

TESTED: Sessa Key Largo 25 ● Lagoon Power 43 ● Mac 600 Sport Cabin ● used Viking 22

MOTOR BOATS

June 2005

£3.70



Bénéteau 12m with IPS

MONTHLY

Drive of your life

Steve Curtis judges which 35ft sportscruiser handles best

- Fairline Targa 34
- Windy 37
- Bavaria 37
- Solent Spear
- Elan 35
- Botnia Targa 35

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Top performers



Of course, it's partly a matter of opinion who builds the boats with the best handling and seakeeping. But if you're going to get an opinion it might as well be from a helmsman who knows all about ultimate performance. So we asked Steve Curtis to test and rate what we thought were six of the best 35ft-37ft sportscruisers available. **REPORT BY HUGO ANDREA & MARK TURLEY**

Which boatbuilder makes the best handling cruisers? It's one of those questions which crops up time and time again in the marina bar.

Needless to say, almost everyone has an opinion, based on personal experience or anecdotal evidence. But few have the chance to conduct objective back-to-back trials.

We decided it was time to rectify that, and

find out for ourselves which mainstream manufacturer can genuinely lay claim to producing the best handling sportscruiser.

THE BIG IDEA

We decided to pull together a collection of 35ft-37ft sportscruisers which have a reputation for great hull design, and put them through a range of demanding tests designed

to reveal every aspect of their handling.

We chose boats of this size because they are small enough to retain a sporty feel yet big enough to cope with awkward seas. Since we wanted our findings to be relevant to cruising boatowners, we excluded esoteric muscleboats with minimal accommodation and sky-rocket prices; all the contenders had to have sleeping accommodation, a usable galley and a



BAVARIA 37 SPORT

- built in Germany
- medium-to-deep-vee hull
- twin 285hp sterndrive



SOLENT SPEAR

- built in Britain
- deep-vee hull
- twin 375hp shaftdrive



ELAN POWER 35

- built in Slovenia
- medium-to-deep-vee hull
- twin 260hp sterndrive



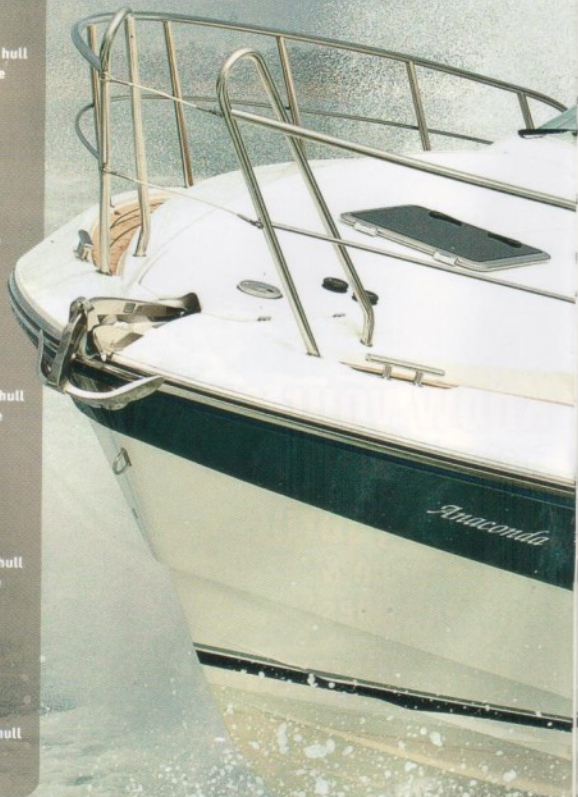
FAIRLINE TARGA 34

- built in Britain
- medium-to-deep-vee hull
- twin 260hp sterndrive



BOTNIA TARGA 35

- built in Finland
- medium-to-deep-vee hull
- twin 350hp sterndrive



separate toilet compartment.

But this was not an exercise in comparing berth sizes, saloon comfort or even value for money. Our only goal was to find out which boat had the best combination of agility, ride comfort, stability, performance and grip in a variety of sea conditions.

THE RIGHT STUFF

We felt that a task of this magnitude required a helmsman of stature, so we asked six-time offshore powerboat racing World Champion Steve Curtis to evaluate the contenders.

Besides knowing how to drive performance powerboats, he's also an accomplished hull designer and a genuine enthusiast, and he isn't afraid to tell it like it is.

There could be no better man for the job.

THE MAGNIFICENT SIX

After some consideration we whittled the list down to the six boats you see here.

Actually we were planning on seven. Having tested the Sunseeker Portofino 35 in 2003, we knew the hull was a cracker and

were keen to include it in this comparative test, but the builders were unable to supply us with a boat. More's the pity.

THE TEST SCHEDULE

Each of our boats was driven by Steve around a timed lap of the same course.

