



HARDTOP CONTENDER

With a new man at the helm, Challenger Boats has given its flagship model a makeover to kick-start the company's expansion plans.

John Eichelsheim tests the new 720HT.

Photos: Mike Hunter



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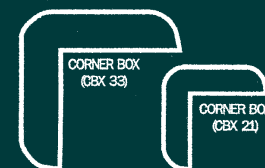
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CORNER BOX
(CBX 33)

CORNER BOX
(CBX 21)



(BC 21)
6 or 9mm Groove

(BC 33)
6,9 or 12mm Groove

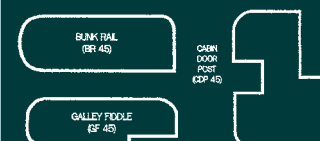


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STYLE AND RAIL
LDSR 45 or 65mm

EDGING
(ED 20)



CORNER
POST (CP 42)
42mm RADIUS



BUNK RAIL
(BR 45)

GALLEY FIDDLE
(GF 45)

CABIN
DOOR
POST
(CDP 45)



CORNER POST
(CP 20)
20mm RADIUS

CABIN
DOOR
POST
(CDP 33)



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Challenger Boats is on the move. With a new major shareholder in Tony Hawker, the Bay of Plenty boatbuilder has plans to increase production and expand its range, starting with a move from its Te Puke manufacturing plant to new premises in Mt Maunganui.

"The new premises will allow us to expand, and also offer the space for a showroom with street frontage and excellent exposure on a busy road," explains Hawker.

An example of a new addition to the range is the Challenger 720HT (hardtop) we trialled on Tauranga Harbour. It's a development of Challenger's proven 720, the largest boat in the company's range, and is offered in hardtop guise powered either by a diesel inboard (as reviewed) or an outboard.

Recognised for their quiet running and soft riding characteristics, Challenger Boats have been around since 1994, building an 18-model range of fibreglass trailer boats from 5.5m to 7.2m. Designed by Challenger Boat's founder Allan McNearney, who still works for the company, Challenger hulls are unusual

amongst fibreglass trailerboats in that they have no strakes. This results in quiet running and a soft ride, with the chine rail and underwater hull profile providing the necessary lift.

Grafting a hardtop to an existing design is a popular option these days, given the popularity and practicality of hardtops in New Zealand's changeable weather. A hardtop greatly extends a boat's usability, allowing year-round boating if you're keen.

Challenger Boats have gone down the hardtop route with the 720HT. It has the raked stem (what the company calls "a long entry, monohedral hull form") and strake-less hull common to the whole Challenger range. The beam is carried well forward, offering volume inside the boat, and a variable deadrise flows into a moderate 18.5-degrees at the transom. The chine rail runs almost parallel with the deck all the way to the bow.

Proven hull

It's not easy thing making a hardtop work with a boat's existing lines. Challenger hasn't made a bad fist of it, but the tall hardtop is certainly a dominant feature of the boat, both on the trailer and on the water.

However, unlike some hardtops, Challenger's offer standing headroom, even if you're two-metres tall. That said, my feeling is that the hardtop could be a little lower without compromising accommodation inside, which would make it a little less imposing. Hawker explains that its dimensions are largely the result of the available toughened glass windscreens – a case of one size fits all.

The 720HT is a conventional fibreglass trailerboat in most respects. The hull's

been around since the mid-1990s, but the decks have been modified to accept the hardtop, increase cabin space and to accommodate a larger anchor locker with an automatic capstan.

Construction is strong, with hull and decks Plexus-bonded, then screwed and fibreglassed together, with sealed underfloor compartments providing strength, stiffness and buoyancy.

The layout of the review craft is influenced by its diesel engine installation, which is tidy and surprisingly



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WHANGAREI HARBOUR

Northland Boat Show

The Northland Boat Show at Marsden Cove Boat Show just continues to grow in popularity with every year it is staged. Marine industry sources say the Northland Boat Show now rates as one of the top three boat shows in New Zealand, which is a compelling reason to display or attend as a visitor. Timed to capture the pre summer buying period, it is the perfect occasion to replace or upgrade boats and marine equipment. Don't miss out; put it in your diary – November 7 & 8

Free entry – The Northland Boat Show is one place where the family can have a great day out without an entry fee.

