

# MAN'S BEST FRIEND

If you want a boat that looks after you while you hunt for your thrills, they don't come much better than a 9.0 from Ribcraft says Irving Stewart . . .

# TESTED

Ribcraft 9.0



At the workshop, a refurbished Ribcraft is ready for another decade of hard work on the water



Precision cutting is carried out to within a hundredth of a millimetre



Ribcraft's new research and development facility in Yeovil is expensive, professional and thoroughly worthwhile

**A**s my rapidly receding hair line and delicate lower spine constantly remind me, decades have passed since I first tested a diminutive and modestly powered four-metre Flatacraft RIB. Over those rapidly passing years the ubiquitous RIB has progressed from being a relatively small workboat much favoured by the rescue services, the military and indeed Greenpeace, to the far larger, far more powerful and often obscenely fast boys' toys we see today.

But, more interestingly, what has also significantly changed is the way in which many large recreational RIBs are now used. Instead of exploiting the inherent and proven attributes of the RIB to soften the effect on crews working in poor conditions (and exploiting the flotation and stability afforded by the tubes) many of today's RIBs are merely very fast monohulls boasting thin and rather pointless high-mounted tubes that rarely, if ever, touch the water.

## Logic to the wind

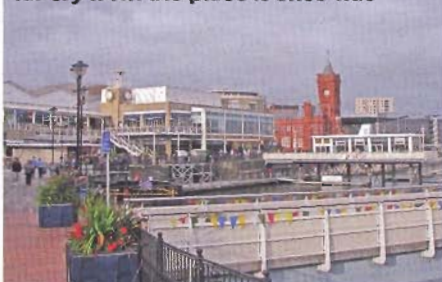
Somewhat illogically, many fast RIB owners now deliberately seek out rough water in which to prove their stupidity

(sorry) prowess and the performance of their craft. It may be a testosterone-fuelled man thing, perhaps even a subliminal penile manifestation, similar to the urge which compells so many to invest in classic E-type Jaguars. But the point is that this fondness for doing battle with the sea in a high-performance 'lifestyle' RIB is not one you are likely to win. In braving it, you merely subject all those on board to impacts and stresses that are not just unnecessary but positively undesirable.

The 'pleasures' of self-abuse totally escape me and it is for these painful reasons that I now tend to leave the testing of the fast and trendy lifestyle craft to my far younger colleagues. I don't need it. What I need is the friendly sea-keeping ability afforded by less radical monohulls and catamarans and, happily they still exist...

In direct contrast to the world of tiny tubes and pretty cushions, a great many commercial and military fast boat operators (and indeed heavy plant constructors) are currently involved in extremely expensive and extensive research to minimise these very stresses on their crews and drivers. So when I was asked to venture out on a 600hp Sea Safari boat in the frequently rough waters off South Wales, I was hoping for a proper grown up RIB and for a >

Cardiff, our venue for the day, is a far cry from the place it once was





The three-metre beam is a huge help for commercial work

little comfort in addition to the thrills. I have never in my life been so pleased to see a Ribcraft . . .

#### Exhilaration with comfort

In 2008, Cardiff Bay Safari operated a single 10.5m Ribcraft with twin Suzuki DF250s. It was hardly a sedate boat but, for the 2009-2010 season, they decided to opt for two slightly shorter craft because, in their own words, they would be “newer, narrower, faster, more powerful and cheaper to run”.

When I learnt that their two custom-built nine-metre Ribcraft Pro RIBs were to be fitted with even more horses, in the form of twin DF 300hp outboards, my curiosity (and probably common sense) got the

better of me. These new RIBs were not conceived to be ultra sleek, and seldom used, luxury toys but tough beamy deep-V craft, designed by the maestro, George Marvin, to carry serious weights and yet handle like small sports RIBs. At nine metres in length, three metres in the beam and more than two and a half tonnes dry, these MCA Category 4 craft have been custom built to carry 12 passengers plus two crew and almost half a ton of fuel. In fact Ribcraft’s ‘Safari’ RIBs have pretty much become the craft of choice for those commercial operators offering an eager public the chance to experience fast RIBs in relative safety.

