

# Chris-Craft

## Constellation 26

*Although its exterior styling takes its key from years gone by, this is a boat for the 21st Century. We tested it in rough seas off Eastbourne.*



**A**t last (or should we say 'again?'), we have a modern production sports cruiser that looks different, breaking the mould in a market sector where the trend has been for boats to appear remarkably similar.

Chris-Craft have looked to the past for contemporary inspiration, with a five-model range named the Chris-Craft Navy, harking back to days gone by.

By definition, retro styling is nothing new, but the Chris-Craft heritage helps to make this an exciting prospect. And lines that will not date probably ensure an element of retained value which is denied to rival designs.

We tested the Constellation 26 in a South Coast chop, to see whether its performance matched up to its looks.

## Design & layout

The boat's definitive styling lies in its angular (rather than rounded) lines, and its flat foredeck and coachroof. The screen is also higher and more angled than those seen nowadays, sweeping back to raised gunwales which offer plenty of protection in the cockpit. Long, narrow windows add to the retro feel.

The side decks narrow aft to allow for a broad cockpit, a concession to contemporary design requirements. Similarly, the



## Cockpit

With its high screen and gunwales, the cockpit feels secure and protected.

A curved settee opposite the helm and an L-shaped bench formation aft offer good seating, but none of this is configured for sunbathing. A small wet-bar with a stainless steel sink and drinks-holders

separates these two seating areas, making the cockpit less sociable. Our preference would be to do away with the bar in favour of a reclining forward lounge seat, to serve as a sunbed.

The starboard bench seat has a full-length locker underneath, and an aft one hides open stowage which is convenient for fenders and warps.



## Cabin

The cabin is most generous for a 26ft boat, with good quality of fittings and finishes giving it a comfortable feel.

As you step inside, an immediate impact is made by the abundance of daylight, achieved through the provision of long side windows rather than contemporary portholes. The deck hatch helps to make this a bright and airy environment, as does the generous opening for the cockpit door.

Light-coloured woods, upholstery and finishes all make the most of this daylight, and the good provision of night lighting.

A standard layout has been

adopted, with a vee-dinette convertible into a double berth forward, a galley to port, a toilet compartment to starboard and a midships berth under the cockpit.

With the dinette table in place, access to the seating is a bit tight. With the table dropped to make up the double berth, sleeping legroom is eked out in the recess below the back cushion at the bow.

There are two side lockers and a forward locker underneath the seating, all carpeted, and there is another set in the forward bulkhead, plus open stowage behind the seat-backs. A cedar-lined hanging wardrobe to starboard, aft of the seating, has further open stowage on top, kept in place by a rail.

high freeboards are essential to offer plenty of headroom in the cabin, which will be considered vital by many of today's buyers.

Overall, the combination of new and old works well, and there is a good balance between cabin and cockpit space. Once you are on board, apart from some notable gestures to the builders' heritage such as the dash design, the Constellation 26 has less of a retro feel than you might anticipate.

As we have come to expect from Chris-Craft, the build quality and standard of fittings is good.

The boat's standard specification covers the essentials, but to its £60,583 base cost our test boat added just under £3400 worth of extras, by way of a CD player, a tonneau cover, a cockpit table, a fire extinguishing system, a toilet vent fan, a macerator, a microwave oven, a repair kit and navy gelcoat. You could argue that some of these should come as standard, but in

general the builders have pitched it right, allowing buyers to specify non-essential items as they see fit.

Engine options are all from Volvo Penta. Our test boat came with the base unit, the 280hp GSi 5.7L EFI petrol, but you could choose the GXi turning out 315hp or the Gi 8.1L with an output of 375hp. The only diesel on offer is a 260hp KAD44.

## Performance & handling

The 280hp engine pushes the Constellation 26 to a top speed of 31 knots, pulling 4000rpm in doing so. It gets there with sufficient urgency to match the boat's sporting image, and provides plenty of usable power throughout the range.

When pushed through a series of turns, the hull banks on the tighter ones and can take a while to settle onto an even keel. There is some ventilation from the propeller, but the helmsman can catch this and

## Helm

The helm is perhaps the only place in the cockpit that fully retains the retro influence of the boat's exterior appearance, being laid out on two flat panels, rather than on a modern, rounded console. A fairly large stainless steel spoked steering wheel contributes to the feel.

The instruments have stainless steel bezels and grey on white backgrounds, with clear markings. One neatly deals with fuel, engine temperature, oil and volts.

The soft-touch switch panels are Chris-Craft's own very neat waterproof designs, with warning lights. The panel to the left of the tilt-adjustable steering wheel deals with the electrical functions and the one on the right is dedicated to the trim tabs. A digital depth-sounder and a compass complete the driver's information.

Owners will inevitably want to add electronic aids, and the right side of the dashboard has been left free for a compact unit. A remote control means the stereo system can be located safely in the cockpit.

The comfortable swivelling helm seat offers fore-and-aft adjustment, a lift-up bolster so that a lean-back stance can be adopted, and a footrest, so the driving position is probably adaptable enough to suit most sizes of helmsman. The throttle is well placed, and you can brace your forearm on the gunwale top inside the screen.

The high screen offers plenty of protection, and the top of the dash is finished in grey to eliminate glare. A hinged perspex panel to port of the companionway can hold a chart if one of the passengers is navigating.



the boat never drops off the plane.

