

AIR SUPPLY

PHOTOS JOHN FORD

Brig is the largest RIB manufacturer in Europe and its latest offering has reinvented the inflatable workhorse into a ripper fun machine, reports **JOHN FORD**





Quite frankly these boats are a whole lot of fun!

We tend to think of the rigid inflatable boat (RIB) as a workhorse. Most we see are in service with maritime authorities—Navy, Surf Life Saving Australia, and craft like the one used by Marine Rescue NSW in my hometown of Merimbula. But Australian Brig importer Neil Webster claims we are on the wrong track, he says most of his customers are getting into RIBs because they are simply the funnest boat available.

Take a look around the marinas in the eastern suburbs of Sydney and you might see something of a revolution going on. Boaters in the Harbour City eschew monster cruisers, which see little use, for these smaller and more easily-handled vessels, and they are clocking up serious hours on the water. Want to go for a run to the fish markets? Then it's just a simple matter of jumping aboard the RIB, without the hassles of undocking, finding a pen, docking again and washing the boat down. Because there's an inflated air-tube around its perimeter, this

craft reacts more like a dodgem car; so if you bump into someone's expensive boat or wharf it merely bounces off with no damage and no recriminations around the bar at the club later.

COLD WAR CHILD

Brig owes its existence to the end of the cold war 22 years ago. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1990, the aeronautical industry in the isolated city of Kharkov, Ukraine, found it had no market for the Hypalon components it had been building. The engineers instead turned their talents and the production line into a more peaceful endeavour. That the factory was miles from any decent waterway did not deter them from entering boat manufacturing and the company has now survived two world economic meltdowns to outlast many older RIB builders.

In the Brig line-up, the Eagle-badged models are the upmarket end of a range that includes diminutive 2.75m tenders through to passenger commuter boats up to 7.8m. Contrasted against the white and light grey models in the marina, the matt black tubes of

[HIGHS]

- › Great handling and soft ride
- › Huge fun factor
- › Very good water access for swimming and diving
- › Easy to dock

[LOWS]

- › Close to the elements

the 6.5m test boat really stood out and gave the boat a purposeful, almost military presence that camouflages a luxury interior

Despite their deployment in rescue and government service rolls, which sees them operating in extreme conditions, RIBs are not top-of-mind for recreational boating and in many ways this is surprising. It is hard to think of any other craft that could take the battering handed out to surf rescue boats, let alone imagine another style of vessel that could even perform the task. They're tough and safe and just the shot for a family boat.

NO GOING DOWN

Yet for many the fear is a 'rubber' boat will not last the distance.



The ability to disembark at the beach in dry shoes is an undervalued benefit.

TOP SPEED IS 44KTS AND BEING CLOSE TO THE WATER YOU FEEL THE THRILL OF EVERY KNOT, WITH THE WIND WHIPPING AROUND FOR A CAFFEINE-FREE MORNING WAKEUP

While some RIB manufacturers use PVC for the tubes, Brig employs Hypalon that is tougher and has much greater UV resistance. As Neil points out, many surf rescue boats have seen service for more than 20 years and a well-maintained Brig kept under cover should be expected to last 30 years before the tubes need replacing. Even then a complete replacement is \$10,000, not a major expense after that length of time. Added to this is the resilient nature of the tubes, which can absorb minor impacts of the sort that would see many aluminium and fibreglass boats heading to the repair shop.

Although the tubes dominate the look of the boat, the fibreglass hull section is the main component of the build. The hull has box stringer sections and a vinylester exterior, plus a composite deck to

keep weight down for winching aboard a motoryacht as a tender. The tubes are bonded to the hull and constructed from five separate compartments in such a way that if one was damaged the others expand to fill the void. And if all compartments were to deflate the boat can still float on the fibreglass hull!

This 650H is a new model and a complete rework of the popular 645 that was the biggest selling Brig across the 40 countries they are sold to. Layout is simple, a side console dominating the single-level deck, while a rear targa arch and a gradual rise to the bow add design dimensions to the low-slung hull creating a sporty, well-proportioned image.

At the bow a fibreglass casing houses popup cleats, an anchor roller and bollard, with a step down to a sunpad and two

storage hatches underneath. A twin seat is fitted to the front of the console and there is another lounge at the transom. Adding in the two helm seats makes a total of eight, so while the boat is rated to a maximum of 13 passengers, some of these will have to find seating on the tubes. Storage compartments at the bow, in the console and under seats make space for all the picnic and water toys any family could use for a day out.

Settling into the helm with the bolster seat down and tucked in behind the acrylic glass screen I noted a real racy feel to the boat. The driver sits to the right on the twin seat, where a sporty steering wheel and a side-mounted throttle control are well-placed for action. Dash layout is excellent, a Garmin GPS551 colour chartplotter set to the left and Honda instruments



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immediately in front. A clear, covered glove box holds small personal items and a Fusion sound system has the mandatory MP3 connection.

