



Family values. The Wellcraft 2400SC Eclipse (left) has striking styling, with curves in all the right places, although our test boat was underpowered as a sportsboat. Its sportscruiser sister the 26SE Excel (below) is more conventional for its genre, and offers excellent performance given its extra weight.

WELLCRAFT

2400SC ECLIPSE & 26SE EXCEL

These sisters are no twins. One is a sportsboat, the other a sportscruiser. And their relative strengths are not quite as you might expect.

"Compare and contrast..." Remember those history exam questions asking you to relate two seemingly unconnected events or achievements? The mind would go blank and the palms start to sweat as you looked nervously around at your contemporaries, who looked quite unperplexed and were already writing feverishly.

It all came back to us as we were invited to do a joint test of Wellcraft's 24 Eclipse cuddy and 26 Excel sportscruiser. These American craft have different hulls and different concepts, and even the engines are different chips off the same Volvo Penta block, so how was a comparison to be made?

Step on board both craft, though, and the similarities begin to strike home.

Design

The styling of the 2400SC really catches the eye. It does not have the compactness of a small sportsboat, but the added length gives a superb balance to the design.

In Ferrari-speak this is Wellcraft's 456, as opposed to the very sporting 355. It has bulges in the right places, and crucial to the whole design are the two flared mouldings that rise and run in the gunwale from amidships to just short of the transom. The high cockpit sides, which integrate the screen, augment this to create one of the most

striking sportsboats for some time.

The 26SE, in contrast, holds to contemporary sportscruiser styling, with a deep freeboard, essential to allow the cabin headroom. This prevents any possibility of sleek lines, but the shallow raked screen, radar arch and bow pulpit help to put the 'sports' into sportscruiser.

The deadrise of the 24-footer is 21°, while that of the 27-footer is 20°.

2400SC Eclipse

It is for the layout of both craft that their designers deserve the most praise, and certainly the cuddy cabin is one of the big bonuses of the Eclipse. In terms of features it is typical of the genre, but in terms of using the available space it is more akin to a sportscruiser.

This impression of space is maximised by excellent use of natural daylight. There is a translucent white deck hatch and two portholes, but these merely supplement the main source of light, the large cockpit door. This slides over a curved and tinted glass window, so the cabin can be well lit whether the door is open or closed. Sensible colour schemes for the interior decor and furnishings enhance the roomy feel.

The aftermost section of the cuddy is occupied by a dining area, made up of double seats each side of

a centre-mounted table, which we thought was set a bit high. The starboard and central elements of this dinette, along with an extension of the mattress area forward into the bow, convert into a double berth.

The port seat-back moulding curves around to house an optional storage cabinet, which can be upgraded to have a television fitted. This feature breaks up the cuddy, and gives it a big-boat feel.

In daytime, cuddies tend to be used as 'throw it in' areas, so come sunset you will have to transfer any gear to the cockpit stowage. There are no lockers under the seats or berth, because of the boat's foam-filled method of construction.

The 2400SC also has a spacious cockpit, and a very well protected one too.

The standard layout has back-to-back fold-flat seating, but our test boat came with the optional galley unit that fits to starboard behind the adjustable helm seat; this means one seat is lost, but the cockpit will still accommodate six or seven people very comfortably.

The galley features a stove and a sink in the top, and a big removable ice-chest in the base; the sink is plumbed into the pressurised water system that also supplies the transom shower. A door hinges up so that you can extend the work surface. Although this is by no means a full galley, it is very convenient for serving drinks and a bite to eat when the cabin table is put up just forward of the rear bench seat.

Erect the full hood, and the whole area makes a very pleasant saloon for an overnight stay on board.

The helm offers the standard array of gauges and instrumentation but nevertheless looks a bit sparse, with the lit rotary switches mounted on a panel to the side of the wide driver's seat. It is as though the dash pod (the same as that on the 26SE) has been designed for a twin-engine installation, but this is not an option!

