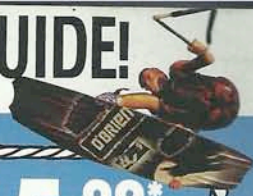


GEAR UP FOR SUMMER: GIANT SKI GEAR GUIDE!



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TRAILER BOAT

Australia's Best-Selling Small Boat Magazine

FIRST TEST

We drive Whittley's amazing new 550 pocket cruiser

EXPERT TIPS

How to install your fishfinder



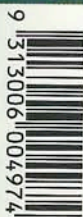
SCOOP!

First look at Mercury's supercharged 250

OUTBOARD SPECIAL

Hot new releases reviewed

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- Suzuki 250hp four-stroke
- Volvo Penta D3 sterndrive



HAINES HUNTER 5.6 BOWRIDER
2000 model, 150hp Johnson, Brooker trailer, skipole, storm covers, as new.
Tel (02) 4384 5482 \$32,000 ono



SEA RAY 220 SELECT
1995 model, mint condition, 7.3lt, kept under cover, power helmseat, very low hours, tel (02) 9960 4044 \$46,990



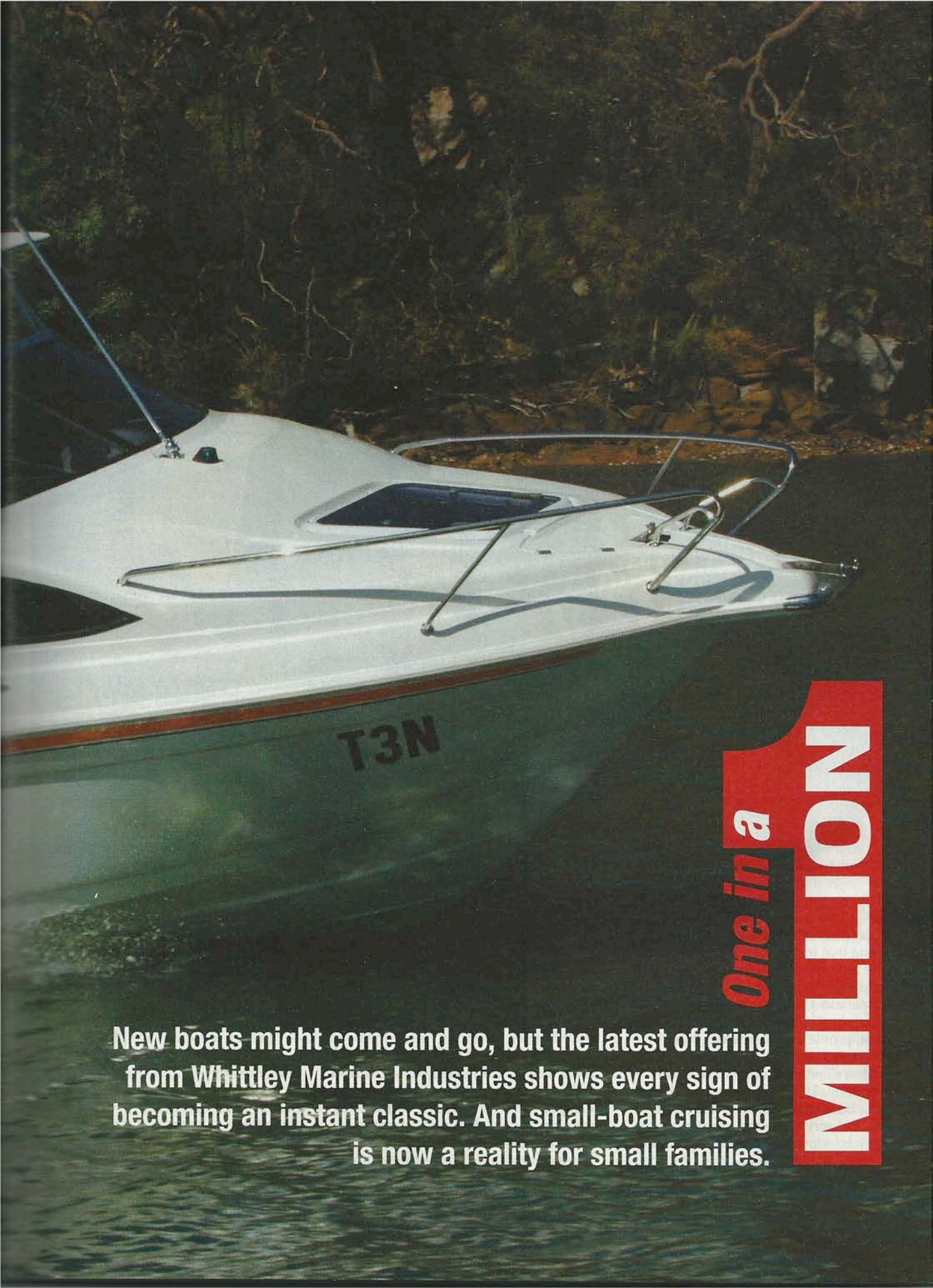
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Honda 130, 240lt underfloor tank, poles, chair, electronics, too much to list. Tel 0419 404 015 \$54,500

