

# This'll blow your hair back



## The perfect boat for dedicated fishos is also the perfect boat for summer.

Challenger Boats has launched its first centre console, dubbed the 'Softbaiter' because of its ideal configuration for fishing.

It debuted at the Tauranga boat show and featured on the cover of last month's Waterline. Tony Hawker and the team from Challenger are giving it a good workout on the waters of the Bay.

The boat is light, simple and functional, with loads of space, and the full walk-around provides a fantastic fishing platform, with 360 degrees of possibilities.

The bow seat is the place to be, as Tony found out on a recent Sunday, chasing gurnard and tarakihi off Papamoa.

Set up with a 90hp Mercury, the Softbaiter is no slouch. With less windage and less weight than your usual 550, this Challenger whips along at a cruising speed of 45km/h at 4600rpm, with a top speed of 68km/h and the Mercury singing at 5600rpm.

The legendary strakeless Challenger hulls are super quiet and smooth.

On a test drive on Tauranga Harbour, on a perfect Tuesday afternoon, we took the 550CC for a spin. The new centre console got plenty of admiring looks from the many fishos at the busy ramp.

Three up, we headed out for a photo session.

Tony took on the wake of the pilot boat, doing around 64km/h and I thought, 'hello, this will get interesting'. (Not an exact translation, but this is a family magazine)

However the Challenger ate the steep wake and remained dry as .... (fill in your own cliché here)

Centre consoles often take a bad rap, with some early versions, particularly of the inflatable variety, providing a wet ride.

Not so the well-refined hulls of the 550CC. As usual with these Challenger hulls, the ride was superb and the handling impeccable.

The layout of the Softbaiter is simple and versatile. Challenger have kept it this way not only for clean, uncluttered fishing space, but also to keep weight and cost down.

There are obviously any number of options for adding gear to suit particular needs and budgets and the inspiring thing about this design is that it's so open, it's like a blank canvas.

The bow features a double-opening anchor hatch and can be easily accessed from the forward cockpit. The well is reinforced for a drum winch if that is an option.

The single seat in front of the console is a prime fishing position. The console itself is a large watertight locker with plenty of room for valuables and lunch.



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# Keeping it simple

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The steering wheel is slightly offset to suit a driver alone, or two people side-by-side. The seat base also has a good storage locker under the squab and a pair of squab-topped bins sit neatly behind the driver seat, making two rear-facing seat positions.

These bins can be moved around the boat or taken out completely if desired.

The underfloor locker is long enough for skis and dive gear and also houses the tote tank, neatly tucked away.

This makes the whole rig a breeze to wash out, with no carpet or tricky corners to catch debris.

Just a quick squirt and she's clean and ready.

The transom has a walk-through to the boarding platform on the port side and a sturdy bait station slides into rod holders amidships.

The options for customising abound.

A bimini for a bit of shade or even a full clears canopy.



Rod holders for the bow seat fishing position ... you name it.

Or, you could keep it simple, clean, uncluttered and just get out there amongst them.

At around \$33,500 as tested, the Softbaiter is good value for money. It offers a light, easily handled and top performing fishing boat that will also be a load of fun for a family summer.

Hardy fishos will find the all-around access ideal for line fishing and softbaiting.

It's a dive boat with some get-up-and-go and would be a great little ski/wakeboard/toy tow craft too. But as we always say at Waterline, don't just take our word for it, try it out yourself.

**Brian Rogers**



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