

MOTOR BOATS TESTED

Bella 703

Practical, comfortable, versatile and keenly priced, this neatly built Finnish 23-footer is a genuine multi-tasker

REPORT BY MARK TURLEY

If you are lucky enough ever to pay a visit to the beautiful and intricate coastline that bounds the Baltic – perhaps a sortie to Norway, Sweden or Finland – you'll find no shortage of the 'double-ender' style boat.

The canny locals find them just the job for dipping and diving around the myriad of inlets and islands that this part of the world offers.

The aim of the double-ender is to provide an easy-to-operate, low-hassle inboard vessel with a bit of everything. There's a decent cockpit, good shelter afforded by a wheelhouse and just sufficient accommodation to make the most out of those long, long summer evenings. There's more: you'll find space to relax on board, and the layout means this is a perfect fisher too. So you

can drop a line overboard in the afternoon and barbecue the catch come the evening.

This practical formula translates nicely to other boating scenarios too, as we found out when we took this Finnish builder's 23-footer for a run on a genteel stretch of the Thames.

Design and build

The 703 is not a new model by any stretch of the imagination. It is – as Bella's brochure points out – more of an updated classic. Yet, save for a few examples cropping up occasionally from the likes of Fjord and Nidelv, we have seen little of this kind of boat here in Blighty.

The double-end design, with its canoe-shaped aft sections, rather than flat transom, helps the hull to run tidily along at displacement speeds without the stern getting too dug in. Furthermore, this rounded

contour reduces the area that can be pushed

about by following seas, making downwind motoring serene and steady. In fact 'displacement' is not perhaps wholly accurate for this boat as the underwater sections do – it would appear – give a degree of lift. Out in open water, this Bella will break into double figures rather than simply strap itself down to a six or seven knot hull speed that can make estuary work a bit laborious.

As mentioned, power comes by way of an inboard installation, which then drives a conventional shaft arrangement – the engine box of the single compact Yanmar diesel then disguises itself as the cockpit table. The propeller and rudder are supported and protected by a metal shoe protruding from the hull's slight run of keel.

You might think that the rounded stern, over and above a full beamy transom, would short-change the cockpit when it comes to seating. But not a bit of it. Not only is there plenty of room, you get a shape well suited to sociable pursuits, whether lounging with a book or sitting around chatting.

The versatile wheelhouse is extremely light and

airy, not least because of the sliding sunroof, and although it is open plan through to the bows, the forward vee-seating area is tucked away – so that when you're down here, you feel you've your own space. An infill makes this area into a berth and, if needs be, the dinette table can drop to give a further spot in which to bed down. Tucked in and around the helm itself is a small (but still

Design & build

Pleasant cockpit, comfy interior, top view all round



adequate) galley, while the rear portion of dinette seating hides the final piece of the 'all-things-to-all-men' jigsaw: a sea-toilet that can be made private by the judicious pulling of a curtain.

Accommodation

If you're around six feet tall, then you will have to mind your head here and there; stooping a tad to clear the sliding door to the wheelhouse, for instance. It's a small thing, though, and that sliding sunroof does allow the skipper – however tall – to stand to keep an eye on things when

mooring up. It also adds to the already light interior, which with those deep windows, afford a great view right round.

The small dinette, with its rather smart fiddled wood table, seats four at a pinch and drops to form an occasional extra berth. Its forward seat also sports a flip over backrest, which allows the occupants to face the same way as the skipper across the way – although this means remembering to hike the vee-berth's base cushion clear, or you'll end up resting your feet on it.

There is space under this forward seat for the optional fridge, while tucked under the rear seat is the sea-toilet installation which comes complete with a holding tank. The lack of privacy might be something of an issue, but in fact with the accompanying curtain drawn, no-one ashore will be any the wiser... and anyone else aboard just needs to find something to do in the cockpit!

The helm is pretty basic, as you might expect, but the wheel and throttle are well placed and there is room for a few electronics. It was also

“With 40hp to call on, the boat's coastal capabilities are well catered for”



FACTFILE
 Bella 703
 LOA: 23ft 1in
 (7.05m)
 BEAM: 8ft 1in
 (2.47m)
 PRICE: from
 £33,290
 SPEED: to 10 knots



A basic helm still allows room for a few gadgets but importantly leaves more room for interior comfort



Limited workspace but decent storage in the usable galley



Heads up: hardly luxury, but again function rules the roost



Good and deep windows keep things light and airy



The neat vee-to-double berth offers some privacy



With the sunroof open, the helm is a pleasant place

good to find a demister blower to help keep the screen clear here. Both screen sections are also serviced by a wiper, not simply the area in front of the skipper. And here, as elsewhere, the mouldings are nicely finished.