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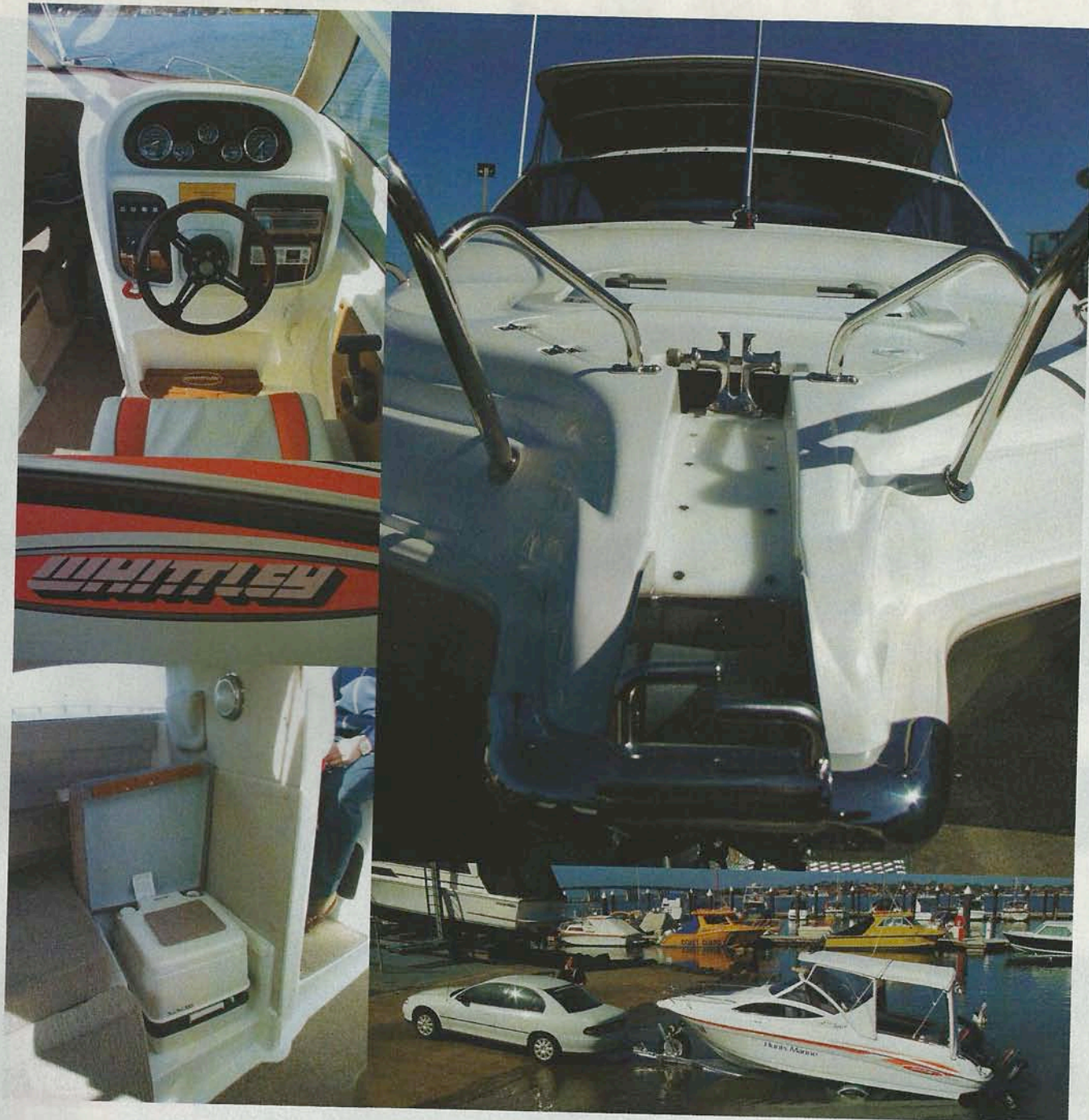






New boats might come and go, but the latest offering from Whittley Marine Industries shows every sign of becoming an instant classic. And small-boat cruising is now a reality for small families.

