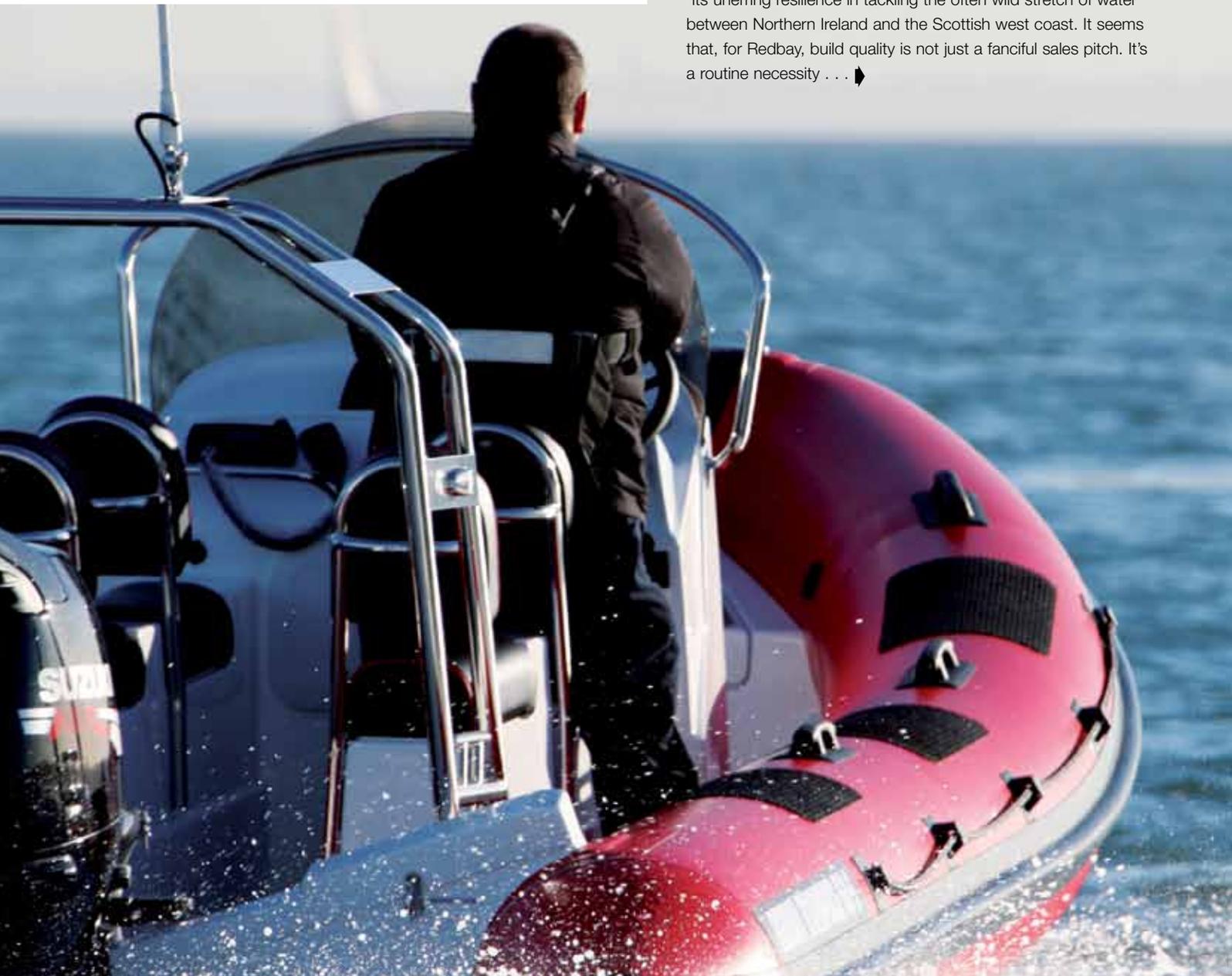


STORMFORCE FOR LEISURE BOATERS

Q: What do you get if you make a 6.5-metre Redbay RIB lighter, quicker and prettier? A: You get the Stormforce 650-S. Alex Smith reports.