Hinge forward the helm seat and you'll make more of the galley by exposing the sink – fed by a manual faucet from the water tank within the seat plinth – while just adjacent is the standard Wallas twin-burner hob, which handily doubles as a heater unit. Set within the galley moulding are three drawers and a small cupboard plus there is a shelf outboard for mugs, tea and coffee; allowing the basics to be kept ready on board while more expansive culinary delights need to be catered for on a day-to-day or weekend basis.

The forward vee-seating is a comfortable spot to tuck yourself away in, with decent width seat bases incorporating tidy, lined lockers. Useful, wide shelves run outboard of the backrest cushions.

Accommodation

Certainly packs plenty into its neat open-plan layout



Exterior

The boat's LOA includes the bolt-on bathing platform and by nicely aping the stern's rounded shape (rather than being a cumbersome, if more expansive squared-off job) it helps streamline the hull, as well as providing some extra locker space – and a spot to board. To lend a steadying hand, the coaming here is equipped with a couple of handrails and the same consideration goes for when you are boarding from the pontoon, with handrails set by the break of the cockpit. To save scuffing the gelcoat here, the coaming top is thoughtfully finished with teak slats.

The coachroof is also equipped with handrails, but the slim sidedecks are

not a place to dally. You are best off sorting ropes out from either the safety of the internal cockpit steps or the foredeck. The latter boasts a good-sized locker, and because there are midships cleats (as well as those fore and aft) there is plenty of mooring hardware to hand.

However, it is the cockpit that makes the boat. The coaming – and hence seat backs – are a good depth, so you feel well and truly 'in' the boat. And with the optional canopy arrangement in play, this is a truly useful area, no matter what the weather, or what you are up to, whether taking it easy with your feet up or having some friends over for a drink. Indeed, there is room for half-a-dozen of you without getting too sardine-like. The top of the engine box



The hull is good for river or estuary work

has been extended to form a handy table, and there is quite a bit of space in the seat locker voids despite the presence of a fair few ancillaries, such as the battery box and holding tank for the toilet. Also located here, and easy to operate, is a useful sized manual bilge pump.

Exterior

Sociable and safe cockpit, but slim sidedecks



seat locker, which helps keep the actual engine box smaller than it might otherwise be, and ensures these two important service items are readily accessible. The batteries are housed beneath the starboard seat, while the actual switch is positioned behind a lockable door set in the seat base, so it can be readily accessed when arriving or leaving the boat.

Engine options & access

Useful hp, easy access except for a tricky impeller



Engine options and access

Our test model had one of Yanmar's ultra-compact three-cylinder 40hp units, and although the brochure alludes to a smaller engine still, there does not seem anything to gain by downsizing on the horsepower. With 40hp to call on, the boat's capabilities – in terms of going coastal – are nicely catered for.

The GRP engine box, lined with a modicum of foam insulation, simply hinges back... and there she blows, sat on a moulded liner to make cleaning up after any spills that bit easier.

Service points around the engine are all easy to get to, although the impeller is quite tight on to an adjacent bulkhead. The raw-water strainer and header tank reservoir are located in the port-hand

Performance and handling

As our test boat was based on the upper Thames, we had to curtail our usual roster of rough-em-up sea-trials, and simply spent a leisurely spell

messing about on the river. But in fact this gentle pottering at little more than 1400 rpm for just under five knots showed just how useful this sort of hull is for river work. It's easy to push along with excellent straight-line stability, so you are not always tweaking the helm as you would do with a sterndrive or outboard leg. There is quite a useful portion of boat in the water, too, so windage plays less of a factor. On the other hand, a sizeable rudder gives plenty



Easy hinge-box access to the compact Yanmar

of kick, and the hull will turn round in just about its own length. It's a pleasantly predictable sort of boat in matters of slow speed work.

Because of the Bella's rounded stern, there is much less chance of catching it, so you can ease away ahead without worrying about the quarters snagging on lock walls. Indeed, somewhat by chance perhaps, this is a commendably serviceable riverboat hull, on top of which the helm affords an excellent view right round.

As to what can be achieved in open water, we have had to dip into the manufacturer's own test data. But given this model's respectable longevity and the fact that there is a whole raft of knowing home-grown Finnish owners with experience of these boats, Bella's claim of a tad

“Perhaps by chance, this is a commendably serviceable riverboat hull”



It is the cockpit that makes the boat

BOAT REPORT

BELLA 703

over 10 knots does not seem at all unrealistic. And considering that this hull is clearly better suited to displacement work than anything too speedy, it is unlikely to want to stretch itself further.

Performance & handling

Well-mannered and steady, with no nasty surprises



We did note, though, that the engine was pulling just 3000rpm out of a possible 3800rpm.

