



Words **John Eichelsheim**  
Photos **Jack Hawker**

**At a glance** ▶ loa x beam 5.5m x 2.15m ▶ engine Mercury 90hp two-stroke outboard ▶ cruising speed 23 knots ▶ maximum speed 32.4 knots ▶ price as tested \$33,500

## New Boats tested

NEW ZEALAND'S MOST  
COMPREHENSIVE BOAT TESTS

# Challenger 550 CC Softbaiter

Challenger Boats is taking on aluminium boat manufacturers with a simple, affordable, centre-console sportfisher aimed squarely at soft bait and fly fishers.

Continuing a trend that has seen the emergence of small centre-console craft from a number of New Zealand trailerboat manufacturers, Tauranga's Challenger Boats have introduced the Challenger 550 CC (centre-console) Softbaiter, a new model based on their capable Terry Reid-designed 550 C cabin boat, but featuring new deck mouldings and totally new moulded centre-console.

Until recently, such boats have been the preserve of aluminium boat manufacturers, some of whom have adapted existing models in their range to meet the growing demand for centre-console boats in New Zealand. Aluminium boatbuilders don't have the tooling costs faced by fibreglass boat manufacturers, so can modify existing hulls easily enough and even build new models from scratch, but a new model in fibreglass is slightly unusual.

In most respects Challenger MD Tony Hawker and his team have been sensible with this boat, simply cutting down the cabin version's deck moulds for the new model. The result works well enough, although visually its cabin boat heritage is clear.

To keep the price competitive, the stripped-out boat comes with simple bench and bin seating, a flo-coated interior, and non-slip painted cockpit sole. Although equipped to CPC standard,

features such as dive ladders, a bait station and transom door are optional extras, as they are with the rest of the Challenger Boats range.

To my mind, the barebones approach doesn't detract from the boat at all, since many 'standard' features are of little use to the serious angler, and anyway, it's rather fun fitting out your own boat as and when you can afford to. By keeping the base price down, Challenger has broadened its potential market for this boat.

As far as fishing is concerned, opening up the front half of the 550 maximises the available space, allowing one angler to fish from the bow (two becomes a little crowded), while the other(s) fish from the cockpit. Although it will accommodate four, I feel the boat better suits two anglers.

It is possible to fish three adults along one side of the boat, as may be required when drift-fishing, but the 550 CC takes on a noticeable list due to the hull's moderately deep vee. It's not scary or anything – with a generous beam and plenty of freeboard, the boat feels safe enough – but the 550 CC doesn't provide quite the rock-steady platform of some centre-console boats.

Where the boat excels is in its ride. The strakeless hull with its convex underwater sections – a Terry Reid design signature – ensures a smooth, remarkably dry ride. For a small, open boat, the 550 CC travels very nicely indeed and Tony, his son Jack

**“For a small, open boat, the 550 CC travels very nicely indeed”**

**Test conditions** > Tauranga Harbour to Papamoa, 10-15 knots SW, calm.

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The new centre-console design opens up the the whole of the 550 CC to fishing. It works best with two or three fishers, but four is not unworkable, especially with one on the helm



The well designed console has space for a decent-sized flush-mounted display and the controls are pleasingly light, not stiff like some installations



Plenty of fishing room in the cockpit, with good toeroom and mid-thigh coamings



Good access past the console and reasonable fishing room in the bow



A bench-style helm seat with under-squab stowage and two removable seat bins



A Papamoa soft bait trevally destined to become marinated fish that evening

## Boating's test day notes

### Below deck

#### Design brief

A handy centre-console boat aimed at lure and flyfishers who might otherwise buy aluminium. Starting with the company's well-proven and popular 550 C cabin, Challenger Boats cut down the deck moulds and added a completely new moulded console with a forward-facing seat. By modifying the deck moulds rather than creating completely new ones, tooling costs were (relatively) minimal, allowing Challenger to offer the basic package at a very competitive price.

