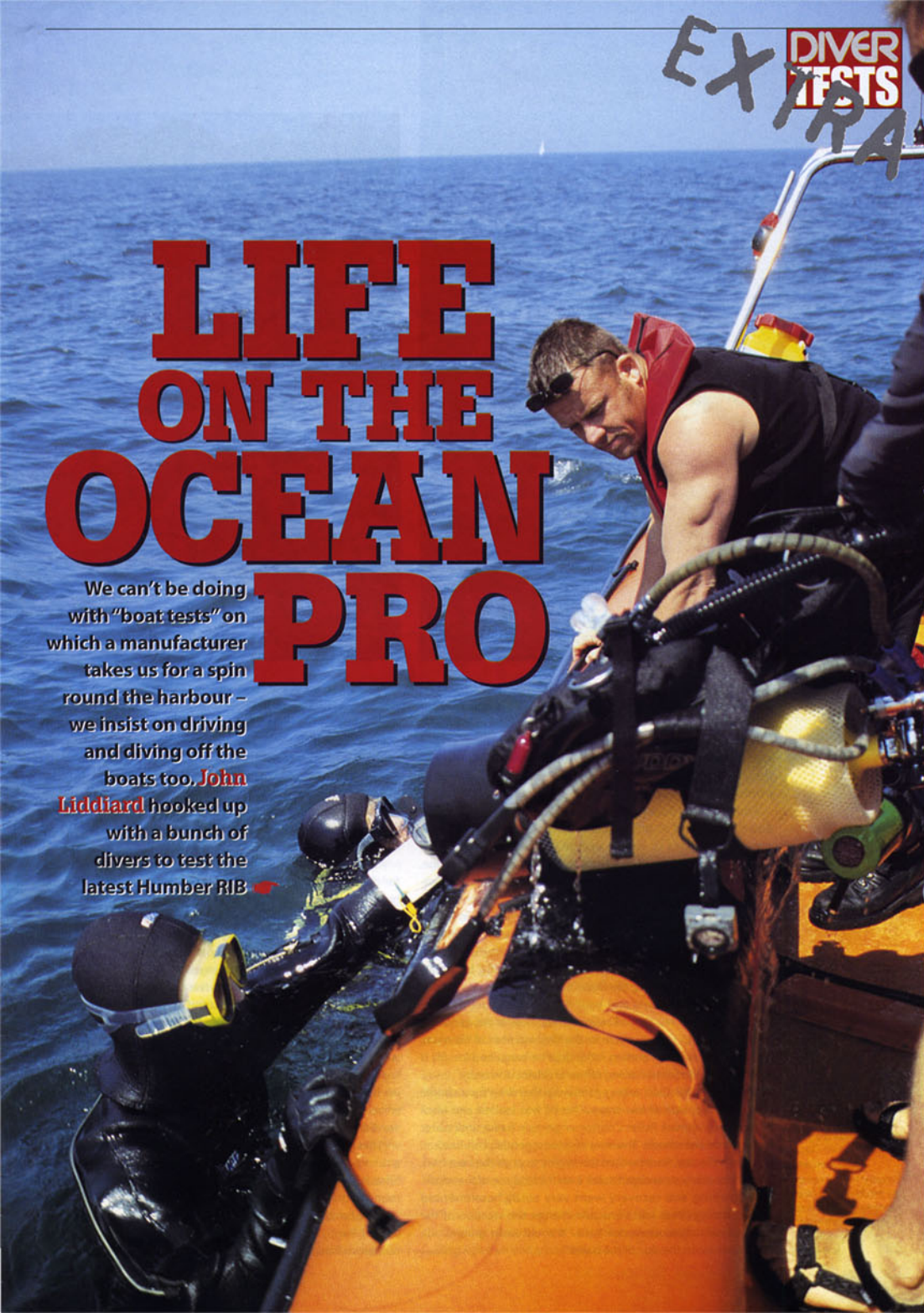


EXTRA  
DIVER TESTS

# LIFE ON THE OCEAN PRO

We can't be doing with "boat tests" on which a manufacturer takes us for a spin round the harbour – we insist on driving and diving off the boats too. **John Liddiard** hooked up with a bunch of divers to test the latest Humber RIB





**"ABOUT BOAT TESTS... WE WANT TO DO THEM DIFFERENTLY.** Get a team of divers together and take this new Humber RIB diving."

