boats cut into pieces with a chainsaw. They are very expensive. My guess is that the Seaforce would probably handle that test too. And it's not very expensive...

The Cabin

Being only 5.3m you could anticipate a small cabin. Not so; somehow Seaforce have managed to marry a useful covered space to a good cockpit. There are bunks suitable for a bigger kid, or small adult while there is clean moulded storage under the squabs, plus backrests to form additional storage. As with the other Seaforce models, the front squab quickly moves to give a solid glass pad to stand on while working the anchor. The hatch above that position is designed to keep



the smooth lines of the cabin top without looking like a pimple. I can't believe that I forgot to test the anchoring position, however the much taller Ric Lawrence looked very comfortable when he stood there later in the morning.

Elsewhere there is an opening hatch fitted over the back of the dash (some boatbuilders do listen...) where there was a typical, if not spectacularly tidy, wiring loom. A big positive, BEP now supply the manufacturer with a colour coded wiring diagram to leave with the boat. Good thinking.

Overall the cabin is more than adequate for the size of the boat and the design will make it dead easy to clean at the end of the day.

The Dash

When it comes to dash design I'm a fussy bugger. There is good



ABOVE: The whole concept is visible in this shot. Its hard to get curves like this in alloy. LEFT: The dash has plenty of room to mount essential and optional gear.

reason for that; far too many years running a marine electronics business and having to make equipment fit into a very pretty, but totally impractical space. One of the best small boat dash layouts around is that on the Seaforce 600, so it seemed logical to lift that design completely and drop it into the 530 Mate. So they did. Good on them because it means there is a large space suitable for a big screen combo unit (and at the price of the boat there will probably be budget left over for it). Below the large panel is a nicely angled area for the instruments. Below that and to the side of the wheel there is plenty of room for switches and controls. I didn't ask but I would think there is even room for a glovebox below the wheel as we had on our magazine 600. There were a couple of handrails mounted in convenient positions.

From a driving perspective they've nailed it perfectly. The wheel height, the throttle position and the seat placement are exactly right. Visibility seated was as good as when standing. Seating arrangements are variable, Lawrence pointed out that there is sufficient room for king/queen seats if required. Personally, I'd spend a couple more dollars and fit the bigger bucket seats to get a bit more support.

Across at the passenger side of the dash is the only 'problem'. The dash needs a fiddle and it will need to be in stainless because people will grab it as a handrail. That will give a most useful storage space when fitted. I was told the reason it hadn't been done to date is the price that has been quoted. There's a job there for someone... Below that is a short handrail which is perfectly placed but would be better if it was a couple of inches longer. The VHF is also mounted on this side.

There is a canopy fitted to the boat that also incorporates the anchor light. The canopy works well and suits the lines of the boat. An improvement that Seaforce have just started adding (but hadn't to this boat to date) is a simple retainer to hold the clear panel flat on top of the canopy when needing to travel with the space open. That saves having to roll and unroll the clear every time its needed. A simple idea and a good one.

Seaforce have their navigation lights perfectly situated; they are one of the few manufacturers who have their side lights mounted exactly along the fore and aft lines of the boat so they aren't visible from the wrong side when running. It's a simple thing but an important one if the boat you can see isn't taking the line you think it is.

The Cockpit

The business end of this boat is deceptively large. From the outside it appears that the sides are a little on the low side and the space is no



CP-180



CP-300



CP-500



CPV-550



CPV-350



ABOVE AND BELOW: These photos clearly illustrate the way the water is turned down and how it leaves the hull well astern. **OPPOSITE:** The angle of entrance contributes to the stability and dryness of the ride as well.

more than adequate. Looks can be deceiving. There are a number of elements that all pull together to make this a very good fishing cockpit, but first we have to jump forward a bit and talk about stability because it is the key factor to how and why this gels.

