

Boat Report

# SEA RAY 290DA

*Can the Americans build a boat for Europe? A test on a frigid February day sought to find the answer.*



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Even if their production has dropped from approaching 30,000 boats a year to 'only' around 12,000 since the onset of the recession, Sea Ray are one of the most prolific boatbuilders in the world. And if you are not impressed by quantity, look at the breadth of the American company's range: no fewer than 60 models from 13ft to 65ft, covering everything from ski-boats to flybridge motoryachts.

In the middle of this line-up is a new 30ft sports cruiser, the 290DA.

### Design

The 290 designation has been revived from a previous model, but we are told it is the only thing the two craft have in common. The second incarnation has a beamier hull and a perceptibly more European layout; gone, for instance, is the rather limiting lone transom bench.

Underwater sections are a medium-to-deep vee, the deadrise running through from midships to transom to the tune of 20.5°. The vee forward of this pinches in quickly to give a clean, slicing entry, but with plenty of flare filling out the bows above the chine.

### Exterior

The integrated bow extension and the bathing platform bring the 290's overall length up to just over 32ft (9.78m).

The bow extension houses a bow roller as standard. A Lofrans electric windlass, on the

*The 290's interior offers plenty of sleeping space, with curtained-off areas in the bows (above) and under the helm position aft of the convertible midships settee (above left). The galley and toilet compartment have practical easy-clean moulded surfaces, and power comes from a choice of Mercruiser outdrive installations, in this case (top right) twin V6 petrol engines.*

foredeck flat adjacent to the good sized offset locker, was one of the many optional extras fitted to our test boat.

Mooring hardware comprises 10in (25cm) cleats, in pairs forward, midships and at the quarters, and also on both topsides sandwiching the bathing platform. The latter also has a handrail at waist height, to help you board when moored stern-to.

An adequate non-slip finish has been incorporated into the low rise of coachroof, and into the 6in (15cm) wide side decks. These are bordered by a toerail and a single-bar guardrail which runs out before the break of the cockpit, at which point a grabrail on the wraparound screen lends a hand back inside; hopping in and out of the cockpit is easiest from starboard, as a small removable section of seat cushion makes for an inboard step without dirtying the upholstery.

The cockpit itself is of adequate proportions, with a settee and a helm station bench seat on one level.

The helm will seat three people if you are chummy and none too beamy, although the sales brochure truthfully calls it a double. The skipper's portion is adjustable fore and aft, and the other section hinges to reveal a storage locker beneath.

A conventional helm layout, with engine instruments in an angled fascia ahead of a perspex chart area, has throttles, tab controls and ready-use switches all falling easily to hand. For the skipper there is a handy cave locker, with a moulded drinks holder, tucked under the coaming. The helm on the boat we tested had the optional tilt mechanism, which is a minor plus when it is preferable to stand while manoeuvring in confined waters. Another

option is the Standard VHF set fitted adjacent to the wheel; further electronics can be located in the clear portion of console inboard.

The 'European look' U-settee arrangement forms a sunbed when you drop the moulded dinette table, with a walk-through to port allowing access to the bathing platform.

Incorporated within the port coaming are a number of lockers providing neat dedicated stowages for such items as the mains shorepower cable, a cockpit shower and gas bottles, as well as the battery switches and larger-capacity breakers. But apart from the helm seat locker, general stowage is confined to an area under the foremost part of the settee, and the sculpted moulding of the seat-base has, in avoiding a boxy appearance, reduced its capacity.

The canopy and side canvas package, tailored to allow full use of the cockpit in normal UK boating conditions, are both supplementary to the standard inventory.

### Interior

A good-sized sliding door/hatch and a curving set of steps lead down to the mainly open-plan interior.

There are two curtained-off sleeping areas, one at the bows and the other under the helm position. Both open almost fully into the main central cabin, to give plenty of useful sitting, lounging and living space, without being solely dedicated to sleeping. However, the midships area has a simple infill to make the settee into a 6ft 3in x 4ft 0in





(1.91m x 1.22m) berth, while the forward, offset berth, measuring 6ft 0in x 4ft 0in (1.83m x 1.22m), has a sliding portion which leaves a modicum of standing room, to supplement a small area of seating, once it is pushed in.

Clothes storage in the forward section is good, with a couple of hanging lockers, a nest of drawers, a cupboard and runs of shallow curtained-off cave lockers outboard. For bulk or seldom-used items, there is also a large void beneath the bunk-base, easy to get at because the mattress comes in two manageable parts. Further aft there is less stowage space, but an effort has been made to take at least weekend gear, in handy lockers outboard and painted-out voids beneath the seat-bases.

The main cabin has a convertible four-seater dinette to starboard, with a reasonable-sized and well appointed galley opposite.

On our test boat, a two-burner gas hob was fitted in preference to the usual alcohol/electric unit. There is also a microwave and a large fridge, and plenty of storage; the deep drawers beneath the dinette base could also be brought into play if you were really stocking-up.

Like the galley's worksurface, the whole of the adjacent toilet compartment is an easy-clean moulded affair. It is equipped with a shower as standard, with an electric pump-out toilet and forced ventilation as options. The area is of adequate proportions, and has just the necessary dry storage.