Its size and weight dictates that this Chris-Craft is not graced with sportsboat handling, but it is still fun to drive, well balanced and responding well to input from the helm.

Competence in performance and handling is topped by ride quality,

as the deep-vee hull worked very well in the rough seas encountered off Eastbourne on our test day.

Running into the waves, the ride is excellent and even when we caught a wave wrong the boat remained in good order and landed smoothly, with negligible jarring. Demonstrating the

sturdiness of the build, there was little shake or rattle.

The Constellation's only shortcoming was when going with or across the waves, when it could run on its chines. But this can easily be worked off using the throttle and a bit of helm.

All in all, this is a very capable

## Galley

With a flush-fit ceramic hob and sink infill, the galley has a generous work surface, as well as full standing headroom.

The sink is part of the moulding and is serviced by a mixer tap. A microwave is set in an upper unit, and a fridge in the base unit. The stereo radio/cassette/CD player occupies one of the open stowage spaces.

Stowage is very generous, with open lockers both at the back of the worktop and in the base, slide-out drawers and a half-depth tilt-out drawer under the sink which, when lined with a plastic bag, will be ideal for the rubbish. A rail on the top of upper unit adds further possibilities. If that were not enough, the steps down from the cockpit have hinged tops revealing two further lockers.

The area is well lit, as the side window runs its full length.



## Decks

There is a step up just aft of the cockpit wet-bar, and both port and starboard gunwales have non-slip top surfaces aft for securer boarding from a raised dock.

Access to the bow is through the centre opening section of the windscreen, with the companionway door having steps moulded into it.

Deck fittings are generous in their provision, and of good quality stainless steel.



## Toilet

The toilet compartment is fully moulded, with reasonable headroom, though those over 6ft (1.8m) tall will need to stoop.

A stainless steel sink is set into a granite-effect work top, which also has a substantial stainless steel handhold beside the toilet. A VacuFlush toilet is fitted as standard, and a wander lead from mixer taps doubles as a shower.

There is sufficient space on the work surface for washbags, as well as open stowage behind the units and a locker behind the loo. A mirror and splash-protected toilet roll-holder complete the fit-out.

## Midships berth

Full standing headroom extends as far aft as the access to the generous midships cabin, where a curtain provides privacy.

The full double berth has good stowage at its foot in two open lockers, and there is a third next to a hatch giving access to an electrical panel, which is easy to get at.

Sitting headroom is provided by the void under the cockpit's forward passenger seat, and light by a window to the cockpit and by spotlights for night-time.



## BOAT REPORT

hull, which is obviously able to cope with more power if you want it. And the smoothness of the ride is matched by low noise levels in the cockpit, which will add further to your enjoyment.

However, the smoothness of the throttle control left something to be desired, a problem we have encountered on some other offerings from Volvo Penta.

### Conclusions

It would seem that daring to be different is a difficult step for

sportscruiser manufacturers. If taking that step was intimidating for Chris-Craft, they can be reassured that it has paid off. This is a great design that combines the best of the past with the all the advantages of contemporary boating.

For us, it is the Constellation 26's sister craft, the Launch 22, that takes first prize in the retro stakes, for being the most desirable sportsboat in the market. However if you want something a little different and you need cabin space

with it, then the 26 is probably for you.

This is one of the more expensive craft in its size range, but its value for money can be seen in the styling, build and specification.

It has a good balance between cockpit and cabin space, which makes it both functional and enjoyable to use. And the ride is excellent, although the hull configuration does induce some chine-riding. You will derive as much pleasure from driving this boat as from looking at it. □



## Chris-Craft Constellation 26

### BUILD

glass-reinforced plastic

### RECREATIONAL CRAFT DIRECTIVE

Design Category B: Offshore (offshore voyages in wind up to Force 8)

### DIMENSIONS

#### LOA

29ft 6in (8.99m)

#### HULL LENGTH

26ft 6in (8.08m)

#### BEAM

8ft 6in (2.59m)

#### DRAUGHT

3ft 7in (1.09m) with drive down;

1ft 11in (0.58m) with drive up

#### DISPLACEMENT

5600lb (2545kg)

#### FUEL CAPACITY

81gal (367lt)

### ENGINES

280hp Volvo Penta 5.7GSi SX petrol outdrive

### PRICE

£60,583 inc VAT

### SUPPLIERS

Bates Wharf (Southern), 7 The Waterfront, Sovereign Harbour, Eastbourne, East Sussex BN23 5UZ. Tel: 01323 470066.

### BUILDERS

Chris-Craft, 8161 15th Street East, Sarasota, Florida 34243, USA.

## Engine room

The whole of the aft cockpit floor, including the seat, hinges up to reveal a generous engine bay, with plenty of space forward to get down next to the unit and its services.

The fit-out is excellent, with clear wiring and piping runs and good all round access. The battery master switch is located here, which would normally be an inconvenience, but with access so straightforward it constitutes an added measure of security.



## Bathing platform

Having decided not to integrate the bathing platform into the boat's styling, the builders have made it pretty big.

It is easy to step onto from a dock, and also at the right level to help you get out of the water, with the assistance of the swing-down boarding ladder mounted out of the way under the platform.

A transom shower is set in the recess for the door into the cockpit.

