



BOAT REPORT

WILDERNESS BEAVER CUB

Full headroom, two berths, galley, toilet and shower in a trailable package. Tardis-like dream or reality?

IT WOULD not be unreasonable to describe the latest boat from Wilderness as 'the ultimate trailable inland cruiser'. Offering all the facilities and comforts of a full-size canal and river craft, it measures just 17ft 6in (5.4m) overall, and can be towed easily behind a large family car.

Wilderness have been building pocket cruisers for some 24 years now, and in that time have sold more than 350 craft, building up a large following of owners who appreciate the versatility of these well-finished boats.

Over the years, the sizes of their models have gradually crept up, as has the amount of equipment installed. Whilst the original concept of a trailable cruiser has remained, the 23-footers really require a four-wheel-drive vehicle such as a Range Rover to handle them comfortably on the road and the slipway, so this year the company

decided to return to their roots.

They have produced a boat with all the features of its bigger brothers, but one which does not require a specialist towing vehicle.

The key feature of the 17ft 6in Beaver Cub is that its all-up weight, including the trailer, is less than 3100lb (1400kg), making it towable by larger family saloons or estates. Yet it still offers full standing headroom, an enclosed toilet/shower compartment, a full size galley, hot and cold water, central heating and two berths.

We took the first boat off the line for a trial from Pyrford Marina on the River Wey in Surrey, at the height of October's floods when the river was running fast. To put all the manufacturers' claims to the test, we towed and launched the Beaver Cub, as well as trying out as many of its features as possible on the water.

Above left: Wilderness on the Wey. Below: one reason the Beaver Cub may gnaw away at your imagination is that it is towable behind a large family car. Above: the interior is welcoming and bright, with space for sink, hob, oven and fridge plus toilet and sitting/sleeping areas, all in 17ft 6in. Above right: the outboard slides along the transom to miss the winch-post.

Towing and launching

Our vehicle was one of our favourite tow-cars, a Mercedes 230 Estate, possibly the best designed two-wheel-drive model on the road for serious load-carrying.

Rear-wheel drive gives good traction on the slipway. Automatic transmission provides inch-perfect control for launching, recovering and manoeuvring, and comfort on the road. The 2.3-litre engine gives plenty of power yet returns reasonable fuel figures. A kerb weight of 1400kg, assisted by automatic self-levelling rear suspension, gives stability at speed and ensures that the tail does not start wagging the dog.

Finally, the load area will swallow up all the paraphernalia of serious cruising, allowing you to keep the towed weight to a minimum.

Their experience of producing of this type of craft has taught Wilderness many lessons about towing and launching, and their custom-built trailer embodies all these. The result is a set-up which they claim allows singlehanded launching and recovery. We had two people, but in practice the second was needed only to hold the boat's lines when it floated clear.

To reduce the overhang at the rear of the trailer when towing, Wilderness advise you to recover the boat stern-first, allowing the outboard to run up alongside the winch-post. This also reduces



the potential damage of a rear-end shunt, the GRP being cheaper to repair than the outboard.

For the engine to miss the winch-post, it has to be slid 5in (125mm) to one side on the transom, then resealed. Being lazy, and curious to see how it would affect the boat's handling, we left the engine here for our trials, and found it perfectly satisfactory. It did not noticeably affect the steering, and in fact we found having the tiller offset to port made it more comfortable to hold when standing on the cockpit side seat. In view of our comments, Wilderness are considering leaving it permanently in this position.

The trailer is a simple flat-bed form, with full-length box-sections with wooden capping locating the centre keel and bilge keels. Vertical guide-posts at the rear ensure the boat lines up centrally when being recovered, and these can be dropped when the boat is parked on the land, making it more stable should you use it as a mobile home.

Another good feature is the non-slip platform alongside the winch-post, which allows you to stand safely on the trailer while winching up or releasing the boat, rather than perching precariously on the box-section frame as you have to do on other trailers.

The slipway at Pyrford Marina has a good angle, with a concrete surface, and it was a simple matter to back the rig far enough down that the boat just floated clear. Its shallow draught ensures this happens well before the car gets its feet wet. Recovery should be just as simple, though shortage of time at the end of our test precluded our confirming this.

Design and performance

The 9.9hp four-stroke electric-start Yamaha purred into life at the first turn of the key. This engine is the ideal powerplant for the Beaver Cub, giving smooth, near-silent running and total control, down to the slowest speeds.