Boat trials – Again, it will be the only boat show where the majority of craft displayed are available for sea trial and comparison. Exhibits will include big boats, trailer boats, marine recreation and fishing items, plus a range of motor vehicles suitable for hauling trailer boats.

Food stalls – A variety of food, espresso coffee and beverage stalls will be placed at intervals around the show.



Location:

Marsden Cove is located near Marsden Point close to the southern entrance to Whangarei Harbour. Follow the signs from the roundabout on State Highway One.



November 7th & 8th, 2009. 10am - 4pm

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unobtrusive. The Cummins Mercruiser 2.8-litre QSD turbo-charged, common-rail diesel produces 210hp at the propeller. It's a four-cylinder unit that revs to a maximum of 3900rpm, with maximum torque at 2600rpm. The torque curve is relatively flat and particularly strong in the mid-range, where it's most useful.

It was this aspect of the boat's/engine's performance that was most impressive – for most of the review we had six adults on board but the load made little difference to the performance, with almost identical top speeds and little difference in acceleration whether we had six people in the boat or three.

The engine is matched to a Mercruiser Sea Core Bravo 3 leg with Mercury's version of a duo-prop (Volvo's patent lapsed some time ago): a pair of counter-rotating, three-bladed, stainless steel propellers. The twin propellers certainly offer plenty of grip and make low-speed manoeuvring easy. Control in reverse is particularly good.

Challenger has made a tidy job of the installation. The engine sits low, and extends well back into the portafino transom, minimising the engine box's impact on cockpit space. The top of the engine box is padded to provide seating for up to two passengers. The engine cover hinges forward to expose the front of the engine and a removable transom cover allows inspection and servicing of the rear of the engine.

According to McNearney, the diesel engine's position low down in the bilge, neatly bisecting the transom, aids the boat's handling.

Performance figures

Three persons on board /120 litres of fuel

RPM	MPH	Litres/PH
1000	6	3
1500	10	8.7
2000	16 (planing)	13
2500	20	16
3000	26	22
3500	32	29
3800 (WOT)	39	38

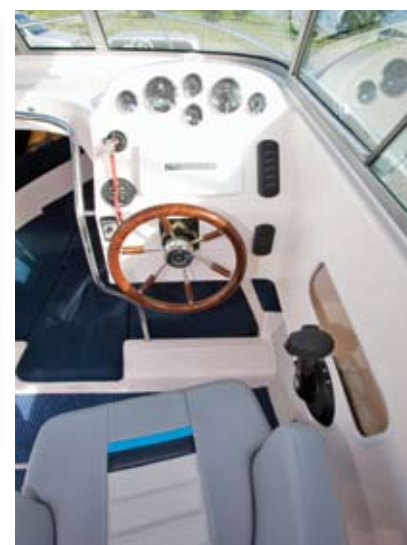
"The weight down low steadies the boat in a seaway," he explains.

Copious cockpit

The 720HT's Frontrunner-lined cockpit is a generous size. The transom cut-out and dive ladder are on the port side, with a transom locker containing the auxiliary battery on the starboard side. The start battery is in a box on the floor under the transom cutout. A vinyl transom curtain tides up the transom area and offers some extra battery protection.

The cockpit sole is covered in hardwearing, washable marine carpet and offers good footing. Water drains into the bilge, where it's dealt with by the bilge pumps, one in the engine compartment and one in the underfloor locker. But Hawker plans to incorporate cockpit scuppers in future versions of the 720, to better cope with the possibility of shipping a large quantity of water.

A 215-litre underfloor fuel tank should give plenty of range, but between it and the inboard diesel, underfloor stowage suffers; the diesel model's underfloor



locker is quite small compared to the locker in the petrol-powered version.

Across the transom is a socket for the boat's stainless steel ski-pole, which accepts a nicely-made, stainless and PVC bait station with five rodholders. Side shelves are deep and wide enough to be useful. There's toe-room under them and rod racks are fitted to the gunwales, complementing four through-coaming rodholders and a sensibly raked, six-position rocket launcher.

A pair of upholstered pedestal seats are well served by moulded footrests, and an excellent handrail wraps right around the cabin bulkhead opening. This boat's layout is pitched at offshore fishermen; seating options are flexible, with back-to-back, loungers and king and queen seats in any mix 'n' match arrangement.