One in a
MILLION



Being a judge for the Australian Boat of the Year Awards can be a protracted and painful affair. The thing that makes it especially difficult is the amount of repetition. Trailerboats, in particular, are often built to suit a price and a purpose using a proven formula. There is nothing wrong with that, providing those boats don't purport to be something more.

That's certainly not the case with Whittleby. The Melbourne-based boatbuilder is breathing fresh air into the industry. Take the new Cruiser 550, which follows hot on the heels of the Cruiser 660, the innovative boat that won the Boat of the Year award from a field of more than 50 boats.

The smallest boat that you can

reasonably expect to camp aboard is not unlike a caravan on the water. It is able to be towed behind a family six-cylinder car, comes packaged with a modest outboard or inboard motor, and has amenities including a two-metre vee-berth, sink with running water, stove and Porta Pottie.

While such amenities have long been part of the winning formula for Whittleby, the way they come together in the new 550 is refreshing. After all, creating a camper within a mere 5.30m-long hull requires a lot of design intelligence.

Computer-software programs, 3D human ergonomic crash-test dummies, laminar-flow projections and a 1/16th model were all integral to the design process. But so, too, something not

Clockwise from top left: Comfy helm seat and great views; Moulded bowsprit and quality anchoring equipment; Easy launching from the Mackay trailer; Portable picnic pack; What's in a name?

available to a lot of other boatbuilders — decades of experience gleaned from hands-on family trailerboating. And it shows.

JUST LAUNCHED

An entry-level version of the award-winning 660, the 550 Cruiser flaunts the company's new-generation styling. The boat is a modern alternative to the Impala 530, a classic cruiser being made for the moment at least.



“This Melbourne-based boatbuilder is breathing fresh air into the industry”

Coincidentally, a husband-and-wife couple arrived at the ramp with their Impala as we set about launching of the new 550 Cruiser. Compared to the classic Impala, the bold new 550 is a lot more rakish and, well, a cleaner-looking boat.

The 550 has been warmly received following its debut at the Melbourne and Sydney boat shows. Unlike the bigger models, the 550 Cruiser weighs a manageable 1525kg on road, which was well within the 2100kg (braked) hitch limit of the accompanying Commodore or the 2500kg load limit of a Falcon.

A cut above your run-of-the-mill cradle, the Mackay single-axle trailer had mechanical brakes, mesh walkways, submersible lights, a spare wheel and a two-speed winch with strap. Best of all, it was a drive-on/drive-off affair that made launching and retrieval a snap for one person.

HIGH STANDARDS

Measuring 5.3m excluding the moulded bowsprit and integrated boarding platform, the 550 hull is a real gem. I don't pass that judgement lightly, mind you, but base the verdict on the sound construction, its feel crossing boat wakes and wind waves, and the stability and volume that defies its specification. As the 550 has tickets on American,

Asian and European boat markets, it is built to demanding NMMA and CE standards. It has closed-cell foam under the floor for flotation and sound deadening, and foam-filled fibreglass stringers for stiffness.

The hull has been subjected to collision testing, and its fuel and electrical systems meet fire retarding and shock standards. All these things contribute to an overall feeling of solidity and strength. The lack of sound has as much to do with generating a smooth ride as the fine forefoot and 19° of deadrise testify.

I noticed a flat planning plank, big reverse chines and pronounced inner strakes for lift along the hull bottom. Up top, the 550 doesn't waste space by using wide coamings or external walkarounds to the bow. The boat's living area extends right to the hull sides and contains a lot of goodies within.

SMART LAYOUT

The deck gear is good quality and, as far as I could see, all through-bolted. The anchoring arrangement includes a moulded bowsprit, stainless-steel fairlead, teflon chain skid, and bollard with locking pin so you can cruise armed with a 10lb plough. The anchor locker is nice and deep, but there's no deadeye.

Internally, a deep cabin and big companionway help you reach the deck hatch. The split bowrail provides a handhold while dispatching the anchor. There is no windlass, but I guess there's room to fit one. The amidships cleats, which are accessible externally, are designed to swing fenders during those annual Whitley raft-ups.

