FPB 64

A feat of formidable function to cross oceans on, get beneath its austere skin and the FPB 64 has a soul like no other

Text: Dave Marsh Photos: Lester McCarthy
Shortly after we picked up an abandoned rowing skiff drifting in the English Channel (an unexpected side show to the two-way Channel crossing that we were using as our MYB boat test on the FPB 64), the boat's owner Peter Watson mentioned that, during his 12,000 mile delivery trip from the builder's base in New Zealand to Grey Wolf's home in Guernsey, he had been hailed and asked to identify which navy his battleship grey aluminium boat formed a part of. It's easy to see why — the aptly named Grey Wolf firmly refuses to comply with the contemporary aesthetic, which on the modern powerboat frequently sees function as wholly subervient to form.

However, although at first sight the FPB 64 represents the polar opposite of that idea, there is beauty of a different sort in this ultra-long-distance cruising boat; it just takes a couple of days on board to really appreciate. FPB 64 is designed by legendary long-distance sailor and explorer Steve Dathew, using his own aluminium 83ft Windstar as a sort of prototype test bed and melting pot for his countless ideas (see MYB June 2009). With 250,000 miles of cruising behind them, Steve and his wife Linda know no bounds when it comes to intrepid voyaging, and yet paradoxically I've heard Steve described as the most risk-averse sailor ever. The result is that every part of FPB 64 is designed for the worst case scenario, for the worst possible weather you're ever likely to encounter, however bold your cruising ambitions.

Take the stabilisers, for instance. They are over-specified to the point where the boat is designed to sit on the fins and dry out. Yet despite their obvious strength, the inboard mechanisms that drive the fins live inside watertight compartments. So in the almost improbable event of a stabiliser being struck hard enough by a passing container to tear the aluminium hull shell, the FPB 64 would stay watertight. That's something I've not encountered on any boat of any stripe. Equally impressive are the windows in the deck saloon. Steve wanted FPB 64 to be able to recover successfully from a capsise or a serious roll, so the toughened glass windows are a remarkable 19mm thick. That also makes them invulnerable to the pounding they receive when solid green water crashes over the bow, and funnels its way aft to the deck saloon.

THE GREAT ROOM

It's all very well designing for marine Armageddon but even survivalists want to enjoy life along the way. After the highly functional but bare aesthetic of the outside, the lovely warmth of the inside comes as a surprise, as does the layout. On board what most of us would regard as the FPB 64's closest long-distance cruising rivals — the trawler yachts from the likes of Nordhavn, Grand Banks, Fleming and Outer Reef — the typical main deck layout comprises a lower saloon and galley, with a raised or completely separate pilothouse forward. In contrast, the FPB
64's single level, all-in-one arrangement could well have been stolen from one of the current genre of galley-up planing powerboats such as the Prestige line. Well, stolen were it not for the fact that Steve utilised this very layout on Windhorse way back in 2005.

Although the advantages of this arrangement are evident on many boats, having spent two long days cruising on board Grey Wolf, I feel they reach their apotheosis on the FPB 64. That's principally to do with the size of the windows and the underlyings geometry of the boat. By keeping the sheer relatively flat and the wave-piercing bow low, the helmman gets a very nice view out without the inconvenience of the usual steps up to the helm position. There is a small blind spot aft, on the centraline where the steps to the flybridge live, but otherwise this amazing view out is a key benefit for everybody on board.(0,0),(994,992)

Our aft deck had a single tender plus seating, but there is enough space for two tenders on the aft deck.

Although there's a covering rug, the owner's cabin sports rubber flooring beneath for the ultimate grip at sea.

Nordhavn want for their 63, would appreciate a little more finesse.

Looking at the slender shape of the FPB 64, it's clearly influenced by Steve's years of cruising on his big, powerful sailing boats. Its shape is more sailboat than powerboat, and it's designed to pierce the waves rather than skip over the top. And that's very much what it did during our double Channel crossing, out from Berthon's marina to Alderney and back again. Unsurprisingly, it has an unusual motion for a powerboat, more akin to the bigger sailing boats I've cruised aboard, even though Grey Wolf is fitted with stabilisers instead of the ballast keel that Steve designed Windhorse with.

In my opinion, it is the single most important thing a potential buyer needs to experience. Stabilisers and autopilots can be fine tuned, and Peter had set up his boat with what could unscientifically be described as the 'soft' settings. This allowed Grey Wolf to move around instead of rigidly fighting every wave we encountered, typically two to three metres high with the very occasional four metre peak. After only a few hours on board, perhaps thanks to my sailing boat background, my body settled into a symbiotic rhythm with the boat and I only occasionally noticed the movement. But I suspect that, just like power cats, the unusual motion will not suit every single owner.