The steering wheel tilts, the seat adjusts and there is a footrest, so it is possible to get comfortable, although lateral support is limited.

The cabin door has a non-slip top and a

grabhandle, helping you step through the centre section of the screen to get onto the deck. However, the application of the non-slip looked like a 'last thing on a Friday afternoon' job, and perhaps it would have been better to integrate such a finish into the moulding.

We have few other criticisms of the fit-out, and there is excellent stowage around the cockpit, including with a big, deep side locker to port and a similar arrangement to starboard, split into two levels with more limited access if you opt for the galley.

For access to the bathing platform there is a recess in the transom and the aft seat cushion can be removed to port to reveal a step/locker.

From the platform you can get at the transom storage box, which is large enough to swallow plenty of watersports equipment. The shower is mounted to starboard, and other fittings here are a retractable boarding ladder, a grabhandle and ski tow-ring.

26SE Excel

The Excel line-up is Wellcraft's budget range, but this is not readily apparent as you get good specification for your money.

Like its smaller sister, the 26SE has excellent accommodation, including what is claimed to be the biggest cabin of any boat in its class. This includes a forward berth, a dinette for four people, a mid-cabin berth, a decent-sized toilet compartment and a galley.

Extra space has been gained by positioning the forward seat of the dinette in the aft section of the forward berth; you hinge it up to complete the sleeping space. Although this arrangement is potentially excellent utilisation of the available space, it needs some further design work, as the base it leaves in berth form is uneven.

There is standing room in the central area, so you can work comfortably at the well equipped galley with its microwave, stove, fridge,





Wellcraft 2400SC Eclipse

Loa
24ft 4in (7.42m).
Beam
8ft 6in (2.59m).
Air draught
1ft 9in (0.54m).
Displacement
1905kg.
Fuel capacity
66gal (302.8lt).
Water capacity
5.8gal (26.5lt).
Engine
215hp Volvo Penta 5.7GL.
Price
£25,424 ex VAT
without engines.



The Eclipse features a well protected cockpit with an optional galley aft of the helm seat (above left), a cuddy cabin which feels bigger than it is (far left), an engine hatch lifting on gas struts (left), and a stainless steel support for a bimini hood (below).

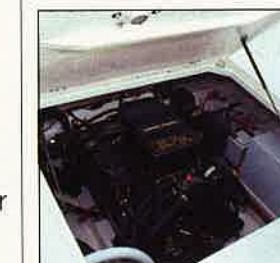


Wellcraft 26SE Excel

Loa
27ft 5in (8.36m).
Beam
8ft 6in (2.59m).
Air draught
1ft 7in (0.49m).
Displacement
2268kg.
Fuel capacity
62gal (281.5lt).
Water capacity
18.3gal (83.3lt).
Engine
215hp Volvo Penta 5.7GL
with DuoProp.
Price
£32,337 ex VAT
without engines.



The Excel benefits from expansive interior accommodation, including a double berth forward of a dinette and galley (top), a compact helm with a swivelling bucket seat (above) and a large area of cockpit sole lifting on struts for easy access to the engine (below).



stainless steel sink and plenty of stowage.

You step up into the WC, which is a complete moulding. This too is well equipped, with a Sealand Vacuflush unit, a full-length mirror, a sink and stowage, although you have to sit down to shower.

The well-appointed mid-cabin offers a queen-sized berth and yet more stowage. Natural daylight enters through the window onto the cockpit, so there is no claustrophobic feel.

The cockpit is a pretty expansive affair, too, in keeping with that biggest-in-class tag.

At the helm everything is compact, with a good throttle position and a comfortable and supportive swivelling bucket seat. The rest of the forward part is given over to a seating arrangement to port, comprising a sociable reclining L-shaped section

which is well protected when on the move, and a rear-facing bench seat which will fold to form a big sunbed or can be left up to provide a mounting for the cockpit table at the stern.

