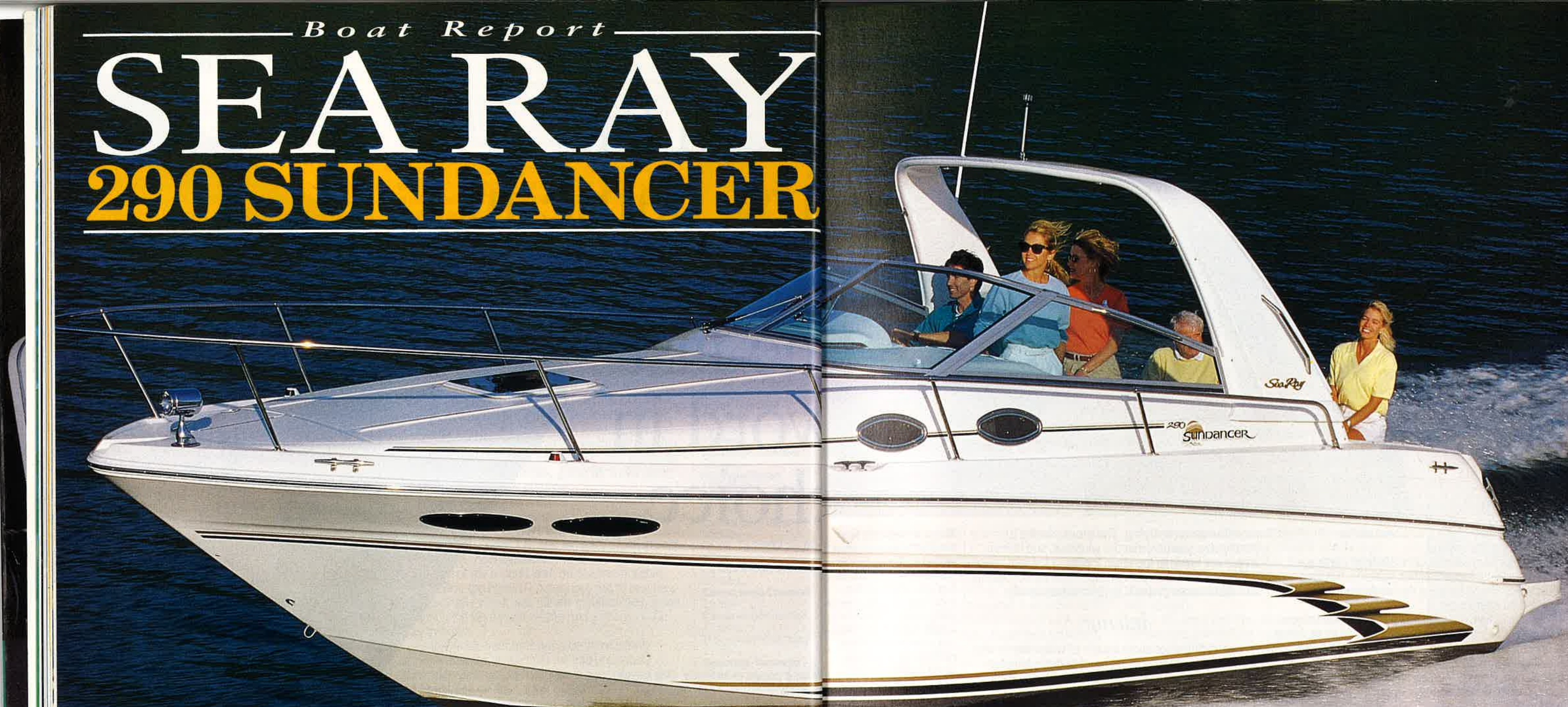


SEA RAY

290 SUNDANCER



With this sportscruiser's updated styling come some thoughtful design features, and the option of high-tech Mercruiser diesel engines. This was the installation we tested in the Solent.

Such is the development prowess within what is arguably the world's largest boatbuilding company that most Sea Ray model lines are updated and relaunched every couple of years. For 1998 it is all-change in the Sundancer sportscruiser range, with restyled 270, 290 and 310 models.

We sought the mid-sized model for our test, not least because it was equipped with Mercruiser's shot at the small, twin-diesel package, by way of a pair of 150hp D-Tronic outdrives.

Design

Sea Ray have retained a policy of keeping the boat's bathing platform clear of the hull rather than incorporating it into the transom moulding. Thus, whilst the 290's model designation relates to its hull length, a platform extension adds a further couple of feet to bring its overall length up to almost 32ft.