Without much bulk to the topsides and coachroof, headroom below might be expected to be a problem. Not so. There is no less than 6ft 4in (1.93m) over most of the central cabin area, reducing to stooping height right forward, and plenty of headroom over all the nooks and crannies of seating.

On the standard fit-out, the only natural light comes from a couple of medium-sized opening side ports and a large forward hatch. Our test boat benefited from the addition of a couple of smaller deck hatches, above the dinette and galley.

## Engines

With Sea Ray being part of the massive Brunswick Corporation, it is no surprise that Mercruiser outdrives are the only options. Even so, just about every power preference is covered, whether in diesel or petrol form, in single or twin installations.

On the single-diesel front you can choose from 220hp or a 270hp V8, while the only twin-diesel option consists of five-cylinder 150hp units. For twin petrol installations, Mercruiser's Alpha One series 4.3lt block is offered in either 175hp or 205hp ratings, and our test boat had the latter V6s.

To lift the engine hatches, it is necessary to dismantle the U-settee and lift the cockpit sole in three loose-fitting pieces. This is not tricky, but nevertheless is an inconvenience which will encourage some owners to put off engine checks, and makes a quick reassuring glance while at sea all but impossible. A hinged, gas-strut supported hatch would obviously make things easier; better still would be a design which allowed part of the seating and sole to be lifted as one.

Having got the hatches up, the service points are accessible, even if the transom moulding still encroaches over the after part of the engines and drive assembly. Standing room to the front of the compartment makes inspection relatively easy, with wiring, cables and pipes kept clear of heavy

footfalls. The batteries and auxiliaries, such as the power-trim pump, are also accessible from this point.

Just in front of the forward bulkhead is the fuel tank, which looked devoid of any shut-off in its pipework to the engine, either in the compartment itself or, as would be preferable, remotely. One safety aspect we approved of, however, was the doubling-up of engineroom bilge pumps, a feature we have noted on other Sea Rays of late. By fitting two moderate-sized Rule units instead of a single large one, the chance of all your pumping capacity becoming clogged or otherwise disabled is considerably reduced.

The lifting hatches have a measure of noise insulation, but the rest of the compartment is bare.

## Performance and handling

Helming the 290DA is typical point-and-press Sea Ray. That is not to say it is a mundane drive or an unexciting ride. It is just that this is an easily controllable package which gets off the mark well, from 0 to 30 knots in 12sec, longs to gallop, turns predictably, does not get stuck in ruts, and gives a smooth, clean passage whatever the heading.

Given its head, churning out a full 4800rpm, the boat notched up 38 knots on our radar gun. The sea state was nothing more than slight, but this kind of speed does not usually require much before your dentures start working loose; here, however, the medium-to-deep-vee hull found an easy angle of attack to balance cutting with skimming, and rarely did it feel so fast.

Dropping back to 4000rpm gave us a fast cruising speed of 32 knots, 3500rpm an easy 26.5 knots, and bringing the legs in and dropping to 3200rpm a steady 22.5 knots.

Sitting on the settee over the engine hatch brought decibel levels into the mid-80s at high engine speeds, which starts to become intrusive, but at 3500rpm or below, 82dB(A) is just about acceptable. Several feet further forward, noise levels were appreciably less, 75dB(A) at 3500rpm for instance, allowing conversation at the helm.

If you were thinking of using the full 410hp in earnest, fuel consumption of 27-28gph (123-127lph) might moderate your views. Knocking the top 500rpm off still gives 30-plus knots, of course, but for something nearer 18gph (82lph), and if you can bear to ease the throttles back to 3500rpm you can expect 13gph (59lph).

## Conclusions

Unlike many Mediterranean-style craft, the 290DA cuts a useful compromise between cockpit and accommodation. As well as a highly usable cockpit, it also offers good facilities for weekend and lengthier cruises for up to four people.

Finish and engineering are generally sound, although one or two areas (such as the absence of any fuelcocks) should really be addressed. Steady handling seems to be a characteristic inherent in all Sea Ray hulls.

To bring a Sea Ray up to what we would consider a complete specification for European cruising, you currently need to opt for a large number of extras. But the manner in which the UK distributors Ancasta Powerboats present their own 'standard' versions is likely to change soon, with all boats benefiting from a higher level of equipment as a base package. □

## Sea Ray 290DA

**Loa** 32ft 1in (9.78m).  
**Hull length** 29ft 4in (8.94m).  
**Beam** 9ft 8in (2.95m).  
**Draught** 3ft 9in (1.14m) w/ drives down.  
**Displacement** 3.5 tons.  
**Fuel** 108gal (490lt).  
**Water** 20gal (90lt).  
**Engines** twin 4.3LX V6 205hp Mercruiser petrols.  
**Price** from £40,995 ex VAT with a single 330hp Mercruiser Bravo II; £44,800 for the standard boat with twin 4.3LXs; £55,741 as tested, with mains electric package, VHF, canopy, electric windlass and gas hob.  
**Builders** Sea Ray Boats Inc, 2600 Sea Ray Boulevard, Knoxville, Tennessee 37909 USA.  
**UK distributors** Ancasta Powerboats Ltd, Port Hamble, Hamble, Southampton, Hampshire SO3 5QD.  
 Tel: 0703 453005.