



SEA FORCE 530 UTE

AT LAST- A FISHING-FRIENDLY FIBERGLASS PONTOON BOAT
“IT DOESN'T SCARE THE FISH AWAY” *Pics and text by Kevin Power*

Aluminium pontoon boats have become a common sight around New Zealand shores particularly in the sub-6m class, popular for their built-in safety and stability. They also have several drawbacks: as a general rule most are buttugly, harsher-riding than a conventional hull, require more horsepower to push, have less interior room and create enough hull noise at rest to scare off the nearest snapper within coo-ee of casting distance. I first spied the Sea Force 530 Ute at the

Fishing and Outdoors Show at Claudelands last year and was immediately struck by the design concept and how it all made sense - particularly from a fishing point of view. I collared Ric Lawrence, owner of Sea Force Boats, and asked him about the concept behind the design

“The pontoon concept was already well proven and fibreglass boats needed a new direction. It was obvious to us that with fibreglass you could step outside the

limitations of previous pontoon materials and create shapes that were softer, drier and more visually appealing.”

Ric went on to say “The advantages of low maintenance of fibreglass over aluminium and its longevity compared with inflatable materials made it an obvious step forward in the pontoon boat arena and of course the unsinkable – safety - aspect of foam-filled pontoons has advantages over other designs.”

We finally got our hands on the 530 Ute in September; Ric kindly let us keep it for a few weeks so we could get a real feel for the design. It is apparent from the first glance the 530 Ute has been a labour of love from the Sea Force team: the fit and finish are exemplary with fantastic attention to detail.

The appearance of the 530 Ute is unique. The way Sea Force have melded the pontoon into the hull is very subtle and aesthetically easy on the eye (unlike most pontoon designs). As the name implies (Sea Force Ute) there is very little foredeck with the cab-forward design leaving a huge cockpit for a vessel this size. To give you an idea: there is enough room to fit three vertical rod holders down each side. Ric sets up the interior of the 530 Ute to your specification. Our test boat as supplied had the most popular set-up which included two swivelling pedestal seats and a centrally-mounted bin with a squab on top that doubles as a fish bin. The hull is not unique to the 530 Ute - it is also used as the basis for the 530 Mate which has a cuddy cabin at the expense of some fishing room aft. Sea Force measure their boats the correct way, the 530 denoting the 5.30m LOH (length of Hull) and not using the LOA (length overall) 5.65m for marketing purposes. This shows when you hop inside; the fishing room is huge for a 5.3m trailer boat.

Our test rig was well kitted-out with VHF, EPIRB, nav lights, wash-down pump, bilge pump, polished stainless rocket launcher, canopy and clears, rear-facing spotlight, bait board, a plethora of rod holders - and I was pleased to see a colour sounder/plotter installed as hopefully this would be the key to finding the snapper. Motive power was provided by a 90hp Tohatsu - right in the middle of the 60-115hp recommended HP range - and the rig is supplied on a quality DMW multi-roller trailer.

For this test I not only wanted to test the ride and handling but the stability and fish-ability. This would see four adults softbaiting from the 530 Ute, and it was also an opportunity to try a few new softbaits from Gulp and a couple of new Daiwa softbait combos. Russell Summers (from Tauranga Hunting and Fishing) and I are both generously-proportioned and made up the bulk of the ballast while my 15-year-old son James and Russell's builder Brian made up the balance.

On our way out through the Tauranga entrance we encountered a sizable swell with a nasty chop on top. I had erected the canopy before leaving, anticipating getting wet on the way out, but I need not have worried as outward flare of the pontoons deflected the spray well away from the boat.

For a 5.3 metre boat the ride was very good heading into a sea: there were a few thumps and bumps but the conditions were very rough and the forward seating exaggerated the effect, but trimming the hull well out improved the ride with the boat touching down stern-first. After telling Brian how good the fishing is up here compared to his home area - Golden Bay - I had self-imposed pressure to walk the talk. After spending half-an-hour at our first stop along the 20m contour off the Papamoa coastline no fish were showing up on the sounder and after about eight drifts I was beginning to regret my earlier words, and was getting a few looks of ... well...