I had the perfect opportunity in mind – a day in the middle of a Bristol University club trip to Pembrokeshire. The trip has become a regular reunion for ex-members and guests, so I had plenty of candidates for a review team.

Andrew Roffey from Humber and Mike Beeley from distributor Sowester arrived at the campsite in the small hours. Divers crawled from tents to see the orange Humber Ocean Pro 6.3m RIB with the latest Mercury Optimax 150 Dig outboard engine. I even caught some of them fondling the mirror-perfect stainless-steel prop.

With Andrew and Mark crewing, I limited my team to six, including myself. From Swansea BSAC were Rachel Whitfield and Paul Nusinov, both instructors and the latter a former diving officer. Both had plenty of experience of club RIBs, including a 6.5m Humber Destroyer, the Ocean Pro's predecessor.

Also BSAC instructors and boat-handling instructors were Victoria and Tony Jay, Oxford area coaches. I was in the middle of teaching a photography course for the final member of the team, Jez Kent. He ended up getting more than he bargained for. Jez is an instructor and former diving officer at Bristol University.

We launched at Dale, a long gentle slip that dries for a couple of hours either side of low water. Our kit was loaded and Mark backed the Hallmark Roller Coaster single-axle trailer until water just covered the wheels. The boat needed a gentle push to clear.

Later in the day, Andrew used the engine to push the boat back onto the similarly submerged trailer with minimal use of the winch.

"Launching and recovery went very easily," commented Rachel, though Paul said he would change the location of the spare wheel to give more clearance. "It could easily ground out, mounted low on the side of the trailer."

Mark was towing the boat behind a 2 litre Subaru. "You don't need four-wheel drive. Any 2 litre car should cope with this, but the engine will get a little thirsty," he said.

Out of the moorings, Mark pushed the throttle up to full speed; we had 10 miles to cover to our first dive at Wild Goose Race to the west of Skokholm island, and needed to get there in time to locate the site for slack water.

"Full speed was not comfortable," said Victoria. "It was too bouncy to sit on the tubes and we had to stand up. Cruising on the way back was much easier."

As Tony said: "Thirty-five knots flat out is usually unnecessary for divers, but I can't blame Mark for wanting to show off how good the engine is, and we needed to get to the dive site."

We did have to stop to re-tie kit on the way out, which might have been down to sloppy tying-down, though as Victoria pointed out: "The straps on the bottle rack were not very good. It needs better straps or strong bungees."

Everyone was impressed with the dry ride. You rarely hear divers disappointed by a calm sea, but "it would have been nice in some ways to have a heavier sea to really test the boat," commented Rachel. "Like any RIB, our club's Humber gets a bit wet when the sea is rough."

At Wild Goose Race, the sea was heavier and Andrew switched on the bilge pump. Throughout the day, the small amount of water collected in the well was easily cleared by the pump, and we didn't need to unfurl the elephant trunk.

"I like the way it's routed through the transom, rather than just a tube poked over the top – much neater that way," said Rachel. "The switches need labelling, but maybe they just haven't got round to that on a fresh boat."

"The bung from the well to the inner hull was easy to get to," added Paul. "There was no outer bung, which could be a nuisance when towing and storing the boat."

A constant bugbear with RIBs is how easily they take on water over the transom, and many owners fit false transoms to overcome this problem. Andrew offered a solution: "We can fit a higher transom with a very tight cut-out for the engine if divers request it."

Paul put the numbers into the Lowrance NCX-15 combined GPS/plotter/echo sounder. It took a while to work it out: "The echo-sounder is excellent, though the user interface to the GPS part is not very friendly," he said.

Kitting up, there was room for two on each side behind the bottle-rack, with the remaining divers beside it. Victoria had a spot just clear of the rack. "It was easy to kit up and roll in," she said. "It didn't feel at all precarious." Sitting a little further forward, Rachel commented: "I had no trouble, though there was the usual problem of fitting my fins between the tube and the rack. There's less room than in our 6.5."