Nudged into gear, it ticked over without hesitation, allowing us to trickle out through a cluster of boats moored alongside the slipway, with just inches to spare on both sides. The extended tiller arrangement Wilderness have developed proved invaluable, allowing complete control ahead and astern, aided by a well located single-lever throttle mounted on the guardrail.

This guardrail is a substantial construction which extends right around the transom and forward 2ft (0.6m) each side, giving security and, with its wooden capping, a handy place to sit while driving. The steel rails, together with the full-length handrails on the roof are painted black, which to our mind gives a rather stark, gloomy effect compared with the bright green of the boat. Perhaps brown or green would blend in better.

The cockpit is practical and surprisingly spacious. Lockers to port and starboard take the battery and 5gal (25lt) portable fuel tank, with plenty of room left for ropes, fenders, mooring pins and a spare tank if required.

The forward port locker is taken up by the gas-fired Atwood boiler which provides central heating and hot water. Made in Italy, this is a new design to this market, but is neat, compact, and reasonably priced considering its dual function. Judging by its performance during our test, it will be making more appearances in this size of boat.

The cabin of the Beaver Cub utilises the same

GRP moulding as its longer brothers although its interior length is 2ft (0.6m) shorter, which means that the cabin sides and roof extend aft over the cockpit. We found this to be a plus feature, giving a cosy area at the front of the cockpit for non-steering crew to sit protected from wind and rain, while still keeping the helmsman company.

Access to the cabin is by way of a pair of double-hinged upper doors with a drop-down lower flap. The latter is an excellent security feature for keeping young children inside.

The interior is comfortably and tidily finished, with carpeted floor and foam-backed vinyl for bulkheads and overheads, combating condensation. Woodwork is neat and presentable, and generous windows make the space bright and welcoming, aided by a large opening sunroof immediately above the berth. Headroom is 6ft 1in (1.85m) throughout.

The galley to port has a four-burner gas hob, with a clever grill underneath. There would be room for an oven if you wanted to fit one. An enamel sink/drain is supplied with pressurised hot and cold water. The gas fridge is located opposite, in the upper part of a louvre-doored wardrobe, a clever arrangement which makes it much easier to get things out, and also facilitates the siting of the burner outlet vent.

Storage space under the sink is screened only by a curtain, but it would be an easy matter to add doors. There is further capacity under the cockpit, reached from the aft end of the saloon. To make complete use of this long, narrow space, three plastic storage boxes are provided, which you fill up and then slide in.

The toilet compartment opposite the galley to starboard contains a Porta Potti, which slides aft out of the way to allow the space to be used for showering. A pump on the end of a wandering hose sucks the water out of a sump, as the shallow draught of the boat precludes an underfloor drain.

Forward are two tables, one on each side, plus seats and a settee, which quickly convert into either two single berths or a spacious double. This sleeping area would benefit from a blind for extra privacy. Hinged double doors lead out onto the foredeck, and provide an excellent open-air aspect when the weather is good.

Larger Wildernesses have a tiny cockpit forward, but the length of the Beaver Cub means this is not possible. The space under the foredeck is given over to a twin gas-bottle locker.

Underway, the Cub handles easily, tracking an easy straight course and turning in its own length. The 9.9hp Yamaha provides more than enough power for river use, with a 7.5hp engine suggested for owners who will use the boat only on canals.

Conclusions

Our brief acquaintance with the Beaver Cub left us more than impressed. Its equipment and finish are excellent, and its ability to be towed behind the family car left us itching to hitch it up and take off for a fortnight to explore the waterways of France or the Italian lakes.

The boat is available in a variety of levels of finish, with prices starting at £5000. It may not look the sleekest of craft, but as a liveaboard river craft for two it is unequalled — and small children could easily be bedded down on the floor. □

Wilderness Beaver Cub

Loa 17ft 6in (5.40m).

Beam 6ft 10in (2.10m).

Towing weight 2900-3100 (1300-1400kg) including trailer.

Price from £5000 ex VAT for the basic boat for home fit-out; £14,500 ex VAT for the Super Deluxe version with all equipment as tested, including the engine; £2000 extra for the trailer.

Builders Wilderness Boats, Stokes Road, Corsham, Wiltshire SN13 9AA.