#### Construction

Construction is hand-laid fibreglass with glass stringers and a moulded cockpit sole. Challenger has added strengthening underfloor to compensate for the missing cabin. No strakes and a slightly convex, variable deadrise hull flattening out to 18° at the transom give a soft, quiet ride. Spray rails direct spray away from the boat. Mouldings are tidy, but inside finishing is basic: flo-coat on the sides and non-slip paint on the floor. Hulls come with a five-year structural warranty.

#### Engine

A 90hp Mercury carburetted two-stroke has ample power for this rig. It's not the smoothest or quietest engine, but a willing performer at the upper end of the rev range. Cable steering and engine control cables are routed under the floor in a tidy installation and the controls are not unacceptably stiff, as sometimes happens with centre-consoles. An open transom locker houses the battery box and a high capacity bilge pump is located underfloor aft.

#### Cockpit

An open cockpit, with easy walk-around and ample space to squeeze past the centre console. Painted non-slip sole, but the hull's flare reduces toe-room. Four plastic through-coaming rodholders, plus two across the transom, and two more forward; a rod rack each side and an underfloor locker aft which held two tote tanks. Stowage in the console locker, console seat, the helm seat, seat bins and six side compartments. There is a pair of plastic horn cleats aft, a step-through transom and moulded swimsteps.

#### Electronics

Standard Mercury analogue gauges, a four-position switch panel and a Humminbird 788CI eight-inch sounder-GPS-chartplotter were fitted to the test boat. There is room for a full complement of instruments, including a good-sized display flush-mounted in the console.

#### At the helm

A simple bench-type helm seat with padded top accommodates two behind the console. The moulded console features a stainless steel grabrail and an acrylic screen. Controls are logically positioned with the wheel offset slightly to starboard. The driving position is good, with better protection sitting down. Controls are firm but not overly stiff and the boat itself is responsive to driver input and a pleasure to throw around.



and myself had no qualms about heading outside Tauranga Harbour and along the coast to Papamoa for a fish.

On the way we passed through the usual pressure waves in the Tauranga Harbour entrance, some quite large, before attacking the ocean swells outside. A 15-knot offshore breeze was responsible for plenty of whitecaps out to sea, but conditions were reasonably pleasant closer in. A comfortable 15 or 20-minute run out to the east took us to an area Tony had heard was producing the odd snapper for kayak fishers.

We'd packed a couple of large tackle bags under the seats and cameras into the console locker (which will receive a shelf in the next boat). Rods were stowed either in the racks along the sides or in the rodholders. There are four through-coaming plastic holders, plus two across the transom which accept the optional bait station. Two more holders up front service anglers working out of the bow, but these are for rod storage only due to their

### Performance data

#### Speed as tested

(with tide), Humminbird GPS

RPM	Speed (knots)
idle	3.9
2000	6.6
2500	7.9
3000	12.4
3500	16.8
4000	20.0
4500	23.0
5000	26.5
5500	29.6
5800	32.4

\* No fuel flow figures available

near-vertical angle.

There's additional stowage in a number of shallow, open side lockers, but these are of limited use except for odds and ends. Tote tanks filled the underfloor locker, but subsequent boats may be modified to allow under-transom tote tank stowage to free up the underfloor space, says Tony.

#### Accommodation

Seating for up to five, with two seat-bins removable if not required. Handholds around the console but nowhere else, so rear-facing passengers have nothing to hold onto. Standing passengers must stand either side of the console, where they risk getting wet, as does the passenger sitting on the seat in front of the console if the sea is rough, but this is one of the disadvantages of centre-console designs.

#### Anchoring

Access is excellent thanks to the walkaround decks. The anchor locker is average size and a powered capstan is certainly an option. On a small boat like this, a powered winch is a luxury rather than a necessity. There is a stainless steel bollard and pin on the short foredeck, a stainless fairlead and an average-sized anchor locker with lid to complete the picture forward.