When the boat was first put in the water on the test day I purposely



swung off the canopy and on the coaming to test what would happen. I then got the much taller Ric Lawrence to stand in the corner as well. Fact; you won't have a hope of doing that with your average 5m monohull. On most I wouldn't even try it. On the 530 Mate the effect is that the hull turns slightly then stops dead. If you have fished on alloy pontoons you will be totally familiar with the action. It is what makes it work because, what is an otherwise adequate coaming height, somewhere between knee and thigh, doesn't vary with multiple people on one side because the boat doesn't lean enough to lower it. Simple physics. Add to that the fact that there is a small amount of toe space at the rear of the cockpit (which progressively disappears as you move forward) and it all comes together. Another major plus is that the corner 'jump' seats remove for fishing giving even further unencumbered fishing room at the rear, something we tested by both fishing with softbaits and both being in one rear corner. Even more impressive, and I hadn't even thought about that until I reviewed the photos when I got home, but the canopy was up the whole time! The test boat had four rod holders fitted plus handrails along the coamings. The side pockets are small but adequate in keeping with the size of the boat. All the surfaces were curved giving modern lines and practical protection. There was a central lightweight baitboard fitted complete with rod holders. Provision is made for a ski pole. Cleats were also fitted and well placed. All the hardware, including the rod holders, is stainless. No scrimping anywhere. The battery and switching had its own central locker in the transom. The floor had a solid non-skid pattern moulded in that gave sure grip during our time on the water. The rear boarding platform is small but notable for the recess designed for the boarding ladder and again the continuation of curved surfaces. Proof that you can have looks and function.

Performance

Boy was I looking forward to this! I must say that there was a degree of nervousness on my part though, not for me but on Ric Lawrence's behalf. I know how much he has invested in the boat, not just in dollars but in credibility and gut feel for what the market wants. If the boat didn't perform (and there would be no fudging of any issues from me) I wouldn't have been happy while I was writing the review. There is lots to talk about though so let's start at the beginning...

Being fitted with a two-stroke motor is a rarity for a boat test now. Having one straight out of the box and on double oil and without the correct prop (probably) was just a pain in the posterior. In this case I insisted on a deadline so we could get the test in this issue so it's not the guy's fault. Leaving the boat ramp took a few efforts and a cloud of smoke. When we did get underway the boat was idling at what felt like 10 knots! Clearly the hull was easily driven...



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We cruised through Westhaven and out towards the point where we could increase speed. Notable immediately was the quietness of the hull and even the low noise from the Mercury. I moved around the boat and it had no major effect on our line or balance, there aren't many monohulls where that is the case. Ric applied the power and the boat lifted onto the plane quickly and with an almost indiscernible hump. It's a long time since I did a course in boat design but from what I could figure out the single strake momentarily provides lift forward to what is a standard hull, until the rear of the pontoons, with their huge surface area, come into play, keeping the boat level and lifting it near instantly to a flat planning aspect. Whatever, it works.

The next bit takes a bit more explaining without giving the wrong impression so bear with me. As we headed across the glassy calm water the hull porpoised to a degree. At least that's the best description I can give of the ride. In fact what it is, is a motion that will be familiar to many owners of alloy pontoon boats which I can best describe as a momentary 'slowing' of the hull as the shoulders touch the water. The Seaforce doesn't have that big bulk in the front the hull rather the pontoons are faired to the forward sections. Then Ric put the throttle right down and several things happened. First the boat skipped happily across the calm water. If possible both the hull and notably the motor were even quieter at speed. Then we crossed a couple of low wakes and a key characteristic of the hull showed itself; the big wide surfaces under the hull catch air, lots of it, and allow the hull to land on a cushion. While that is a positive it is also a trap for anyone deciding to overpower and under trim the boat because it gives the impression that if it was done, the boat would become an aeroplane.

Now let me qualify that. I was fizzing to get behind the wheel. What I found was that the Mate 530 is the most trim responsive boat I've ever driven. That is a good thing; I've been in boats that respond like a



CP-180



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CPV-350



TOP: The Mercury is well suited to this hull. **ABOVE:** Another view of the hull in action. Its wide and the water is well turned.

wet fish. The 350 Mate comes alive. I found that the trim position was critical. A fraction either side and it was clearly evident. Over-trimming brought the expanse of the pontoons into play, the revs and speed dropped markedly and the steering stiffened right up. Under-trim and the boat was loose rather than flighty. Get the trim right (and it was exceptionally simple to do) and the boat thanked you and performed like no other I've driven of that size. High speed cornering was like following rails. The ride was smooth and any bobbing of the nose vanished. I had to remind myself that it was a 5m hull. Looking over the side (and later reviewing the photos) showed that the water left the hull a very long way back and turned right down. I suspect that a side sea and wind would see little returned back into the boat. And in fact only one small wisp of spray landed on the screen all day.

