

Stessl Edge V wins over Top End ranger - by Andrew Dundas

Boat tests on smaller boats in the three to lower four metre size ranges are fairly hard to find in much of the printed media - as I have recently found out. Perhaps that is because many anglers now use larger vessels, especially for barra and bass fishing. Or is it just because the larger models are more appealing to test than the basic dinghy.

It is a fact that the 12ft punt with 15hp outboard that was the standard rig with barra fishers 15 or 20 years ago has now been largely replaced by trailered 4-5m vessels.

Often these are beautifully decked out with every available option, and pushed along by seriously powered engines, with a 30hp being very much at the lower end of the range.

Nevertheless, smaller boats still remain popular with huge numbers of anglers, and this fact shouldn't be forgotten. Let's face it, some of us just don't have the dollars or perhaps the justification or need to purchase a bigger vessel. And as many people have found out, the performance and suitability of some of the better designed current model dinghies is actually far greater than what they expected.

For around 10 years, the Lyon family had three vessels decorating the yard. One is a fibreglass Canadian canoe that has provided some great paddling adventures along a 55km stretch of the upper Normandy river (which is free of crocodiles). A painted 3.4m Savage Gull fitted with a Johnson 8hp has seen a huge amount of country from the tip of the Cape to the Cooktown area, and has had some great fish caught from it's fairly seaworthy but less than stable hull.

Being light, this dinghy is an ideal car topper for taking into remote country, but realistically it is fairly limited space wise. The other boat, a Stessl Cuddy Cab has served for many years as our reef and coastal boat. This has been an excellent vessel - seaworthy and roomy, and the cuddy cab provided useful shelter from the elements for the kids when they were younger.

In recent years however, the "Nautilass" received less and less use, partly because of Cooktown's frequent windy weather, and partly because of me being away due to work commitments. Eventually the tough decision was made to sell the cuddy cab, and buy something that would be more of an all-round boat. Something I could use up rivers and creeks, and also around the coast and inner reefs on good days, which are frequent here in the far northern tropics during summer.

It would also be taken to Cape York and Gulf locations such as Weipa and Princess Charlotte Bay, towed down to the Hinchinbrook Channel and various impoundment's, and also needed to be capable of covering fairly large distances fairly economically.

Being able to work the steep chop of tropical coastal waters and estuaries ruled out a V nosed punt, although the new style bows being offers by Quintrex and Stessl for example,



A great little fishing boat - as evidenced by this super mackerel.



Powered by an 18hp Tohatsu, this boat handles offshore conditions comfortably.



The author and a Top End mackerel - photo by Andrew Dundas



looked to be a big improvement for handling rougher water.

Without much written material around for V hulls in the high three to lower four metre range, I started ringing dealers and talking to various people. The Stessco range was appealing, and a couple of mates had already had great service out of their 4.2m Catchers with solid 3mm aluminium hulls - a great advantage over the rough conditions on Cape York. The Catcher was slightly larger than what I was after, however the beamy 3.95m Angler was definitely a contender, as was the Ally Craft 4.15, although it too was perhaps slightly on the large side. Apart from these, there was a good range of honest, well-proven dinghies available.

Nevertheless, in general their design seemed to offer no particular advantage or innovation over each other. We had previously used Stessl Edgetrackers for crocodile work, and their edgetracker shaped hull had given unbelievable stability - even with the weight of a good sized croc hanging off one side. Stability, as can be imagined, is a fairly desirable trait!

Checking the Stessl website out one night, I discovered that Stessl also offered the same "edge" shaped hull in a range of V hulled dinghies, not just the V nosed punt (the latest models which have recently received a national award for best fishing boat).

A ring around some of dealers didn't provide a great deal of information. It seems that many salespeople don't really know much about the nitty gritty of what they are actually selling. I eventually got onto the Bowen Stessl dealership just south of Townsville - Tropical Trailer Boats - and some of these people actually owned the boats in questions. At last I was able to get some real information and background on their performance. The seemingly fair dinkum response was that the Stessl Edge V dinghies did offer exceptional stability, ride, and seaworthy characteristics as quoted in the product brochure.

So 6 weeks later I took delivery of a 3.8m Edge V on a Sea Link trailer fitted with shackle springs and 14" wheels. Apart from a drop in floor and a 2mm hull as opposed to the standard 1.6mm, the boat was standard. This included an anchor shelf, two seat thwarts, and a fuel tank rack at the stern.

I later had side decks (extended gunwales) added, and in retrospect should have had these fitted when the initial order was placed, as this feature really does add to the comfort, strength, and looks of the boat.