As usual with a RIB, it takes a bit of organisation to marry divers with kit. As Tony put it: "Divers always spread out to make any space look crowded." Nevertheless, Paul thought "there was lots of room once we were all kitted-up".

After the dive, Rachel approved of the grab-lines outside the tubes. "It's good to have them all along. Many boats have lines only part of the way forward."

"The tubes rested nicely on the water, making it easy to get back in," said Paul. "I liked the inside handles on them."

We headed further out to Grassholm for a second dive playing with the seals, and while fizzing off we had a play with the boat.

Paul went first: "There were no problems getting it onto the plane. Handling at high speed was excellent. It didn't lose any grip when turning and felt in control through choppy bits and whirlpools. The hydraulic steering is excellent."

Tony agreed. "The combination of boat and engine was well matched. I didn't need any tricks to get it going; it just went. It was nice and predictable when turning. It felt like a very safe boat."

"It turned well and felt very steady," said Rachel, and Victoria was left to add: "It was a pleasure to drive. I felt in control even when flat-out."

Driving the RIB was a first for Jez. "I had only driven inflatables with tiller steering before," he said. "I was surprised how easy it was to control."

I took a more sedate pace and tried some slow manoeuvres. The boat was nice and predictable, though I could have slackened off the throttle friction a bit. I guess Mark preferred it slightly stiffer than I would.

Paul thought the console configuration "very good, though the throttle was a bit low down. Maybe it's just what I'm used to." He was also impressed by the Mercury instrumentation: "The two displays showed everything by pushing buttons to change the selection."

Tony liked the one-man jockey seat: "It keeps more space available for kit." Rachel disagreed: "A two-man seat can be useful when instructing. It can also be good if one of the passengers is feeling seasick."

On a point of comfort, Victoria thought the bucket seat "a bit too wide to stand comfortably across".

The use of space in front of the console came in for some criticism: "I don't like the anchor locker below the floor," said Paul. "It's too easily buried below all the other kit. I would prefer just to keep the anchor and line in an open bucket with a lower deck and more space."

Our lunch break gave us the chance to examine and test the A-frame and transom. No problem for the male contingent, and Victoria reported that "the A-frame and engine provided good points to hang on."

"It was a bit close to the water and could be risky if waves were coming from behind," she said. "Overall, more comfortable than having a pee on many hardboats."

Previous page: "The tubes rested nicely on the water, making it easy to get back in" – Paul.  
Above from left: Everyone was impressed by the dry ride; the boat needed a gentle push to get it clear of the trailer; concentration at the wheel



Above: The computerised high-pressure direct injection system makes the Mercury Optimax 150 Dig two-stroke more fuel-efficient than an equivalent-sized four-stroke. Right: "The combination of boat and engine was well-matched. I didn't need any tricks to get it going."

More seriously, Paul commented: "The A-frame was solid and well set up, with lots of space for fitting dryboxes and accessories."

By the time we had finished playing with the boat and had our second dive, Andrew and Mark were a little concerned about the fuel level. The boat had a 91 litre tank fitted below the console and it had been full when we left Dale. As this was the first time the boat had been used, the gauge was not yet calibrated.

We returned to Dale at an economical cruising speed of 24 knots, a comfortable ride with the trip computer indicating 7.5 gallons/hour.

Mark explained that the computerised high-pressure direct-injection system made this two-stroke engine even more fuel efficient than an equivalent-sized four-stroke.

When Andrew dipped the tank at the end of the day, he estimated that we had used 70 litres.

"Seventy litres to cover over 35 miles with a fair bit of zooming about in circles is very economical," commented Paul. "It should be possible to use the trip computer to drive for optimum economy and cut that further."

Nevertheless, we all felt a 91 litre tank was a bit small for extended offshore diving trips. "I would opt for the larger underfloor fuel tanks, which would also give more room for dry storage beneath the console," said Paul.

Victoria also commented on the dry storage: "I would like some dry space for hats and sandwiches etc. There wasn't much space left in the console."

"The boat handled well with two crew plus six divers with two sets each," summed up Paul. "It could have coped with enough kit for eight divers." Or, as Tony put it more simply: "A good club boat."

\* Humber 01482 226100



Our thanks to Pembrokeshire Dive Charters and the divers from Hereford for letting us borrow their boats to take photographs.

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