The topsides are pretty high, to give the basis for the typically American-scale interior headroom, but are broken up with some attractive rakish knuckles and gunwale strips to reduce the impression of bulk.

The hull has a medium-vee shape of 21° deadrise, a wide chine-flat and three sets of sprayrails.

Exterior

Running just about full-width, the bathing platform is equipped with a fold-in swim ladder, and has inspection plates let into it so that the props can be got at when the drives are raised.

A large boot-type hatch incorporated within the transom moulding offers some general stowage as well as housing the shoreside electrical hook-up. In the case of our test boat, it also revealed a gas locker, as the galley hob was gas rather than electric, to suit the preference of most UK buyers.

With this arrangement, of course, greater use will



have to be made of the areas beneath the seat-bases in the cockpit.

The after section of cockpit seating is arranged in a face-to-face format, either side of a moulded table which drops to make the whole area into a good-sized sunlounger.

Forward, the helm seat has a lifting squab so you can drive while leaning against the raised base, but it is only three-cheek-sized, so with the squab down the skipper's mate will have to perch rather than sit beside him. If this becomes uncomfortable there is a more inviting settee/lounger opposite, with a raked backrest.

The wheel and throttles are well placed for driving while standing or sitting, and the instrumentation is attractively retrospective in style. There is room lower down for small items of electronics, such as a VHF and log/depth unit, but space on the console itself is limited so larger gear might require bracket-mounting on the moulding towards the screen.

We were disappointed to find that the wipers were not self-parking, but the helm-operated Seafire extinguishing system is a plus-point, incorporating an engine compartment sensor to forewarn you that something is amiss.

Leg-ups to the side decks are offered by a neat step that folds down from the starboard coaming and one which is part of the moulding to port, adjacent to the small wet-bar. Handrails on the radar arch help.

The decks themselves are just adequate at 6in (15cm) wide, but the toerail is only slight, which is a design nonsense. Mind you, grabrails are helpfully fitted to the outside of the screen, which is especially handy if the canopy is in situ and you cannot use the screen itself to steady yourself.

The bow roller is simply set on the stem, rather than enclosed in a dolphin-nose extension, and this helps to make the redesigned Sundancers much

more European in styling. The ground tackle is handled by a vertical electric windlass, and there is an access hatch to the chain locker.

Other deck hardware comprises forward, midship and stern cleats of the 10in (25cm) bar variety.

Interior

A large sliding door and a couple of wide steps make access below easy, with no need to duck, although strangely the grabrail provided is too tight to the door surround to get your hand around.

The main cabin has two possible layouts, with either a vee-berth/dinette arrangement or, as on our test boat, a permanent angled 6ft 3in x 4ft 0in (1.91m x 1.22m) double in the bow.

This forward mattress area can be curtained-off for a measure of privacy, and has a single clothes locker. A portion of the base also hinges up to reveal a moulded locker space, which in turn has a false bottom giving onto the bilge.

The inboard end of the berth finishes in a short run of settee which obliquely faces the main dinette to starboard, with its kidney-bean shaped table. The latter has a couple of useful-sized cave lockers built into its base, but it would have been nice to see similar stowage incorporated into the smaller settee too, for clothes.

The same criticism cannot be levelled at the galley, which benefits from a good array of drawers and cupboards of various sizes. Set into the marble-effect moulded worktop is a two-burner gas hob and sink, and there is a microwave built-in above and a sizeable fridge with a freezer compartment.

Thoughtful touches include a handrail running around the edge of the work surface, a fiddle of sorts to stop things sliding too far in the hob area, and a small extractor fan to deal with cooking smells without the need to open the side port.

Above: the layout of our test boat had a permanent angled double berth in the bow, ahead of the dinette. Top right: although the helm console is attractive, retroactive in style, there is little space for mounting extra electronics. Above right: plenty of stowage space is offered in the galley, with its gas hob, microwave and fridge. Below: the WC is neatly moulded, but the sink is rather small. Below right: the 150hp Mercruiser D-Tronics are a tight installation under the aft portion of the cockpit.



A similar device is in the standard specification for the good-sized toilet compartment to starboard, which features a moulded shower tray but a rather poky sink, no larger than a mixing bowl in fact. The toilet is an electric Vacuflush unit, nicely incorporated so that the mechanics and pipework are hidden within the moulding, and a 23gal (106lt) holding tank is fitted as standard. A steadying handrail is provided, and there is a moderate amount of storage.