The time had come to get them on the water and so it was off to Cardiff Bay, where

the threatened sunshine and warm weather were not yet in evidence. Here, Emilio and Ryan were waiting for me. These guys share a passion for boats and have been friends for eons, They now jointly operate Cardiff Sea Safari and were delighted to have the chance to show off their two new 600hp craft, ‘Cobra’ and ‘Viper’.

#### New technologies

From the keel upwards these craft were designed and built at Yeovil, fully exploiting the huge financial investment and new technologies introduced at Ribcraft during the past couple of years.

The CAD (Computer Aided Design) deep-V easy planing hulls are built to full commercial specifications, so they’re well able to withstand the constant abuse inflicted by heavy seas, extremely long working hours and the careless feet and bums of countless passengers. The precision-built tubes, manufactured entirely in house, are perfect examples of the huge advantages provided by Ribcraft’s new computer controlled precision tube cutting and grinding machines - which are reputedly still the only ones of their kind in the UK.

The RIBs carry comprehensive Raymarine electronics, Icom VHF radios, fully integrated sound systems and nightclub-style deck-level LED lighting. Even the ultra-tough stainless framed seating (with tiny logos on the upholstery) were produced by Ribcraft in-house using new technologies and processes, unique to the UK’s RIB building industry.

As for the engines, the Suzuki DF300s positively bristle with clever innovations, including the finger-light accuracy of ‘fly by wire’ controls and the clever positioning of a high proportion of the engine’s mass



The elevated helm, bristling with electronics, allows you to look down on the passengers ahead



It's rare to find a boat in which almost every part is manufactured in-house

# TESTED

## Ribcraft 9.0



52 knots over a chunky wake does nothing to concern your buttocks



Ah, the look of people who are not quite sure what to expect . . .



relatively far forward, over the transom instead of behind it. This set up ought to be a class act.

### Surprises in store

Once afloat what really surprised and delighted me was not just the straightline performance of these boats or the remarkably low planing speed, but the extremely impressive ride quality. At every speed in the range, even at full chat, the hull runs with unerring smoothness, with virtually no evidence of slamming. And when we really

chucked her through the swells, the shocks that were transmitted to those sitting aboard were disarmingly moderate.

The grunt from the big Suzukis, meanwhile, comes in quickly, quietly and with memorable potency. Never once during our various sea trials did the engine noise from 600 horses exceed the ambient wind noise. And while people who wear their caps backwards and drive low powered hatchbacks with noisy exhausts might hanker after a more obtrusive engine tone, the bizarre coming together of extreme motive power and virtual silence is an extraordinary thing. When you see how compact these engines are, it seems even more incongruous.

It was when I took the helm and started to throw the big RIB around that the second shock of the day struck. Superlatives are not needed to describe the effortless finger tip engine controls, or the one-handed effort required by the helm. These craft are simply magnificent and, while the faces of our novice passengers suggested that the G-forces were intense, I have to say, their enthusiasm was matched by that of this seasoned old hack, because these Ribcraft hulls simply will not let go. Even winding the wheel round at full chat to crank the boat right over induces no sign of slip. We even managed to corner on one tube lifting a prop out of the water, at which point Suzuki's electronic wizardry instantly took over. It reduced the revs momentarily and then seamlessly poured the power back on the moment the 21.5-inch stainless prop had once again found some water to bite into. Aren't computers and Japanese engineers just wonderful?

But, as Ryan explains, the DF300 engines were not chosen simply for their speed but because they provide smooth cruising at 40mph, plus the pure grunt to accelerate extremely quickly if needed. Better still, they actually use less fuel than twin 250s running

at a similar speed – proving the age-old theory that there is simply no substitute for cubic inches. The fact that they are more powerful than anything else in Cardiff Bay is just a handy marketing bonus . . .