Things get more interesting at the transom. This outboard-powered 550 had an integrated full-width boarding platform with a surprising amount of buoyancy. Two people could sit on the transom and dangle their toes or cast a line without fear of shipping water. With three adults standing aft or leaning into the gunwales, the 550 felt stable and safe.

The young'uns will appreciate the concealed swim ladder, and a cockpit shower is an option. The big boarding steps lead to the aft quarter seats, whose padded bases can be removed to make way for incoming sandy feet. The engine well is an extra big one to stop slop coming aboard, and when reversing I noticed that the transom lifts up and stays dry.

A full-length, factory-fitted camper cover improves the comfort in the cockpit. The canopy was well grounded and apparently strong enough to leave in place when towing. During testing,



the side panels flapped annoyingly and the press-studs to anchor them down didn't line up. This was just an adjustment issue, the dealer said.

COMFORT & STYLE

I tried the quarter seats and considered them generously proportioned and comfortable for big blokes. There are handrails and drinkholders alongside and storage space under the transom to the oil bottle to port, battery on the centreline and fuel filter to starboard.

Clip-in cockpit carpet was a nice touch, but the amount of internal vinyl trim borders on obsessive. The '70s jaffa-orange panels on the coamings, where fishing lines and ropes are likely to rub, could be a maintenance issue.

I got down on my haunches and found excellent access into the bilge, but no pump. The dealer made subsequent enquires and, defying all logic, the pump is an option. Just as well we didn't forget the bung!

But full marks for the inspection hatch to the sender for the fuel tank — which is a 115lt underfloor polypropylene number — and standard issue teak lunch table, which hinges off the splash well. There are also fully-lined storage sidepockets.

The comfortable helm seats have swing-away backrests and flip-back

bases. The skipper's seat harbours a sink with 43lt of pressurised fresh water, while beneath the copilot's seat is a single-burner alcohol stove and cutting board.

A portable picnic pack — which is a plastic tupperware container with an insulated cover and shoulder strap — is located in another recess under the copilot's seat. It's perfect for taking lunch ashore or bringing prawns aboard after dropping by the co-op.

Full marks for the storage net ahead of the copilot for personals such as sunscreen, wallets and mobile phone. There are footrests at the helm and funny little vinyl accent panels nearby that would be better served as storage nooks for, say, a fire extinguisher.

CABIN CAPERS

As mentioned, the entrance to the cabin is a great, big inviting one for such a little boat. The level of trim and quality of fabric upholstery is not unlike what you will find in a six-figure luxury cruiser. There's headroom for two adults while sitting on the vee-berth, storage space and a loo behind the dash.

Two struts locate between the vee-berth to support the main infill cushions, which are permanently attached to the boat, leaving only a small, loose cushion to create a double

bed. Measuring two metres down the centreline, the double bed is surely the biggest in this boat's class. It's a great playpen for the kids if nothing else.

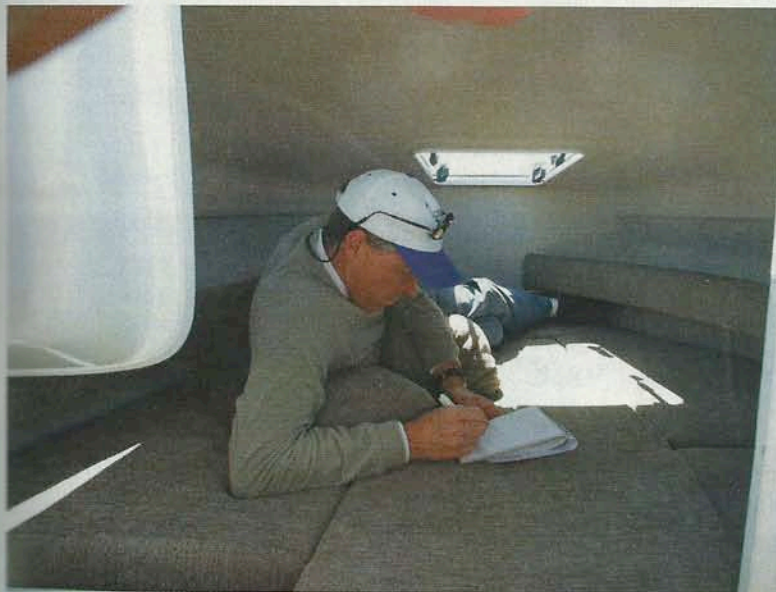
Curtains are needed for privacy, especially if you intend to sit on the dunny. I also noted that the carpeted cockpit sole is wide enough to sleep two kids, or even another couple of adults on an airbed. Camping holidays here we come!

