

Back Cove 26

More a gentleman's launch than a mini-cruiser, this appealingly retro offering from the US firm that brought you the 'Downeasters' boasts solid quality, but a beefy price tag. **REPORT BY MARK TURLEY**

You don't have to be a traditionalist to love lobster boats, but it helps. There is something about these original sea-kindly American classics that has spurned many lookalikes through the years – and the Back Coves are the latest in the long line. The company is a relatively new venture from the same organisation that builds the

handsome Sabrelines 'Downeasters' (see MBM, Feb p60 for details), and is now branching into smaller vessels.

The idea with the inboard-powered Back Cove 26 and 29 is to capture buyers aspiring to, or downsizing from, the Sabrelines, which start at 36ft (11m). They offer much the same style and solid quality, they're just smaller.

The 26, featured here, is primarily offered as an open-cockpit boat, although a hardtop of sorts is available, while the 29 is available with a more full-on wheelhouse.

DESIGN & BUILD

Clearly the boat's overall design sets out to be all rather retro with an unusual spoon-shaped

stem – the 29 is actually more conventional – and what used to be referred to as a 'cruiser-stern'. The deckline or sheer, joining these two bookends, pans out dead straight to give a crisp, unfussy profile that is topped off with a softly curved coachroof and what is, in fact, quite a bulky, protective screen.

Underwater, time has moved on, and the variable deadrise hull has been developed with a prop tunnel so as to keep the shaft as horizontal as possible and to ensure the engine can fit beneath the main cockpit rather than needing any intrusive engine box.

In fact the cockpit is on two levels anyway with a well deck right aft (which can be fitted with seating if required) and the main spacious helm area, which is raised.

Down below there is just one, open plan cabin area (apart from the toilet compartment, that is). The cabin features the usual convertible vee-shaped dinette

forward plus a well-appointed galley immediately to port of the companionway steps. The fitout here takes a step away from the distinctive retro feel of the exterior styling and is smart and uncluttered rather than exuding much cosy warmth. Indeed, the bulk of the interior is based on mouldings, including the deckhead. But despite the fact that there is plenty of wood – cherry and ash –

to break this up, it does not create the ambience of a gentleman's yacht that you might expect.

✓✓✓✓✓
Strong exterior styling but unsociable cockpit. Nice interior.

ACCOMMODATION

The hatchway down to the cabin is a good size and easy to negotiate. Headroom here is not quite full standing, but really that is not of concern, because the area towards the galley is

lofted due to the open hatch. In any case you are more likely to be sitting around the dinette where there is plenty of room.

The table here drops to form a comfortable-sized berth, but apart from some shelves worked into the seat backs, stowage is limited to lockers in the seat bases, which, for a boat of this quality, should have been lined out rather than simply given a slosh of gelcoat.

A similar situation arises in the galley and toilet compartment's lower cupboards, which back straight onto the hull sides. This is odd, given the calibre of the yard. Above waist height it is a different story, though. The outboard cave-lockers in both these areas are tidily lined and finished off, and we liked the fact that the area outboard of the dinette had been attractively finished in wood planking. Indeed, in the main the fitout is smartly finished and very well executed.

The galley is equipped with a single electric/





above Practical touches characterise this Back Cove, but you'll pay extra for an electric windlass.

alcohol burner, microwave and fridge, while the sink is a square, stainless affair set in a Corian work surface.

The toilet compartment is of a reasonable size and fitted with a shower and moulded basin. Fashioned into the GRP fabrication

Reasonable room and smartly finished except for a few areas.

outboard, below the opening port, is a handy fiddled shelf area to keep washbags safe.

below Certainly the galley, cabin and washroom are well appointed, but the moulding disappoints.



below Generally, we thought the fitout felt a little clinical, rather than the cosy hideaway we hoped for.



EXTERIOR

Boarding the 26 is easy as the cockpit coaming is wide enough to tread on and there is a broad moulded inner step just where you expect it. The cockpit hoop arrangement fitted to our test boat also provides plenty to hang onto. The cockpit itself is a lovely size, but clearly the Americans have a different take on what they need out of a boat like this. Indeed, most of our transatlantic cousins will probably enjoy some sports-fishing, and hence, for

Spacious cockpit and some practical touches but limited seating.