Earlier in the week Lawrence had run the boat in 2m breaking seas. He was ecstatic with that performance and was gaining a large amount of confidence that his baby performed in a range of conditions. The smile said it all. As the wind got up it became clear that dead flat glassy was where the boat was at its worst. With a 400-500mm chop on the water the hull ran even better. What I didn't notice at first was that we were travelling at much higher speeds than usual. Bringing the speed back to a more common low 20's in knots, felt like standing still. It's a genuine passagemaker. The ride was smooth and quiet.

Our first stop was someone else's top secret spot at Rangitoto. The fish didn't know the secret on that particular day. As I mentioned earlier

we were both jammed in the corner casting softbaits and circling past each other as you do. No need to telegraph a move, no need to hold on, in fact no need to do anything except fish. Very impressive.

We continued to move and work various spots along the way. I've never struck softbait fishing like it; bites we couldn't hook up, struck fish that kept falling off. I'm sure we would have figured it out given more time. The fishing may not have worked but the cockpit certainly did. To make a long story short, we managed a circumnavigation of the islands, drifting some deeper spots before finishing up in the Sergeants Channel. It just wasn't to be our day. We made our way back to the wharf at Motuihe to take the speed shots. Ric did well to safely drop me off and pick me up again without damaging the boat considering the 10 knot idle speed.

Looking through the telephoto lens and watching the boat was interesting. It was hard to see what I'd want to change. The water flow seemed to be doing everything it was designed to do. As the photos show, there was very little lean into the turns.

The run home was interesting. I let Lawrence have his boat back and most of the trip was at 45mph across the chop with me holding on. The hull loved being up on top and rode without thumping the hull and with only the one wisp of spray on the screen mentioned earlier. Occasionally the spread on a wake would be just far enough apart to remind us of the real size of the boat yet there were still no major bangs as it landed. At one point I got him to re-run a big wake ferry sideways to see what would happen if the chines caught a wave. The answer was nothing. The only test we couldn't do was to properly test the performance with the sea astern. Based on the huge trim range available I expect there will be no vices.

Summary

Wow, what a boat! I often get asked my opinion on a particular hull or 'best of' in a certain range. Generally I will answer with multiple options with the selection depending on the individual's requirements. However, if someone asked me tomorrow I'd say I've just been in the best compromise family/fishing boat I've experienced. It's a lot of boat at the current package price being quoted. And it's totally unique; this is the world's first fibreglass pontoon boat.

Compromise is probably the wrong word to use because there is very little left out of the boat. It performs all the functions adequately. However for those who want a full-on blood and guts fishing boat, Seaforce will be releasing the second version of the boat later this year. It will replace their now aging but still very good Utility and will keep the same name. It will be all cockpit and little cabin with a central fish box. I want the first test on that one too!

Ric Lawrence and his team should be congratulated on building a boat that combines aesthetics with practicalities. The hull is something special that rewards the driver who trims it correctly and drives it well. For the inexperienced there is little to fear. My only concern and it is a potential problem on any boat any time, is the potential to over power the vessel and create a safety issue. 90 horsepower is all that is needed on this boat. It should be regarded as the maximum although I note the spec sheet rates it to a maximum of 115hp. The Mercury was an ideal fit that suited the boat. I'd love to try it with the four-stroke. I'd also seriously consider adding hydraulic steering. The non-feedback unit fitted was okay but the pressure is applied when over trimmed and it would certainly be more comfortable with hydraulic.

Mark my words; over the next few years every major manufacturer will want to add a pontoon hull to their range. Seaforce have proven that it can be achieved with style, good looks, very good performance and seldom matched safety. The 350 Mate is a boat that will make great waves in our market. Take it for a ride and you will understand completely.



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