Up forward, vee-berths with an infill allow overnighting, while sidepockets offer a fair amount of stowage. The cabin is Frontrunner-lined but here and there



the detailing was lacking. Access to the foredeck is via the front hatch, where the anchor locker, Quick remotely-operated capstan, and fairlead are within reach. There's also access via the sides, with handrails positioned at the end of the mullions and an integral handrail incorporated into the rocket launcher on the roof.

From the driver's seat, controls fall nicely to hand. The moulded dash has space to flush-mount moderate-sized displays, in this case a Humminbird 957C GPS-plotter-sounder. Smartcraft gauges provide a wealth of engine and navigation information, including fuel flow and speed over ground, although we used a portable Garmin GPS for our speed recording. The VHF radio and stereo head unit are flush-mounted in the hardtop console.

A timber-look wheel operates Hy-drive hydraulic steering, and Lectrotab trim tab controls are within easy reach, sitting or standing. I found myself using them a fair bit in the windy conditions we experienced on test day. Cross winds, a fairly tall hardtop and six passengers moving around the boat made tab use mandatory.

Even with six persons onboard, the

Cummins diesel made easy meat of getting the boat up and planing. Once the turbocharger catches its breath, there's an irresistible river of torque to propel the boat along. Our top speed of 35mph six-up – 39mph (63kph) with three persons onboard – was respectable enough. But it was in the middle of the rev range, at cruising speed, where the engine most impressed. No matter the sea conditions – and it was reasonably rough with a fair swell outside the harbour heads – the engine couldn't be knocked off song, its torque punching the boat through the seas.

Quiet runner

The 720 is certainly a quiet runner and Challenger paid particular attention to sound insulation when fitting the engine. Mercury Marine's Chris Ethell was very involved in the engine installation and also put the boat through its paces for our benefit. He has gone to the trouble of ducting away the turbo intake to further reduce engine noise. Compared to diesel installations in similar-sized aluminium boats, vibration was minimal so we could happily conduct a conversation at cruising speed.

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The 720's ride impressed, too, certainly in respect to landing softly and quietly.

The diesel liked to have the nose trimmed well-in. The propellers certainly hang on in a turn, where the 720HT heels over considerably, although once again the drive needed to be trimmed well in. The boat tracks well and showed no tendency to bury its nose in a following sea, despite its raked bow. It also seems fairly dry, which is good, since there's no wiper fitted to the windscreen – a \$1500 optional extra.

Fuel consumption is very reasonable; at gamefish trolling speed the engine burns only six litres an hour. At a comfortable, distance-eating cruise of 20mph (32kph), the fuel burn is 16 litres per hour, rising to 22lph at 26mph (42kph).

The Challenger 720HT is supplied on a Prescott dual-axle multi-roller trailer, braked on one axle. The trailer is hot-dip galvanised and equipped with leaf springs, a manual two-speed winch and a spare wheel.

Boating's verdict

Diesel won't be for everyone – the extra cost alone may put many buyers off – but Challenger has achieved a tidy installation that performs well with the company's proven 720 hull.

The addition of a hardtop makes this a serious bluewater contender, with the range to contemplate extended cruising and gamefishing. No doubt the rumble of a diesel engine will prove a great fish attractor as well.

Where the extra outlay of a diesel engine can't be justified, Challenger Boats offer the same hardtop model – with a passenger side, back-to-back seat – in outboard guise (200hp Mercury Optimax) for a lot less money. ■



Challenger 720HT

designer	Alan McNearney
builder	Challenger Boats
construction	GRP
Loa	7.2m
boa	2.45m
deadrise variable	18° at transom
horsepower range	up to 250hp
engine options	inboard diesel, outboard
max speed	39mph
fuel capacity	215 litres
length on trailer	8.3m
height on trailer	3.15m
trailerable weight	2700kg
price as tested	\$127,975
packages from (200hp outboard)	\$98,957

ENGINE

make	Cummins-Mercuriser
type	QSD 2.8-litre common-rail, turbocharged
horsepower	210hp
cylinders	four in-line
max rpm	3880rpm
propellers	Bravo 3 leg; two counter-rotating, three-bladed stainless steel
price	\$54,841

TRAILER

manufacturer	Prescott Trailers
braked	over-ride on one axle
suspension	leaf spring, zinc-coated
rollers	multiple
features	submersible LED lights