The midships cabin has a reasonable dressing area with standing headroom, and there is good sitting headroom over the 6ft 5in x 3ft 6in (1.95m x 1.07m) berth, whilst stowage is limited to a shallow hanging locker and a narrow shelf unit. An attractive curving window lets onto the cockpit.

Engines

Our test boat had the priciest engine option, a pair of Mercruiser's D-Tronic electronic controlled D2.8L diesels producing 150hp apiece. Twin petrol options start at some £10,000 less, with a pair of 190hp V6s, whilst a single 270hp D-Tronic V8 diesel with a twin-prop Bravo III leg also represents a fair saving. Any of these options should give the 290 Sundancer 30 knots, and your choice will depend on how you plan to use the boat.

A large but not full-width hatch towards the rear of the cockpit lifts on a gas strut to give access to the engine compartment. At first glance in here, it appears pretty tight for maintenance work, but as you work round the various service points you find most of them, even the legs, are just about accessible. However the close proximity of the engines to the forward bulkhead does not help, nor does the fact that the belts and pumps are hidden by the overhang of the header tanks.

Panels outboard give access to items such as the macerator pump and battery boxes, as well as to

parts of the fuel and water tanks, although the fact that the panels are screwed down makes things difficult. With the engines' raw-water strainers located out here also, it all seems unnecessarily awkward.

The absence of fuel shut-offs needs to be addressed, although in most basic respects this is not a bad installation.

Insulation to the hatch and bulkhead is of the foil-faced variety. Bilge-pumping arrangements run to two small submersible units shoehorned between the bearers, plus a manual one sited in the cockpit.

Performance & handling

The short wind-against-tide chop in Southampton Water brought a fairly sharp edge to the Sea Ray's ride, but once we were out in the larger stuff of the Solent the hull settled in most comfortably.

We cruised at 3300rpm, for just over 26 knots, and recorded a top speed of 30.5 knots when we pushed to 3700rpm. Acceleration onto the plane is responsive, from rest to 20 knots in just over 10sec.

Pulling back to 3000rpm gave just under 23 knots, and 2800rpm gave 20.5 knots, for economical passagemaking. These figures indicate fuel consumption of around 10gph, which equates to 2mpg.

None of this is too noisy, and we measured just 82dB(A) at 3300rpm in the cockpit. That said, the Mercruisers do have a fairly harsh note.

The torque of the diesels keeps the power coming in a steady pattern, and the hull and engines sit happily wherever you set the throttles. The ride is nice and dry, when running straight and through turns, and the boat quickly picks up once through a turn with the bow hardly dropping, which almost certainly accounts for the lack of spray finding its way aboard.

For the most part the drives can be left unattended at level trim, but you can alter the angle of attack without the props becoming unstuck. In fact the only time we found it necessary to tuck them right in was through the harder turns at more than 3300rpm.

The steering is light, and with its comfortable driving position the 290 is easy to helm.

Conclusions

The layout and fit-out of the 290 Sundancer is fairly standard for an American sportscruiser, and getting it out on the water revealed it to be a pleasing drive.

It moves along nicely enough with the diesel package we tested, certainly, but the premium of some £10,000 might make a few potential buyers shy away from this installation. A pair of Mercruiser V6 petrols is going to do much the same job, and possibly more smoothly. □



Above: a neat step which folds down from the starboard coaming offers a handy leg-up to the side deck. Below: to port, the function is performed by a fixed part of the moulding beside the wet-bar.



Sea Ray 290 Sundancer

Loa 31ft 8in (9.65m).
Hull length 29ft 8in (9.04m).
Beam 10ft 2in (3.10m).
Draught 2ft 1in (0.64m) with drives up.
Displacement 4.8 tons.
Fuel capacity 108gal (490lt).
Water capacity 23gal (106lt).
Engines twin 150hp Mercruiser D2.8L D-Tronic diesels.
Price from £68,081 ex VAT with a single 300hp petrol engine; £80,614 as tested.
Suppliers Marina Marbella (UK) Ltd, Firefly Road, Hamble Point Marina, Hamble, Southampton, Hampshire SO31 4JD. Tel: 01703 453005.
Builders Sea Ray Boats Inc, 2600 Sea Ray Boulevard, Knoxville, Tennessee 37914, USA. Tel: (1) 423 522 4181.