At this stage one of my favourite spots - the knoll off Motiti - was looking pretty good, especially around the Black Rocks where a commercial cray boat was pulling and re-baiting craypots, hopefully creating a nice berley trail. Fifteen minutes later we arrived at the Knoll, and things were looking up with plenty of sign showing up on the sounder. I spent a few minutes establishing the best drift line to take us over the fish sign. The breeze was still quite brisk so we deployed Russell's drogue off the bow to slow our drift rate and this also positioned the 530 Ute stern-first into the drift, the ideal attitude for casting the soft-baits. To my relief Brian the Mainlander was the first to hook up and immediately boated a nice pannie snapper. What followed was the sort of red-hot fishing session we all dream about. We all caught plenty of 35-plus cm pannies with James

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getting bragging rights at the end of the day with the largest snapper. We also caught a few gurnard and the largest blue cod I have seen in these waters - on a Lucarnus slow jig dragged along behind the boat off a rod placed in the forward rod holder while we cast soft baits ahead of us. Russell had brought along half of his tackle shop so it was a good opportunity for me to try out some gear I hadn't used before. The Daiwa Sol softbait combo was a pleasure to use and the extra power in the rod over my very supple set-up increased my strike rate by about 60% as it set the hook far more positively. I can feel a case of Tackle Acquisition Syndrome coming on. (Mental Note: Must buy Clare some jewellery first.)

The Sea Force 530 Ute exceeded my expectations in the stability stakes. At times all of us ended up on the one side of the boat peering over to catch a glimpse of the next snapper arriving alongside, but at no time did the boat lean more than a few degrees. The room in the cockpit allowed us all to fish unhindered by clutter or a lack of space, and the effective deck-wash pump kept things clean as we fished. On the way in we encountered a following sea, a condition most pontoon boats excel in and the 530 Ute was no exception. I enlisted Russell to be chief photographer and once in the harbour dropped him off on the Matakana wharf to take a few shots of the 530 in action before heading back to the boat ramp to conclude a fantastic day and send a believing mainlander heading home with a big smile on his face.

All-in-all I rate the Sea Force Ute as the best sub 5.5m fishing boat I have experienced. It can be towed easily, has the safety of foam-filled pontoons making it ideal for crossing our treacherous bars, heaps of usable fishing room, a good ride for a boat this size and is easy to keep clean. It's definitely a step-up on most aluminium pontoon boats; although I think a prop with more rake could provide a little more bow lift which would suit this hull, and I didn't like the stretchy gear-holders up forward as with any weight in them they banged around. The motor as fitted went well; I know from experience it's a very durable motor and at close to \$10,000 less than some more modern options, fitted a price point, but was quite loud and not particularly economical. I for one would part out a bit extra dosh and fit a modern Four Stroke. The hull can certainly handle plenty more weight. Would I buy one? Yes.

Foot Note:

The Sea Force pontoon concept won the Hellman Innovation Award at the 2008 NZ Boat Show and the Sea Force Ute featured won the 2009 Under-6m GRP Fishing Boat of The Show.

VITAL STATS:

L.O.A.	5.65m
L.O.H.	5.30m
Beam	2.22m
H/P Range	60-115HP
Recommended H.P.	90HP
Max/Motor Weight	200kg
Max Load	540 kg
Dead Rise	17 deg
Dry Weight	500 kg
Max/Persons	6
Reserve buoyancy	953 m ³
Towing weight approx as tested	1000 kg
Fuel capacity	70L
Price as tested	\$44 995.00 including

BF

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Pics: Opposite page from top
 Russell Summers with a nice pannie caught on a Gulp nuclear chicken.
 Brian, the Mainlander with his first North Island kelpie.
 James with a good bend and promise of things to come!
 Russell Summers with a nice pannie caught on a Gulp nuclear chicken.
 Above: Heaps of room for a 5.3 metre boat

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