This included a standing start to test its acceleration, a medium-speed corner to test its turn-in and steering feel, a tight spin around a buoy to test its turning circle and propeller bite, and a high-speed corner to test its cornering grip and stability. We recorded an elapsed time at each buoy, and the boat's minimum speed as it took the turn.

We then asked Steve to spend some time slaloming over the considerable wake kicked up by our Broom 39KL, to see how each contender dealt with awkward seas and to get a feel for its behaviour in normal use.

Finally MBMs technical team of Mark Turley and Ray Sargood put all the boats through a standard set of performance tests.

The combination of our data and Steve's insights was to prove very revealing. ➔

Scoring system

Steve Curtis filled in a score card for each boat, assessing it on various aspects of its behaviour. He gave a score out of ten for each of these categories.

SEAKEEPING

The hull's behaviour in awkward sea conditions, including its ride comfort over a typical Solent chop, it's resistance to slamming over bigger waves, whether it throws spray into the cockpit, its ability to avoid being pushed about by big waves or dig its nose in, and the feeling of strength and security imparted by its build quality.

MANOEUVRABILITY

How the boat responds to the driver's steering inputs, including the weight of the steering, the amount of slack in the system, how many turns there are from lock to lock, the tightness of the turning circle and the hull's ability to track a straight course at speed.

CORNERING

How the boat copes with a turn taken at speed, with particular reference to its degree of lean, its grip on the water, propeller slip, its ability to maintain speed through a bend and the confidence it inspires in the helmsman.

PERFORMANCE

How the boat uses the raw power provided by its engines, including how quickly it steps up onto the plane, how sensitive it is to trim, what its preferred running angle is, and how it responds to the throttle.

HELM DESIGN

How the layout of the helm contributes to the driving experience, with reference to the relationship between the seat, wheel, throttle, instruments and trim tabs, the comfort and support offered by the seat itself, and whether the helmsman feels in any way cut off from the rest of the boat.

WINDY 37 GRAND MISTRAL

- built in Norway
- medium-vee hull
- twin 285hp sterndrive





1st

Windy 37 Grand Mistral

Scandinavians aren't usually prone to blowing their own trumpets, but Norwegian boatbuilders Windy have no such qualms. The opening page of their glossy brochure describes their range of sportscruisers as "the

world's greatest-handling boats".

That's fighting talk, but it wouldn't cut any ice with Steve. The 37 Grand Mistral would live or die on its own merits.

Helping to fight its corner were a pair of 285hp Volvo Penta

KAD300s giving it a potential top speed of more than 40 knots. Even that wasn't enough to outdrag the 700hp Botnia Targa in the sprint to the first marker buoy on our course, but from there on the Windy streaked away to record the

fastest overall lap time in a very rapid 3min 51sec.

Even taking into account its power advantage over the Fairline and the Elan, there was no doubting the excellence of its hull. Steve reckoned it had the best



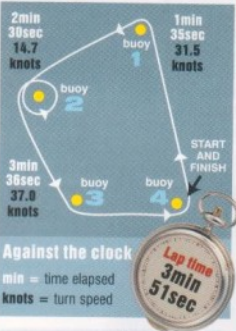


is quite quick enough for most people's needs, but there's no doubting it could go quicker still without frightening the helmsman or crew.

The fact that it felt the best-built of the six boats also played in its favour, with no discernible squeaks or rattles even when pounding over a wake.

The only thing that came in for any real criticism was the steering, which Steve found too sloppy for a boat of this potential. Otherwise the helm got full marks for its supportive seat, clear view through the windscreen and sensibly sited trim controls and throttle.

Perhaps it's a nation's pragmatic approach to boating that appeals to Steve, who has won the last two Class I World Championships at the helm of a boat called Spirit of Norway, but certainly there was no hiding his enthusiasm for the Grand Mistral. "Norwegians have to go out in all conditions, so it's hardly surprising they build good boats."



Steve's scorecard

Ride comfort	9/10
Steering response	6/10
Cornering	8/10
Performance	8/10
Helm design	9/10
Total	40/50



design notes

Although the 37 first saw the light of day in the late 1990s, it is all credit to its designer, Hans Johnsen, that it has barely dated and is still a firm favourite in the Windy range.

He highlights several factors that need to be got right, and in balance, for a hull to achieve both fast straight-line stability and sharp handling.

An efficient planing area, just as much as plenty of horsepower, is key to getting the required performance, he says. This demands a high-aspect-ratio surface, while the deadrise has to be a compromise between efficiency and comfort.

The fact that Windys excel when running 'downhill' shows the attention paid to the bow sections. They have a sharp enough entry to minimise slamming when heading into the waves, but are broad enough to lift them when being carried with them.

