

tradeboat
TENDER TEST
BRIG EAGLE
780

STORY & PHOTOS JOHN FORD

DIGGIN' THE BRIG

We sent **JOHN FORD** to sunny Queensland to escape the cold and cruise the Whitsundays in the Brig Eagle 780. We haven't seen him since, but he filed this report...

Neil Webster's call suggesting we venture to the Whitsundays off the central Queensland coast to test his Brig Eagle 780 could not have come at a better time. A cold westerly was biting at the door and the miserable clouds that had been hanging around for days were casting a gloomy pall on my southern NSW coastal town, and my state of mind. Bloody winter! So, weighing the prospects, a trip to Hamilton Island and the promise of some warming rays seemed like a good idea.

As part of his promotional program for the Brig brand, Neil had located a test boat on the island for use by his clients over winter and as a press boat for Hamilton Island Race Week. Like the many migrating whales that find their way north each year, the Whitsundays is a favourite refuge for the southern cruising fleet and fly-in holidaymakers, some of whom are Brig customers keen to take up Neil's offer.

Ironically, our plans were put on hold for a month while some unpleasant weather passed through and then to find a slot in the school holidays so Neil could bring his kin along to demonstrate the Brig's family and holiday friendly nature.

BRIG IS BIG

According to Neil, Brig is the biggest manufacturer of inflatable boats in the world turning out 44,000 craft last year across more than 40 models, ranging from tiny tenders to the rigid inflatable 7.8m cruiser on test. For a landlocked factory in the middle of the Ukraine that's an impressive achievement, especially in an economic climate that has crippled a number of competitors. In Europe, inflatables are more mainstream than in Australia, where glass and alloy boats are the norm. Judging by the number of rubber boats nestled in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs' marinas the tide is turning as people discover the safe and simple nature of inflatables.

Our tour test of the Brig over three days in perfect spring weather showed the versatility and capability of a largish rigid inflatable boat. We went touring, swimming, diving, picnicking, wakeboarding, and generally having lots of fun to a background

The helm setup puts the skipper at the centre of the RIB maximising all-round vision, a bolster seat creating room for stand-up driving and manoeuvring.



up provisions and necessities for our day on the water. As well as the console and the bow, there is storage room under the driver seat and in a cavernous space under the rear lounge that holds wakeboards and dozens of lifejackets.

At the helm there is a bolster seat accommodating the driver and a passenger behind the wide dash. Because the console is set to starboard and the driving position is on the portside of the helm the skipper is in the centre of the boat allowing good vision all round when docking. The large moulded dash was fitted with a 12in Garmin 5012 sounder/GPS and Honda instruments — although the NMEA compliant engine also interfaces with the Garmin to send information there as well.

There is also a VHF radio, a switch panel for bilge pumps, anchor, lights and a freshwater shower. A storage bin on the top of the dash has a clear plastic lid that makes it great to see what's inside, but a beaming tropical sun could render heat sensitive toys, like cellphones, lifeless so bear that in mind. To the right of the dash is a waterproof Fusion sound system with an iPod dock and lots of volume through two speakers set low on the console.

Extending over the stern is a targa arch and an attached folding bimini providing shade over the rear third of the boat. (It's a two-minute job to erect the bimini and it stays secure at speeds up to 20kts). A picnic table can be erected at the rear lounge and the driver seat flips over to make an extra seat for lunch. A swimplatform on the port transom has a boarding ladder, which got a good workout by everyone, and while it is easy to negotiate from the water I would have like an extra grab-handle high up to help.

BUILT FOR SPEED

Power comes from a 250hp Honda — the latest and most powerful from the Japanese builder. Its 3.5lt V6 is a high-tech four-stroke, with aptly named BLAST technology with plenty of mumbo to launch

The bimini (top left) folds away unobtrusively against the targa arch, incorporating a moulded transom seat underneath. Passenger seating extends to a settee at the front of the console (middle left), with hatched storage options ahead in the raised bow platform.

MORE A SMALL CABIN THAN A CONSOLE
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ENOUGH TO ALLOW INCLUSION OF A HEAD
IF DESIRED

of tropical islands and beaches on a sparkling azure sea. Four adults and three teenagers were able to spread themselves out on the boat without getting in each other's way, travelling quickly on our exploration and revelling in the fresh air and the boat's soft ride.

WHAT'S A RIB?

This ride is a result of marrying a deep-vee fibreglass (rigid) hull to Hypalon (inflatable) tubes that are fixed around the perimeter. The solid glass hull is foam filled and has Kevlar reinforced stringers and a composite deck. Weight is kept to a minimum because, even at nearly 8m in length, the Brig is designed for lifting on davits to serve as a tender on a superyacht. Some tender!

Brig use Hypalon in the tubes of their boats because of its lasting qualities and strength. Those concerned about the durability of an inflatable boat should look no farther than the workboats of the navy and rescue organisations to find examples in their fleets that have endured the elements and rough handling for many years. You should expect the tubes to last a good 20 years, and even then the cost of replacing them on the 780 is

around a reasonable \$9500 fitted.