#### Trailer

The boats rides on a sturdy galvanised steel, single-axle A-frame Prescott trailer with two sets of two wobble rollers per side, keel rollers and guide rollers. The unbraked trailer features LED lights and a manual winch. Launch and retrieval were easy, the boat centring nicely on the trailer, which supports it on rollers along the keel line rather than on the wobble rollers.



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# Challenger 550 CC Softbaiter

key features

Good-size cockpit with the battery and oil tanks nicely up off the floor in open transom lockers

Moderate size anchor locker with provision for an electric capstan if desired

Portafino transom may be modified so that tote tanks fit under the transom locker, freeing up the underfloor locker for general stowage

Good console design and excellent walkaround maximise the fishing room. Graphics are an extra



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# Challenger 550 CC Softbaiter

technical

## PROS

- practical layout
- plenty of fishing space
- smooth, dry ride
- good performance with 90hp
- cheap boating

## CONS

- base price equals basic fit-out as reviewed
- tote tanks eat into underfloor stowage
- not as stable at rest as some centre-consoles



## Challenger 550 CC Softbaiter

- loa 5.5m ► lwl 5.1m ► beam 2.15m ► draft approx 0.31m at rest ► weight 980kg (on trailer) ► engine Mercury 90hp two-stroke outboard  
► propeller 17-inch alloy ► fuel tote tanks ► cruising speed 23 knots ► max speed 32 knots ► price as reviewed \$33,500 ► designer Terry Reid  
► builder Challenger Boats ► enquiries Challenger Boats Ltd 07 575 0497 www.challengerboats.co.nz

We set a drogue off the bow, but a combination of wind and tide resulted in an awkward drift with the boat yawing around a fair bit. This is a common problem with a drogue off the bow; in calm conditions the drogue is better off the stern quarter. Serious soft baiters might rig a running yoke system to ensure the boat drifts side-on.

Although we marked a bit of sign at intervals on the sounder, our short soft-bait fishing session was hardly red-hot. I managed a nice trevally and dropped an unidentified fish, while Tony hooked and lost a couple of fish.

What the session did prove was that the boat works well for soft baiting. At the bow, the prime position is on the forward-facing padded console seat with your feet comfortably braced against the foredeck. This allows you to fish to either side of

**“The session did prove that the boat works well for soft-baiting.”**

the boat. Standing works too, but I found it difficult to brace myself against the coaming due to the hull's flare, as is the case with most small centre-console boats. It's quite OK in calm conditions but it could well feel a lot less secure when it's lumpy.

Further aft, the wide cockpit offers mid-thigh support and room to fish two anglers side by side.

On our run home, we gave the Mercury its head. The engine seems

happiest at the upper end of the rev range, where it feels really strong. Top speed was a bit over 32 knots with three adults aboard. Hole shots are good and there was no suggestion of cavitation in the turns. The hull seems to perform best on a level trim; lift the bow too much and you lose some of the softness in the ride.

## OUR VERDICT

**The Challenger 550 CC is definitely a strong contender if you're in the market for an easily-handled, easily-towed runabout for soft bait fishing. The walkaround layout makes the most of the available space and the well-proven hull is a sweet runner that offers the kind of ride most aluminium hulls aspire to but never achieve.**

**On the other hand, the fact that it is adapted from an existing model does show in slightly awkward styling and a certain amount of tenderness at rest. Some of the ergonomics, particularly around the foredeck, are also**

**less than ideal, although improvements have already been scheduled.**

**For the money, the little Challenger has a lot going for it, and if you want to spend a bit more there's a comprehensive range of optional extras. A couple of keen flyfishers or soft baiters would enjoy a day's fishing from this capable little centre-console, safe in the knowledge that they'll get home, mostly dry and a lot less shaken up than some, if the weather decides to cut up rough while they're out. That knowledge should compensate for a bit of rock and roll at rest.**