ENGINE OPTIONS & ACCESS

Our test boat had the larger of the two Yanmar four-cylinder inboard engine options, pushing out 240hp rather than the 200hp fitted as standard. The other alternative is a Volvo D4 rated to 260hp.

Access to the compartment could not be easier with the whole of the raised cockpit area (including seats) hinging up with the aid of a pair of gas struts. Once raised there is space aplenty to get right round the engine as well as all the auxiliaries like batteries and calorifier, with the water and holding tanks tucked in the wings.

The raw water strainer and primary fuel filter are easy to get at, but while the engine service points are mainly clear of obstructions, quite why the extinguisher has been fixed on the forward bulkhead is a mystery given the available space. Its placement hampers getting to the belts. Elsewhere, insulation has been applied to the bulkheads and hatch, but let's

Robust engineering; engine and accessories are easy to get at.

be honest: this is a big void in which to contain noise, as our sound meter readings confirmed.

them, the limited seating option of a transom bench will be of little concern. However, less fishy types might prefer a more sociable layout, allowing people to cluster around a table. Furthermore, if you want to make use of the bathing platform, it is a matter of hopping over the transom; there is no door.

As to going the other way, to the bow, to sort out mooring warps, the sidedecks are uncluttered and bordered by decent-sized toe-rails. Although the guardrails do not run back to the cockpit, the screen is fabricated with outside handrails, so no problems there. There are four sets of 8in (20cm) cleats on each side, making it easy to run springs hither and thither, but the ones handling the stern lines are set inboard. This means you have to thread the lines through fairleads, and this all becomes a bit awkward with the corner seats in situ.

Up at the bow, the chain locker is of a size that can swallow a couple of fenders, but no windlass is supplied as part of the standard package. A further cubby-hole is supplied by way of a cockpit lazaret. However, this also houses the fuel tank and gives access to the steering gear, so a fair portion of this space is already in use.

The raised helm area, which is protected by the sizeable screen, sports two comfortable armchairs set on plinths that neatly incorporate a drawer apiece. When tucked behind the screen and overhead canopy, it does not take too much sun for things to get pretty stuffy, so you'll be thankful for the large quarter lights, which help with the ventilation.



PERFORMANCE & HANDLING

The combination of 240hp on tap and channelling it down a shaft rather than an outdrive fits the boat's demeanour perfectly. It pushes along eagerly – up to a full throttle 28 knots – but doesn't make a big issue out of it. Open the throttle and it picks up quickly and

sits primly where you want it. Give the boat some hardover helm, and it takes you round in a tight but easy-banked turn. It's all very well behaved, and if you need to do some levelling because of a cross-wind then a stab or two on the tabs (which are fitted as standard) will sort you out. For general cruising speed, you

obviously need to back off from the engine's WOT of 3400rpm down to something like 3000rpm, and this will give you a shade under 22 knots. However, the hull is happy to push along at just about any speed without running with its nose up, and 2600rpm keeps up a tidy 17 knots and helps reduce the noise levels,

below Access to the engine is well thought-out.



below American taste informs the helm design.



below Uncluttered sidedecks impressed, but...



below Neat and unfussy it may be, but this layout is more suited to sports-fishing than entertaining.

below ...the bathing platform is tricky to get to.



which will otherwise begin to get on the intrusive side.

Once fully reined back in displacement mode, the hull tracks well without continual recourse to the wheel. However, for manoeuvring you are stuck with the age-old problem of a single-engined boat finding itself in tight corners. To this we have to hold up our hands and say hurrah for the bow-thruster; especially when it comes as part of the standard fitout.

Now all that remains is to bone up on which direction you're heading – and to this end there is plenty of space on the formidable angled dash to take a plotter and other electronics, as well as uninterrupted visibility over it. That said, a seat that is adjustable up and down as well as fore and aft might well be beneficial for sub-six footers as that sizeable, compass-topped fascia is pretty high, and you'll have to crane your neck to look over it no matter how tall you are.

The screen is serviced by three decent-sized wipers. The switches for these, together with the rest of the ready-use gear, is nicely on hand. The wheel (which is adjustable) and throttle are well placed.

✓✓✓✓✓
Runs tidily and pleasant to helm, although noise levels are quite high.