A small casting deck forward of the front seat was also added, along with a number of stainless steel brackets to enable gear to be lashed down. In contrast to most of the current blunt nosed dinghies on offer, the Edge V featured a very sharp, fine entry bow, which promised good ability to smoothly cut into waves. The bow then widened to a very roomy 1.7m beam, with the hull featuring that signature "Edge" shape.

These downward extensions of the hull along each outside edge resemble a miniature tri-hull. They are designed to both add stability and trap air when underway to give a smoother ride than with a standard hull. It all looked and sounded fine

in theory, but how would it work?

Initially I was going to match the Stessl with a 25 two-stroke Yamaha, having had great service from these motors previously. In the end we settled for a near new Tohatsu 18 two-stroke, having heard nothing but good reports about these apparently underrated motors. Almost immediately after delivery, we rapped the boat up in a protective tarp and trailered it to the Wenlock River north of Weipa where it spent the first few weeks of its life helping the Steve and Terri Irwin Australia Zoo team catch large estuarine crocodiles for a satellite tracking research project. Between here and numerous trips back into the Hey and Embley rivers around of the Weipa region, the 12 footer displayed exceptional stability and handling characteristics. We didn't encounter any really rough water, but rough enough to show that the boat simply went where you pointed it without any hint of broaching in any sort of a following sea, even when navigating at an angle.

The Edge V also remained flat, steady and predictable in the first real adventure of its life. On this occasion we had to retrieve two underwater cameras that had been taped onto a muscly 14ft crocodile that we had just captured and released. The retrieval involved locating the buoy and rope attached to the big reptile, and hauling them in until the string and tape released and the cameras were set free. Upon our approach the big bloke took exception, and twice rolled over and slammed the boat with his great jaws while Steve was releasing the cameras.

Remarkably, the boat sat as flat as a pancake when the croc hit, although I later had one of the tooth marks welded up as the aluminium looked fairly thin. We were all more than impressed at the Edge V's stability. At the end of this trip I had still not had the chance to have a fish from the new boat, and patiently had to wait until our return to Cooktown. One calm September morning Tim Bell and I headed out to one of our closer reefs - 25km off the coast, and pulled a good catch of nine trout before lunchtime when we ran out of bait - a great way to christen the dinghy.

At this stage I hadn't even got around to fitting a sounder, so we were basically fishing hangs that were selected according to the "lie of the land". The sea breeze chop had well and truly kicked in on our return trip, but the Stessl rode the following sea comfortably and effortlessly. The next trip - a major one - was to Princess Charlotte Bay and then back to Weipa for a combined two-week period. Lyall Davis and his mate Neil towed their 4.2m Stessco Catcher, while Robbie Giblin and I loaded the Edge V onto the roof rack of the Landy, but towed the trailer for daily launching at Weipa.

It was during this extended trip over a variety of conditions that I was really able to give the boat a thorough testing, and some of the conditions were not really by choice. During the dry season PCB is normally relatively calm inshore, with the south-easter coming off the land. Three days into our visit though, the south-easter dropped out and gave way to a good north-easter that gave us a fairly choppy 25km trip back across the Bay to camp. The following day we headed eastwards and while fishing some remote creeks, a really solid 15-20 knot northerly set in. Heading back into the open water, we were confronted by a sea of white caps that worked

vigorously along a choppy northerly swell.

It was during these two runs that I found that the Edge V could comfortably move along at a slow plane - able to cover the sea miles at a respectable speed without bashing its occupants to bits. This has proved to be one of the boat's best traits. It also kept its bow high and dry and ran with the fairly decent following sea where necessary, without any bother. Similar situations were encountered around Weipa, including the very steep chop that set up with the tide against the wind situation.

The Tohatsu too has exceeded my expectations, and is well matched to the vessel and offers a ton of grunt. What about fuel economy? The 50km round trip to the Cooktown reefs with a moderate load used 9.5 litres of fuel, and a 75km trip in a choppy south-easter from Weipa to Duyfken Point used 13 litres. By any standard that is especially thrifty and makes for quite inexpensive boating trips. However I should point out that the throttle rarely moved above three quarters. After a solid week fishing at Weipa and elsewhere, the Edge V had made up for its previous fishing deficiency and had good hauls of barra, king salmon, cod, groper, jacks, fingermark and mackerel caught in it. That can wait for another month however.

We all hope that any boat purchased is going to live up to our expectations. Having been driving small boats now for over 25 years, I was keen to give this vessel a proper test before presenting a write-up to Bush'n Bash readers. Without question the 3.8m Edge V has the sharpest handling, and the best ride and stability of any dinghy I have driven and its seaworthiness matches many boats of considerably larger dimensions. I can't really say more than that!