Although we didn't test it, the tubes are claimed to be as resistant to penetration as the sides on aluminium dinghies and have the added benefit of reverting to shape in a minor accident. Five separate compartments and a hull that floats even if all the tubes are deflated offer a margin of safety that is hard to beat. And even if a tube were to fail, the neighbouring tubes are designed to fill the void.

An open layout makes maximum use of the space to accommodate a payload of up to 18 passengers. That's a lot, but some will have to find seating along the tubes, not that it's a problem as they are soft and comfortable even on an extended voyage over rough water.

Fibreglass mouldings of the hull rise at the bow to form a platform for boarding and a strong mount for pop-up cleats and the anchor that is housed well out of the way

under the bow plate. A Lofrans electric winch handles 50m of chain and we found its inclusion a real bonus on the many occasions we anchored up. A raised section in the bow houses a large sunpad with storage below in a large, drained locker. There is provision for a picnic table to be set-up in the bow, with additional seating on the bench forward of the centre console.

THIS IS A CONSOLE

For maximum width the console is set to starboard, with a single walkthrough on the port side only. More a small cabin than a console it has 1.52m of headroom and is big enough to allow inclusion of a head if desired. Loading everything onboard was a good test of the boat's storage capacity and, under the pressure of carrying the needs of three teenagers and four adults, the boat easily soaked-



the big Brig from an ambling 8kts an exhilarating 40kts.

Driving this boat is very enjoyable, especially with such a stunning backdrop. At some stages between islands, traversing 10km stretches of 1.5m seas kicked up by a 15-knot breeze, we travelled at 20 to 25kts in comfort. Despite the boat being almost totally open to the elements it stayed dry onboard in these conditions because the spray from the hull hits the tubes and is deflected downwards.

Steering is light through the Seastar hydraulic system and handling is also impressive as the air tubes keep the boat flat through turns, with the inside sponson providing formidable buoyancy. This stability applies equally at rest and even with everyone clambering over the boat it stayed rock solid. Fuel economy was impressive. Our first day's trip was around 100nm, including speed trials and photography mostly with seven onboard and yet we used less than 60lt of fuel. The following day two-up, we covered about 80nm for 47lt.

The trip opened my eyes to the

possibilities of spending time in this northern playground in a trailerable, privately-owned vessel. It costs about \$2000 to have an 8m boat delivered by truck from Melbourne to Airlie Beach, so it's worth thinking about for an extended holiday.



[HIGHS]

- › Self-draining deck and inherent safety
- › Easy to drive
- › Fast and great handling
- › Soft ride

[LOWS]

- › Open to the elements, so stow some wet-weather gear

“AN OPEN LAYOUT MAKES MAXIMUM USE OF THE SPACE TO ACCOMMODATE A PAYLOAD OF UP TO 18 PASSENGERS. THAT'S A LOT...”





[tradeboat SAYS...]

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Hydraulics make the steering light and the tubes keep the Brig flat through turns (top). While not really a wakeboat, the Eagle 780 (above) is still a versatile performer and great to tow the young ones around.

If you had lots of time for touring, an added bonus is that the Brig is trailerable (with the pontoons deflated) and it can easily carry all your camping gear and provisions if you wanted to spend some time on the many campsites scattered throughout the islands. Sure there are lots of charter boats around, but the freedom and privacy afforded by your own boat is hard to beat.

Touring in the Brig was a great

way to see the Whitsundays and the boat proved versatile and fuss free. It easily handled diving in Manta Ray Bay, sunbaking on Whitehaven Beach, exploring Nara Inlet and simply lazing back on the marina at Hamilton Island. At around \$100,000 it's not a cheap toy, but I doubt we would have had 20 times more fun on a boat 20 times the price. 🌊

Facts & figures

BRIG EAGLE 780

PRICE AS TESTED

\$108,000

OPTIONS FITTED

Garmin 5012, VHF, and fusion sound system

PRICED FROM

\$97,900

SEA TRIALS

Single Honda BF250 outboard

RPM	SPEED	FUEL BURN
2200 (planning)	8kts	9lt/h
2500	12kts	11lt/h
3000	16kts	16lt/h
3500	20kts	21lt/h
4000	24kts	29lt/h
4500	28kts	34lt/h
5000	30kts	53lt/h
5500	36kts	69lt/h
6000 (WOT)	39kts	85lt/h

GENERAL

MATERIAL Hypalon and fibreglass

TYPE Rigid inflatable

LENGTH 7.85m

BEAM 2.9m

WEIGHT 1080kg

DEADRISE 23°

CAPACITIES

PEOPLE (DAY) 18

REC HP 250 to 300

REC MAX HP 300

FUEL 340lt

WATER 50lt

ENGINE

MAKE/MODEL Honda BF250

TYPE SOHC V6 four-stroke

RATED HP 250

WEIGHT 278kg

DISPLACEMENT 3583cc

GEAR RATIO 2.00:1

PROPELLER Solas 17in four-blade

SUPPLIED BY

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