Johnsen also points out that a lot of ride comfort can be put down to a correctly trimmed boat, which means getting the longitudinal centre of gravity just right.

hull

LENGTH OVERALL	36ft 7in (11.14m)
WATERLINE LENGTH	29ft 6in (9.00m)
BEAM	11ft 6in (3.50m)
DEADRISE AMIDSHIPS	20°
DEADRISE AT TRANSOM	20°

power

ENGINES	two Volvo Penta KAD300s
POWER RATING	285hp at 3800rpm
DISPLACEMENT	6.5 tonnes
POWER-TO-WEIGHT RATIO	87hp/tonne
SPEED AT 3850rpm	39.0 knots
SPEED AT 3400rpm	33.0 knots
SPEED AT 3000rpm	27.5 knots

details

PRICE	£218,000 as tested
ENQUIRIES	Express Cruisers Tel: 01590 679222. www.windy.no

combination of ride comfort and agility of all the boats on test.

"The bow maintains a lovely attitude, with no fear of stuffing into a head sea," he enthused, pointing out that "we didn't get dragged into the photo boat's wake". Comments like these say as much about the 37's all-weather ability as its high-speed cornering agility.

Steve had no trouble holding

the throttle flat through all but the tightest turns, and had nothing but praise for the way the boat carved through the bends. "It's dry, predictable and shows no sign of sliding or walking out."

One sign of a good hull is that it feels ready to accept more power, and, even with 570hp on tap, Steve was left wanting more. The Grand Mistral steps up onto the plane faster than the Fairline, and

cruising comfort

Norwegian builders Windy have a reputation for producing well-mannered hulls that nevertheless love to be pushed. They combine this with sound build quality and clever use of space.

Take the helm for instance: three people can sit directly at the console, but there is further space, with umpteen handholds, if others want to stand nearby. Equally, should they prefer, they can settle down and watch from the lovely large dinette.

Neat design and fine fit-out extends below, to the two cabins and the pleasant saloon. The latter incorporates an ultra-smart yet usefully appointed galley.

The hull makes efficient use of its power, even at 3000rpm it pushes on at a tidy 27.5 knots when pretty well laden. But for those who prefer less wind in their Windy, there's a very good-looking hardtop version of the 37.





rapid RIB



Just to put our selected sports cruisers in perspective, we invited Steve Curtis to do a lap of the same course in one of his company's own Cougar RIBs.

Although it shares its sleek stepped hull and four-stroke outboard engine with the Honda

225 raceboats, this has been designed as a quick and efficient leisure boat rather than an out-and-out racer.

Its top speed of around 50 knots is only 10 knots quicker than the Windy, but being so much lighter its acceleration and handling are in a different league.

Interestingly, around the relatively tight first and second turns it was actually slower than the best of our sports cruisers, but it blitzed them all through the quicker bends, and of course on the straights, to record a total lap time fully 50 seconds faster than the best of them.

Given that a difference of only 24 seconds blankets the six boats in our test group, that's a fairly substantial margin.



Verdict

Although we have ranked the boats tested according to Steve Curtis's scoring system, you should bear in mind that every one of them was chosen precisely because we already rated it as one of the most satisfying drives in its class. So the fact that the Bavaria and the Solent Spear came in 5th equal is not to denigrate their abilities.

Remember, too, that this was purely a test of handling and performance. There is more to buying a boat than simply choosing the one with the best hull design or the most speed.

Although it is shaded here, the Bavaria remains a very appealing sports cruiser with masses of accommodation and a very comfortable, if rather wet-riding, hull.

And few buyers are going to be comparing the Solent Spear with Windys and Fairlines. If you appreciate its retro styling and the unique

driving experience of a powerful shaft-driven deep-vee hull, then the fact that it isn't as quick or agile as a well-sorted modern sports cruiser isn't the point.

For a new make, the Elan did well to hold its head up in this elevated company, but in the end it couldn't live with the front-runners from Windy, Fairline and Targa.

All of our top three have truly exceptional handling characteristics, and splitting them came down to peripheral elements such as helm layout, steering and power-to-weight ratio, rather than fundamental differences in hull design.

With more potent engines, the Fairline would have run the Windy a lot closer around our timed lap. The Botnia Targa defied the odds to give its sportier-looking rivals a serious scare.

But in the end it was the Windy's combination of good seakeeping, entertaining handling and fine performance that earns it the accolade of Britain's best driver's boat.



STEVE CURTIS' RATINGS

	RIDE	STEERING	TURNING	PERFORMANCE	HELM	OVERALL
WINDY 37 GRAND MISTRAL	9	6	8	8	9	40
BOTNIA TARGA 35	8	8	9	8	7	39
FAIRLINE TARGA 34	8	7	8	6	6	35
ELAN POWER 35	6	7	6	6	5	30
SOLENT SPEAR	7	4	4	6	6	27
BAVARIA 37 SPORT	6	6	5	5	5	27