The moulded dash has mock walnut panels with chrome-rimmed Faria gauges conveying engine revs, speed, fuel, trim level and battery volts. There was a dealer-fitted GME marine stereo with CD and 27meg radio. A carpeted dash panel eliminated most of the glare from the windscreen, whose framework is part of the deck moulding.

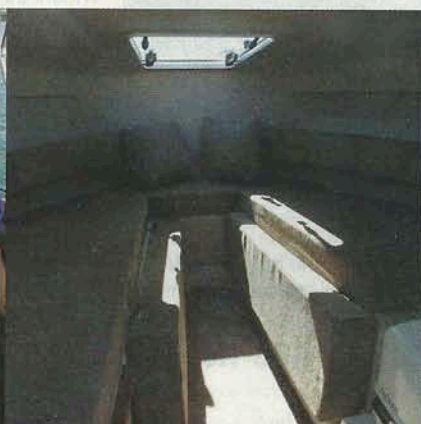
The front windscreen panels are armourplate glass and there is no distortion. In fact, the view from the helm and copilot seats is simply excellent when seated, which is how you tend to drive Whitley boats. But the helm seat and wheel aren't adjustable, so try before you buy.

RIVER RIDER

I drove this boat upriver, around some winding bends, across boat wakes and through wavelets caused by a spring sea breeze. The difference between this



“The level of trim and quality of fabric upholstery is not unlike what you will find in a six-figure luxury cruiser”



and most trailerable cabin boats was obvious. Discernible to the ear and to the touch, the Cruiser 550 is exceptionally quiet, smooth riding and a delight to drive.

The 115hp Yamaha V4 outboard was linked to mechanical steering and, while I normally opt for hydraulic on motors above 90hp, the wheel wasn't heavy in the early stages of the boat's life. The 17in stainless-steel propeller lets you corner tightly without the prop breaking free.

The two-stroke motor was being run in on double oil, hence the filthy smokescreen that had me thinking of a four-stroke. But for such a compact motor it had plenty of giddy-up and go. At 3000rpm with three adults the hull held a low planing speed of about 21kmh. It felt happiest with a touch of negative trim at 3500rpm doing 39kmh or 4000rpm and 45.6kmh. Top speed was 76kmh at 5800rpm, which is plenty fast enough for a family boat.

Opposite page: Factory-fitted camper cover for cockpit comfort. Clockwise from top left: Tough job, but someone's gotta do it; Skipper's seat has sink with pressurised fresh water; Big, inviting cabin; Transom fishes two comfortably.

BEST TILL LAST

Whittle's design team raised the bar with the celebrated 660 Cruiser and created great expectations in the process. I went through the 550 with a fine-toothed comb to do the nitpicking. The only real omission, the bilge pump, will cost a couple of hundred dollars, or less if you install it yourself.

A capsule of clever design, the 550 Cruiser will appeal to families and couples keen to cruise enclosed waterways and dangle a line offshore when the weather is fine.

Innovation to write home about and a price that won't break the bank — boats like this don't come along very often.

WHITTLEY 550 CRUISER

Price as tested: \$52,690 with 115hp Yamaha two-stroke outboard, tandem trailer, dealer-fitted options and registrations

Options Fitted: CD player and speakers, 27meg radio, rear cockpit carpet, boat and trailer registrations

Priced from: About \$51,248 as driveaway package

GENERAL

Material: GRP hull and stringers, foam filling
Length (overall): 6.07m
Hull length: 5.30m
Beam: 2.20m
Deadrise: 19°
Rec/max hp: 90/140
Weight: 1525kg on road

CAPACITIES

Fuel: 115lt
Water: 43lt
Passengers: Six adults
Accommodation: Two + two

ENGINE

Make/model: Yamaha 115hp outboard
Type: Carburetted 90° V4 petrol two-stroke
Rated hp: 115 @ 5000-5500rpm
Displacement: 1.73lt
Weight: About 167kg
Drive (make/ratio): XL outboard 2:1
Props: S/S three-blade 17in

SUPPLIED BY: Hunts Marine, 629 Princess Highway, Blakehurst, NSW, tel (02) 9546 1324

For your nearest dealer, tel (03) 9465 1644 or visit www.whittley.com.au