A further seat has storage provision underneath, but the general layout of the seating and the space demands of the cabin below mean there is less stowage than you might expect, albeit enough for day to day items.

The whole of the aft section of the cockpit raises on twin gas-struts for access to the enginebay.

A fairly deep bathing platform facilitates boarding when you are berthed stern-to, and the usual trappings here include a swing-down boarding ladder and a shower. As usual with sportscruisers of this size, there are no side decks, so you get to the bow

through the folding centre section of the screen.

The 26 is imported 'fully loaded', so the radar arch is included, as are shorepower and trim tabs.

Engines & performance

If the 2400SC eclipses its rivals and the 26SE excels in areas where other craft of their genre are sometimes found wanting, they switch roles when it comes to performance.

Unfortunately, the exceptional styling of the 2400SC was not backed up on our test boat by the breathtaking performance it suggested, mainly due to it being underpowered. It was fitted with a 215hp Volvo Penta 5.7GL engine, whereas the recommended maximum for the hull is 300hp; better treatment would be a 270 with DuoProp, which should give the boat some extra sparkle.

Even so, with the 5.7 we recorded a top speed of 35 knots, and saw 15 knots registered from standstill in 3.4sec, with 25 knots being reached another 4.6sec after that.

The addition of a DuoProp would also be a boon to the Eclipse's handling. Without it, on tighter turns with the throttle hard open, the propeller ventilates. You need rather more judicious application of the throttle to maintain smooth progress, and this rather spoils the fun.

Straight-line tracking is good, though, and there is no evidence of any slip-out in tight corners or S-turns.

The 26SE we tested came with the same engine, but this time with the DuoProp, and this endowed the sportscruiser with cuddy-type handling, and the get-up-and-go to match its smaller sister.

We reached 15 knots from standstill in 3.2sec, and 25 knots in another 4.2sec, before going on to record a top speed of 33 knots, pulling 4300rpm. The Excel is equally assured when less hurried, showing 22 knots at 3000rpm and 31 knots for fast cruising at 4000rpm.

Handling is very much a match for performance, the hull biting well through tight turns with only a slight hint of prop-ventilation. A series of S-turns gives a slightly dulled response at the wheel, but that is the only time you remember that the 26SE is not a sportsboat but a heavier sportscruiser.

At 3000rpm, our noise reading in the cockpit was 88dB(A), and at 4000rpm it was 92dB(A).

Conclusions

The builders have ensured, through some clever design work, that features you would normally only associate with one of these boats are equally evident in the other.

Wellcraft claim that the 26SE Excel offers more space than any other sportscruiser of its size, and this would seem to be so, but the attention given to the below-decks accommodation is not at the expense of cockpit space.

On the 2400SC Eclipse, the interior accommodation surely belongs to a craft at least 2ft longer, with generous seating and a good-sized berth, and only the lack of a more formal galley, more private toilet arrangements and extra standing room keep it from being a sportscruiser.

In styling, the Eclipse very much looks the part, with a fresh design approach. The Excel's looks are more familiar, although still with some nice lines.

On performance, however, the latter impresses more, which you would not expect. If you fancy the 2400SC, then specify an EFI engine and DuoProp.

With this proviso, the 2400SC would be our choice, given mainly weekend use, because it is a very complete craft. However the 26SE will rate higher for entertaining, thanks to that huge cockpit, or for sleeping aboard, due to its more formal accommodation, without compromising performance or handling.



Above: the bigger of the two boats has a pukka toilet compartment, fully moulded. Below: a deep bathing platform makes the 26 easy to board from the stern, and its standard specification in the UK includes a GRP radar arch.

Suppliers

Thames Boat Centre,
Racecourse Yacht Basin,
Maidenhead Road, Windsor,
Berkshire SL4 5HT.
Tel: 01753 865611.

Builders

Wellcraft Marine
Corporation, 1651 Whitfield
Avenue, Sarasota, Florida
34243, USA.