SPEED ACTION

We pulled away from the wharf surrounded by multimillion-dollar cruisers in the absolute confidence that I wasn't about to wreak costly damage to the fleet. At low speed the Brig Eagle 650H is easily manoeuvrable and vision unrestricted.

Once clear of the marina the throttle was buried and the boat surged forward with a slight rise of the bow, the Honda BF225 hauling us out of the hole and lifting the hull up to its running stance. This thing boogies. Top speed is 44kts and being

close to the water you feel the thrill of every knot, with the wind whipping around for a caffeine-free morning wakeup. Of course it's not necessary to hoon around at flat chat but it is fun — back-off for a more sedate cruise at around 3500rpm and there is still 27kts showing on the GPS.

This impressive performance came courtesy of the quiet achiever strapped to the transom in the 225hp Honda four-stroke. It started and ran silently at trolling speed then emitted a healthy growl from the air-intake as it accelerated and settled into stride. The Eagle 650H could cope with a power rating down to 150hp, but the RIB is so well-matched to the big Honda that it would be a shame to lose its acceleration and drive through corners.

At all speeds the Brig sits flat, the sponsons lifting clear all the way back to the transom. As the hull dips low over waves the tubes contact the water cushioning the ride. Into turns, the RIB leans until it is restrained by the inside tube pushing up to maintain a level attitude. At the same time the deep-vee of the hull bites in, tracking the boat around in the direction it's pointed. Even into sharp turns at 30kts the Eagle 650H just goes wherever she's aimed and passengers need to be aware of the driver's intent because the side force is enough to eject the unwary, with little freeboard to keep them aboard.

OUT TO SEA

With our speed runs over, Neil prised the wheel from my grip



Clockwise from above main: Safe, economical and convenient — the Brig Eagle 650H could be the ultimate on-water commuter; Twin forward hatches gives options in terms of anchoring and line storage; Although it has a relatively small internal volume every opportunity has been taken to provide comfortable seating; The Honda VTEC 225 justifies its “quiet achiever” moniker. On this hull a 150 would do the job but it would be a shame to lose that pulse-quickenng rush out of the corners; The console is simplistic and built to handle the elements.





Facts & figures

BRIG EAGLE 650H

PRICE AS TESTED
\$79,900 (\$85,400 on trailer)

OPTIONS FITTED
Engine upgrade

PRICED FROM
\$74,900 w/ 150hp Honda

SEA TRIALS
Single 225hp Honda outboard

RPM	SPEED
2000	8kts (planning)
2500	16kts
3000	22kts
3500	27kts
4000	33kts
4500	36kts
5000	41kts
5200 (WOT)	44kts

* Sea-trial data supplied by the author.

GENERAL
MATERIAL: Fibreglass and Hypalon
TYPE: Rigid inflatable monohull
LENGTH: 6.48m
BEAM: 2.5m
WEIGHT: 685kg (1094kg on trailer)

CAPACITIES
PEOPLE: 13
REC. HP: 150 to 225
REC. MAX HP: 225
FUEL: 200lt
WATER: 50lt

ENGINE
MAKE/MODEL: Honda BF225
TYPE: Four-stroke V6 outboard
RATED HP: 225
WEIGHT: 272kg
DISPLACEMENT: 3471cc
GEAR RATIO: 1.86:1
PROPELLER: 21in

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[tradeboat SAYS...]

In Europe, the acceptance of RIBs as runabouts and for fishing is much higher than here, so it's all a matter of perception holding the conservative Aussie public back, but a ride in an Eagle might change all that.



As "big boat" tenders RIB's are unequalled. The stability is excellent and the forgiving tubes negate damage.

heads and down to Bondi showed the Brig Eagle 650H is capable of offshore cruising and fishing. It is can easily slug it out in the chop and swell with the best of fibreglass boats, showing an effortless 30kts across 1m wind waves. At speed over some bigger swell the RIB could be lifted clear of the water, landing softly and safely each time. And it's dry throughout — despite all the photography and spirited driving not a drop of water found its way into the Brig.

THE WRAP

We are forever banging on about the relative seaworthiness of fibreglass and alloy boats, but it's time to throw the RIB into the mix. The Brig Eagle 650 is as soft-riding as any boat of similar length and its forgiving nature makes it a sensible choice as a family cruiser. It might lack the weather protection of a cabin boat but it makes use of its whole length to accommodate a big mob for a fun day out.

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and we headed into a secluded beach, where the boat easily took advantage of its shallow draft and gently nudged up to the sand. Disembarking over the bow was easy — we didn't even get our feet wet. It was one of those warm spring days making it easy to imagine anchoring close to shore in a sheltered bay over summer for a swim and a picnic. There is a skipole to tow water toys, the swimladder and freshwater shower adding another dimension to the boat's versatility. A quick run out through the

Test day weather information supplied by