### Twelve-hour days

It true that luxury RIBs of a similar length with comparable horsepower are frequently seen in the Solent - often exceeding the maximum speed of these Ribcraft. However, it is extremely unlikely

Astonishingly, propelling three tonnes of boat and 14 people through serious sea conditions for a full hour burns just 45 litres of fuel

that their hulls (or their crews) could sustain such velocity for very extended periods, or indeed even be capable of carrying sufficient fuel to do so without compromising performance.

During a full hour's 'Safari Run' in the Bristol Channel, these Ribcraft boats burn just 45 litres of petrol. That's more than three tons of boat and fuel plus 14 people being shifted through often serious sea conditions. And despite all of this, Cardiff Bay Safari's new Ribcraft, and their Suzuki engines, routinely work 12-hour days, seven days a week in season - and that is a hell of a lot. To put that into perspective, it means that, in less than a five-day week, each craft exceeds the annual use of the UK's average recreational boat.

As you will see in the specs box at the end of this feature, these RIBs are not exactly cheap. But when you compare them with the 'Designer RIB' market, the value is very striking. Yes, you miss out on a >

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## Ribcraft 9.0



The nine-metre Ribcraft is a boat of monstrous dynamic ability

few seats, perhaps a sun lounger and a few drinks holders but these ultra-tough craft bring plenty more to the party because, with their combination of economy and seakeeping prowess, they open up a range of destinations and seastates that would not previously have been on the cards.

### Novice introduction

Operating from Mermaid Quay in



Ryan, the Skipper, tells it like it is ...

Cardiff Bay, Cardiff Sea Safari's craft, 'Cobra' and 'Viper' offer non-boaters a rare opportunity to experience the adrenaline rush of fast boating in the form of half-hour trips around the bay (where everyone gets wet), an hour's open sea safari around Flat Holm Island, or an extended full-day trip around the coast. The guys will even take your kids off your hands for an afternoon and give them a thoroughly memorable floating pirate party.

In other words these are craft well outside even the widest dreams (and pockets) of most everyday boaters and the opportunity to try them is an enjoyable and exhilarating experience. The fact that anyone can, even briefly, experience such boats for between £5 and £18 (£12 for kids) is alluring in the extreme.

In the near future, Cardiff Sea Safari will be opening an RYA training school, providing specialised advanced training specifically aimed at the operators of fast commercial boats. What they will commission as a training craft is currently open to conjecture but it's pretty short odds that both Ribcraft and Suzuki will be involved. We will keep you updated on developments.

In the meantime, I offer my sincere thanks to Emilio and Ryan of Cardiff Sea Safari for their time, their hospitality, and for use of their craft. I thank Ribcraft for the rare and thoroughly appreciated experience of painless fast ribbing and I thank my old friend Charlie for personally setting up the big Suzukis to run as sweetly as Emilio's Bentley.

Special thanks are also due to Philip Stevenson and Laura who very kindly provided their comfy Sealine 534 as a camera boat when what they really wanted to do was chill out (or pass out) after a big party the night before. Great teamwork, great city, great boats ... ■



### SPECS

Length overall	9.0 m
Beam	3.0 m
Draft	0.5m
Tube diameter	550 mm
Compartments	seven
Weight [dry hull]	2500kg
Fuel	400 litres
Deadrise	24 degrees
Max power	600hp
Engines	twin Suzuki DF300s

### PRICES

Basic hull and tubes	£21,844
12 seater Safari spec	from £47,409
Boat as tested	£80,500
Trailer	£5,744

### PERFORMANCE

RPM	Speed (knots)
2400	13.0 (lowest speed plane)
3000	24.3
4000	34.8 (cruise)
5000	41.7
6000	52.2 (top end)

### ACCELERATION

0 - 13.0 knots (to plane)	4.6
	seconds
0 - 24.3	6.8
0 - 34.8 (to cruise)	8.2
0 - 41.7	11.5
0 - 52.2 (to max)	16.3
34.8 - 52.2 (cruise to max)	9.9

### WHO TO TALK TO ...

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