Specification and value

Small, jaunty, inboard craft like this are rare. Of course there are a fair few pêche-promenaders available that have the same wheelhouse/inboard configuration, but they don't really lend themselves so much for inland work. And most dedicated inland craft of this size will invariably be outboard powered, and so less geared towards more onerous estuary and coastal waters. All of this means that it is tricky to make like-for-like comparisons with 'rival' boats. On top of that, we found it hard to find practically any inboard diesel boat as keenly priced as this Bella.

Sure, you still have to spring for the cockpit cushions and the canopy – which are really essential to the enjoyment of the boat – plus most of us would opt for the convenience factor of a fridge. But even allowing for those options, you're still only up to £35k.

We also liked the fact that it is tidily finished with decent quality joinery, and that most lockers and tucked-away areas benefited from GRP liners. So there's no missing that ha'penth of tar. And yes, the

Specification & value

Keenly priced, but equipment not scrimped on either



spec fulfils all you would ask: the toilet is a proper pump-out jobbie complete with holding tank, and there's that useful hob-cum-heater too. All in, a great package.

Verdict

Finnish yards have a particular flair for building neat, usable boats and this pleasing, quite traditional-looking example is no exception. It is typically hop-a-board-and-go, and if 'go' means a gentle meander on the river one day and out into the estuary the next, then the 703 will cover it. It boasts fine camping convenience on the one hand and suitable push-on diesel power on the other. Impressive.

8/10

MBM rating



Bella 703 technical data

specifications

BUILD	GRP
RCD	C
LENGTH OVERALL	23ft 1in (7.05m)
HULL LENGTH	21ft 6in (6.55m)
BEAM	8ft 1in (2.47m)
DRAUGHT	2ft 0in (0.60m)
AIR DRAUGHT	6ft 1in (1.85m)
DISPLACEMENT	1.4 tonnes
FUEL CAPACITY	15gal (67lt)
WATER CAPACITY	4gal (13lt)

key dimensions

WIDTH OF SIDE DECKS	5in (12.5cm)
HEADROOM IN W/HOUSE	6ft 0in (1.83m)
FORE BERTH	5ft 10in x 5ft 0in

performance

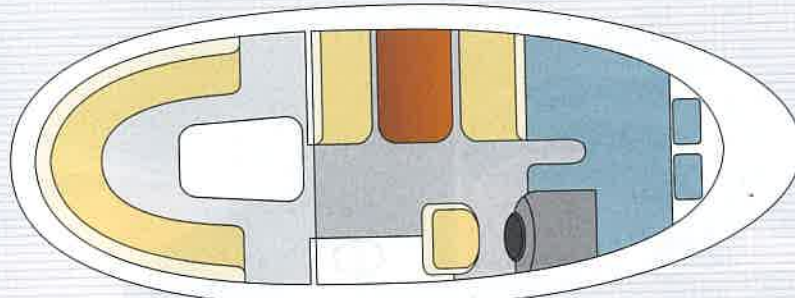
Engines	single Yanmar 3JH4-E 40hp diesel				
Configuration	3cyl, 1.5lt, 40hp at 3800rpm				
conditions	river/light breeze				
Load	fuel 50%, water 50%, crew 3				
Rpm	knots	gph	mpg	range	noise
800	3.8	0.3	15	180	72
1500	5.5	0.4	13.8	158	72
2000	6.1	0.5	12.2	140	74
2500	7.6	1.1	6.9	79	75
3000	10.2	1.8	5.7	66	78

Range figures quoted above are in miles based on standard fuel tanks and include a 20% margin. GPH & MPG refer to imperial gallons. Noise readings are in dB(A) and were taken in the wheelhouse.



prices

STANDARD BOAT with 40hp Yanmar	inc VAT £33,290
BOW-THRUSTER	£2230
WALLAS HOB/HEATER	£STD
FRIDGE	£675
COCKPIT CUSHIONS	£705
CANOPY	£720
SHORE POWER	£1120
COMMISSIONING	£STD
BOAT AS TESTED	£35,750



ENQUIRIES T L Harvey Ltd, Whitworth Close, Darlaston, West Midlands WS10 8LJ.
Tel: 0121 568 8837. www.belleboats.fi

the rivals



VIKI 26

From £56,430

More money but more space, especially in the cockpit with its old-school launch feel. Cabin has similar vee berth but also a separate WC.
Tel: 01932 243722, www.boatshowrooms.com



BÉNÉTEAU ANTARES 710

From £40,050

A possible pêche-promenade alternative with largely similar layout to the Bella. Comfortable dinette cabin and quite elegant looks.
Tel: See website for dealers, www.beneteau.com



HABER 660M

From £34,950

The Bella's nearest rival? A smart-looking, inboard-powered 22-footer, with decent wheelhouse and useful outside helm.
Tel: 01189 403211, www.valwyattmarine.co.uk