SPECIFICATION & VALUE

There are not too many like-for-like boats with which to make a direct comparison. This is clearly one good reason for importing Back Coves: there is a gap in the market. We have picked some ballpark rivals – which are all British built – but these tend to be more like mini-cruisers with attitude, whereas the Back Cove feels more like a gentleman's launch.

That said, the Back Cove still has very useful weekending fitout down below, and we were really pleased to find few hidden extras to get her up to cruising spec; notably the bow-thruster and trim tabs that are included in the package. The finish is generally tough and smart, but those unlined cupboards certainly niggle and, frankly, this boat is a little on the pricey side to have moulded headlinings.

✓✓✓✓✓
Good overall spec and build for the most part, but you pay for it.

Verdict

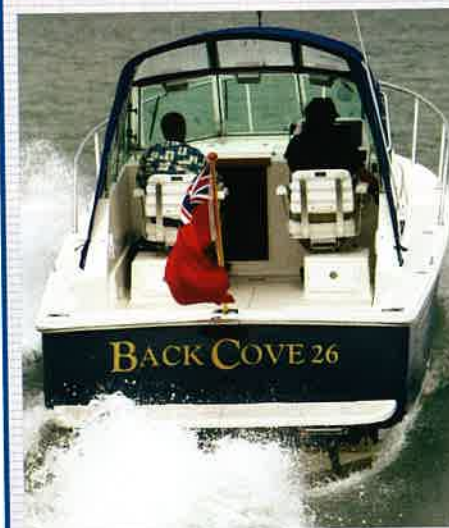
This is a smart looker and handles nicely but is undermined by an unsociable cockpit layout. Make sure you keep guests down to a couple rather than inviting a big crowd.

MBM RATING

7/10



Back Cove 26 technical data



specifications

BUILD	GRP
RCD	Category C
LENGTH OVERALL	27ft 10in (8.50m)
HULL LENGTH	26ft 6in (8.08m)
BEAM	9ft 4in (2.84m)
DRAUGHT	2ft 6in (0.76m)
DISPLACEMENT	3.9 tonnes
FUEL CAPACITY	83gal (377lt)
WATER CAPACITY	25gal (113lt)

key dimensions

WIDTH OF SIDE DECKS	8in (0.20m)
HEADROOM IN SALOON	5ft 7in
CABIN BERTH	6ft 3in x 6ft 0in

performance

engines	single Yanmar 4LHA-STP diesel						
configuration	4cyl, 3.45lt, 240hp at 3300rpm						
conditions	wind NE'ly Force 3/4, sea slight						
load	fuel 50%, water 25%, crew 2						
rpm	knots	gph	lph	mpg	range	noise	
1800	7.6	2.4	11	3.17	209	81	
2200	12.9	3.7	17	3.49	230	82	
2600	17.8	5.7	26	3.12	206	82	
3000	21.7	8.4	38	2.58	170	84	
3400	27.8	11.6	54	2.36	156	86	

Range figures above are in miles (based on standard fuel tanks) with 20% margin.
 Noise figures are in dB(A), recorded at the helm.

prices

STANDARD BOAT	inc VAT
with Yanmar 240hp	£98,192
BOW-THRUSTER	Standard
COCKPIT ARCH	£1309
COLOURED HULL	£1007
ELECTRIC WINDLASS	£1410
TRIM TABS	Standard
SHORE POWER	Standard
ELECTRONICS	POA
COMMISSIONING	Standard
BOAT AS TESTED	£101,918

Enquiries: Sea Ventures Ltd, The Yacht Haven, King's Saltern Road, Lymington, Hants SO41 3QD. Tel: 01590 672472.
www.backcoveyachts.com

the rivals



HARDY 26
from £86,300

Sports a pleasant semi-enclosed wheelhouse and protected cockpit, plus the fore cabin has a quarter berth to supplement the convertible dinette. Tel: 01692 406483. www.hardy-marine.co.uk



AQUILA 27
from £121,100

Solid in looks and build quality with the benefit of a full wheel shelter and launch-style cockpit. Limited headroom down below. Tel: 01202 826800. www.imperial-motoryachts.com



SEAWARD 25
from £84,000

Purposeful looks and quality to match, including twin engines. Obviously it's a shade smaller, but it still works nicely as a weekender. Tel: 01983 280333. www.seaward-m.com