There are very few brands with a reputation for solidity so profound that the brand name becomes virtually synonymous with it. Arguably, Humber has achieved it and so too have the likes of Ribcraft and Ocean Dynamics. But up on the Antrim coast in Northern Ireland, there is a company that has been knocking out boats to tackle tough Atlantic seas since 1977. Redbay Boats started out building traditional wooden clinker boats, before developing a range of GRP fishing boats, from 12 to 21 feet in length, that would make their name both with day fisherman and the commercial workboat market. As for their RIB range, well that didn't actually emerge until 1990 but, since then, it has become renowned for its unerring resilience in tackling the often wild stretch of water between Northern Ireland and the Scottish west coast. It seems that, for Redbay, build quality is not just a fanciful sales pitch. It's a routine necessity . . . ▶





WHERE DOES IT FIT INTO THE RANGE?

The Redbay Stormforce line-up consists of 19 boats, ranging in length from the 6.1-metre Open RIB to the 11-metre platform, which is used in no fewer than five differing configurations. There is also a 16-metre boat in the offing for the end of the year - a large commercial RIB designed to carry 30 passengers at speeds of up to 30 knots. But this new leisure-biased 650-S, however, is essentially an enhanced version of the second smallest boat in the range, the 6.5. In the 650 guise, it benefits from an internally moulded deck and console arrangement, plus a polishing of the aesthetics that sets it apart from the more industrial boats upon which it is based.

ON BOARD DETAILS

As I step on board the little red Stormforce via the aft section of the collar, I am immediately conscious of just how soundly built this boat is. The Hypalon collar itself is topped off by no fewer than six sturdy, high-friction stepping strips, three on either side, plus handles and lifelines along the tube's entire useable length. On the nose is an equally workmanlike fairlead and below that, in the apex of the foredeck, that most traditional symbol of maritime muscle, the inimitable Samson post.

At the back end, the hard-knock touches continue. The squat, metal, four-legged A-frame stands above the transom with all the robust stoicism of a bulldog. At its base, it is anchored in elevated deck mouldings on either side of the automatic bilge pump and the large-diameter 'elephant's trunk' deck-drainage pipe. Back here, the pipes and cables are all neatly (and very strongly) secured, leaving a large, unencumbered aft deck available for the leisure boater to enjoy in any way he sees fit. Strangely though, up at the helm, there seems



to be virtually no design continuity between the screen and the rail that surrounds it. The screen is a frameless affair, angled back and prematurely curved to the point where the wind whistles over the sloping sides and strikes the top of your head and your outside shoulder. The rail, meanwhile is a lower, broader piece of work, angled forward a touch to aid those manoeuvring around the foredeck. Ideally, it would be good to see these two disparate elements come into closer union, whereby the screen provides proper protection for the driver and the rail lends the screen a little of its structural strength.

Even so, the dash arrangement on the 650-S is excellent. The wheel is angled slightly up, the top-mounted left-hand throttle with its thumb rocker switch is well positioned and the simple Suzuki dials are easy to see and to use. There is also a good space for a proper grown-up chart plotter (in this case, the Standard horizon CP-300 GPS/Sounder).

And even the compass



(that often overlooked but completely essential piece of navigation equipment) is displayed centrally, on a dedicated plinth, like a proudly won hunting trophy - not just as an unfortunate afterthought but as a properly integrated part of the helm.

It works very effectively, making the driver feel comfortable, connected and in control. And this feeling of confidence is magnified by the fact that the console is positioned so far forward. Instead of seeing the long nose of your boat arrowing off toward distant swells, the fact that you are essentially driving from the front puts you right up close to the point of impact. From here, it is extremely easy to judge wave shapes and adjust your driving accordingly.

This layout is also very effective for your passengers. That forward console enables the use of two pairs of jockey seats, with scope to incorporate an extraordinarily spacious aft deck. Unfortunately, though, there is very little in the way of storage back here. Instead, the useable storage areas are limited to the four seat bases, some minimal space inside the front of the console and the (relatively small) anchor locker in the V of the bow. And when you try to reach that bow, a combination of some fairly fat tubes and quite a wide console means that transit from one end of the boat to the other inevitably involves bums sliding over tubes.