However, for those in tune with this boat it's a joy because the words slam and crash, or even bump, are not in this boat's vocabulary. Whatever it encounters it just soars up in an indestructible, unrelenting Terminator-like way. There's another crucial joy to be had from the FPB 64. Although this is outwardly a displacement cruiser, capable of just 11 knots flat out, with its single 265hp John Deere diesel, its slender bow and not so flat sections aft also allow it to surf at amazing speeds. On the way back from New Zealand, the Berthon apprentices who accompanied Peter competed to see who could achieve the fastest surfing speed, above 20 knots! A thrill doubtless denied to Nordhavn owners. The other monumental differences between a Nordhavn and the FPB 64 are fuel consumption and range. Cruising at 9 knots, the albeit roughly 60% heavier Nordhavn 63 gets less than 1 mpg, whereas the FPB 64 is achieving over 3 mpg. Stir in 74% greater fuel capacity, and even with a 20% safety margin the FPB 64 has an astonishing 7,000+ mile range at that speed. It's indicative of the serious intent of the FPB 64 that our double Channel crossing counted as no more than a short hop.
A CLOSER LOOK
WITH DAVE MARSILI

WINDOWS
The toughened glass windows are 19mm thick, in anticipation of the worst case capsize scenario that Steve wanted the FPB 64 to be able to recover from.

FLYBRIDGE
It may look austere but thanks to the FPB 64's gentle motion through the water, the flybridge is a remarkably comfortable place to while away the time.

WATERTIGHT COMPARTMENTS
The FPB 64 is divided into a number of watertight compartments. One of these comprises the huge forward lazarette shown here.

THE ENGINE ROOM
Rather than hide wiring and plumbing, it's left fully exposed so that servicing is as easy as possible. All it takes is this single 236hp John Deere engine to push the 41-tonne FPB 64 at its hull speed.

THE RIVALS
NORDHAWN 63
Price from £1.1m ex VAT
Philosophically poles apart but similar unbreakable design for ocean crossings.

BUY THE TEST
mby.com/nord63

AQUASTAR 65
Price from £1.3m ex VAT
Not really in the same world-girdling club as the FPB 64, but still a terrific long-distance cruiser.

BUY THE TEST
mby.com/aqua65
Larger FPB may have a proper crane to launch the tender, but on the FPB 64 the tender is launched using this manual system.

The aluminium is left unpainted to keep maintenance to a minimum, but this aesthetic will not suit everyone.

In many places the Lloyds Special Service Rule scantlings have been further increased, e.g., 12mm hull plating in place of the recommended 8mm (a threefold increase in stillness).

THE DATA

LENGTH OVERALL 64ft 11in (19.73m)

BEAM 17ft 3in (5.27m)

FUEL CAPACITY
2,816 imp gal (12,800 litres)

WATER CAPACITY
1,496 imp gal (6,800 litres)

DRAUGHT
4ft 6in (1.37m)

AIR DRAUGHT
25ft 9in (7.85m)

DESIGNER
Steve Dashew

CLASSIFICATION
Lloyds Special Service Rule

FULL DISPLACEMENT
41 tonnes (full fuel & water & stores)

Engine room is as far as possible from the Great Room and owner's cabin, which is good for noise levels.

There's a colossal storage area amidships — adding weight here leaves the trim largely unaffected.

The owner's suite is very roomy, but the huge forward lazarette is equally impressive.
The amazing view out is a key benefit for everybody on board, and no other boat this size comes close

VERDICT

Verdict implies critical judgement, a tricky thing to do when a boat brings along its own unique frame of reference. Superficially, the FPB 64 might be considered as an alternative to the long-distance travelers. And it could well be used and cruised in the same way as, say, a Nordhavn or a Fleming owner might undertake their passage-making. Scratch the surface, though, and the FPB 64 reveals itself as a different breed of boat, with a different way of fulfilling its vocation.

Quite why it's named FPB is a mystery. FPB is the unromantic acronym for Functional Power Boat, and yet beneath its starkly functional aluminium skin, it has so much personality and character. And if you possess even a shred of engineering appreciation, there's real beauty to be found on board, albeit of an industrial nature. Certainly, during the two days on board, it got under my skin like few other boats. The morning after the test, I just wanted to climb back on board and set sail. If for no other reason than the whims of aesthetic appeal, I don't think there will be many who feel the same way. But for those that do, there just won't be any other boat for you.

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THE HELM VIEW

For once, the navigation screens are large enough to render conventional paper charts all but redundant

Thanks to the low bow, the view through the toughened glass windows is outstanding

Instead of a wheel, this joystick dial is used for low-speed berthing manoeuvres

There's a great deal of redundancy built into FPB 64: two completely separate outboard systems, for example

No conventional wheel as standard, but there's a socket for an emergency wheel, one of only four ways to steer

FORMANCE

* ENGINES Single John Deere 6068TFM M3 236hp @ 2,400rpm. 6-cylinder 6.8 litre diesel

UEL BURN FIGURES

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tek, MPH & PPM figures are approximate. Range/maximum speed allows for a 30% reserve. Calculated figures based on FPB at sea, your figures may vary considerably. All prices exclude UK VAT. Figures based on 100% fuel + 30% water + full cruising including tender and liferaft.

THE COSTS & OPTIONS

| PRICE FROM APPROX | £2.1 million (single 236hp) |
| PRICE AS TESTED APPROX | £2.1 million (single 236hp) |

Based on £1.00 = US$ 1.67 and £1.00 = NZ $ 1.98

Yanmar 100hp wing engine | £42,029
Flybridge enclosure inc. screens | £2,525
Two 320W solar panels | £2,020
Custom SODAS for tender | £8,999
UV steriliser for water maker | £750
Built-in saloon table | £3,630
2-level saloon table | POA
Additional electronics | £5,050
Pilot House raised 2in (50mm) | £5,050

1 = Options on test boat

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DECEMBER 2004