UNDERWAY

The hull is basically the same as that used on both the 6.5 Open and Canopy RIBs, but with a redesigned bow and sheer line. On the water, the result of that is a ride of extraordinary softness. True, this particular boat, with 140hp on the transom is not being asked to deal with the scale of impacts that can arise from a frantic 50-knot charge but, running at wide-open throttle with around 34 knots on the clock, over some lumpy wash from the Solent's commercial traffic, the sensation from the



Composed, resilient and easy to drive, the 650 makes a very sound companion

THE ENGINE CHOICE



The Suzuki DF140 offers some of the most compelling power-to-weight ratio figures of any production four-stroke in its class. Weighing only 186kg it is in fact lighter in weight than the two less powerful models beneath it - the DF115 and DF100. Above it, the DF150, with its 2,867cc capacity, adds another 24kg to the equation - not to mention another £1,000. The 140, therefore, looks like an ideal real-world midrange partner for the Redbay 650. True, out on the water, you may find yourself conscious that the boat could handle more power (and with a maximum rating of 225hp, it certainly could). But with 34 knots available and an all-in package price below £35,000, the benefits of the lightweight DF140 remain resoundingly obvious.



FACT FILE

VERDICT

The 650S is basically the distillation of the Redbay ethos in affordable miniature. The Suzuki makes a fine partner for most applications and, while the performance is more effective than enthralling, the resounding solidity of build and the usefully practical layout make it a very worthwhile option for the general-purpose leisure boater. I can't pretend it's the sort of boat I would hunt down for the purpose of a one-off pleasure trip - but when the weather deteriorates, it is most certainly a boat I would feel happy to own.

WHY YOU WOULD

- Ultra-reliable build quality
- Tremendously soft ride
- Big aft deck

WHY YOU WOULDN'T

- Limited storage
- Poor screen

PERFORMANCE

RPM	Speed (knots)
2000	5.4
3000	11.0
4000	21.4
5000	28.5
5850 (WOT)	34.5
Time to plane: 5.0 seconds	



SPECIFICATION

- LOA: 6.5m
- Beam overall: 2.7m
- Internal length: 5.46m
- Internal beam: 1.6m
- Tube diameter: 460 / 560mm
- Tube material: Hypalon
- Max Recommended Load: 1,000 kg
- Max Recommended Persons: ten
- Hull Weight: 710kg
- Max power: 225hp
- Engine: Suzuki DF140
- Fuel tank: 210 litres
- Design Category: B
- Price as tested: £34,950

MORE INFORMATION

- MRL
- 02380 335333
- www.mrl-uk.com
- Redbay Boats (N.Ireland)
- 02821 771331
- www.redbayboats.com

driver's seat is one of very great comfort indeed. In fact the hull upon which the unmodified 6.5-metre platform is based was the first RIB hull Redbay ever introduced. It arrived in the form of the 6.1-metre RIB in 1990 and, while that original hull proved itself very capable as an offshore racer in its early days, in this guise, the driving experience is far more about composure, comfort and control than about outright aggression.

Pin the throttle from a standing start and you rise onto the plane in five seconds or so. There is in fact a fair bit of bow lift as the transition over the hump is executed but, because you are perched up at the bow with a short view ahead over the stubby little nose section, it seems like a very flat and level progression indeed.

As you get better accustomed to the boat, you begin to realise that, in this guise at least, there is virtually no prospect of upsetting her. She sticks, steadfastly to the surface, even over some fairly provocative lumps, never losing shape, getting flighty or risking any driver surprise. There is no clatter either and, while that's partly due to the softness of the ride, it's also a consequence of that excellent build.

It's not perfect up here of course. Despite the excellent helm set-up, the wind whistles unchecked past my ears and I find the console a little too close to my seating position to really extend my legs but these are minor gripes, because - one way or another - this 650 proves itself in all relevant respects a very robust and dependable seagoing companion. ■