



RIB Revolution

Rigid inflatables aren't confined to yacht garages anymore. They're often the primary family boat.

By ZUZANA PROCHAZKA

SIZE & PAYLOAD

Modern RIBs are growing. It's not difficult to find a RIB longer than 40 feet, but they don't have to be big to carry a sizeable payload. A 16-foot RIB has so much buoyancy that it can accommodate more people and gear than a comparably sized fiberglass or aluminum boat. Due to their inflatable nature, RIBs are also lighter than their solid counterparts. That means owners don't need a pickup truck or SUV to tow one.

"Americans are used to big things, and it seems everyone has an F150," said Tom Watson of Highfield Boats. "But you can tow RIBs under 25 feet with a smaller car or a hybrid, which is great for the more urban crowd."

RIBs are somewhat collapsible. With a RIB's tubes deflated, owners can legally tow a large (and wide) one without a permit, and they likely can fit a RIB into a tight shed for storage. And because they're lighter, chances are owners can find a hard river or lake bank to launch a RIB off the trailer, rather than being bound to the boat ramp.

RIDE & STABILITY

RIBs ride well even in rough seas. The fiberglass or aluminum V-hulls help them track well, slice through chop and keep the center of gravity low, and the large tubes make them stable by keeping the buoyancy far outboard. A day of fishing in a RIB will result in less fatigue, and even if several anglers fish off one side, a RIB will stay upright and keep crewmembers on their feet. To a degree, the tubes also absorb the stress of pounding into head seas, something everyone's back will appreciate.

Dual floors have become popular, and they provide a level platform — rather than the angled hull floor of a tender — and a softer ride. Finally, squared-off bows such as those on Walker Bay and Brig models help block spray when the boat is on plane and allow for extra stowage space, which is sometimes used for a fuel tank.

EFFICIENCY & HORSEPOWER

For their length, RIBs are lighter, so they need less horsepower and get better fuel economy. As a result, buyers will spend less on a smaller outboard and put the beast on a meager diet. They'll still go faster. RIBs today can shoot over the waves at speeds greater than 90 mph, and with stepped hulls they get on plane faster.

Lighter weight means buyers can go with smaller outboards, but Americans like big things, so it's not unusual to see 300 hp (and larger) single outboards hanging off a RIB transom — or twins and triples. Williams Jet Tenders are powered by inboard Rotax jet engines. Its Sportjet 435 skims the waves at 50 mph and can comfortably seat up to seven people in 14 feet of length.

● Using jet propulsion, the Williams Sportjet 435 can reach 50 mph, but it can also seat seven people and serve as a platform for on- and in-the-water activities.

THE RIGID INFLATABLE

boat (RIB) has been the backup singer to the mothership for decades. I say "RIB," and most people say "tender" without a second thought. But in Europe, RIBs are used as standalone primary boats for all sorts of family-friendly boating activities, including fishing, towing, cruising and more. With an eye toward bringing that mentality to this side of the Atlantic, RIB manufacturers have designed boats that are stronger, faster and more versatile. In so doing, they're getting Americans to think out of the boating box and test new waters.

RIBs have plenty of attributes that make them worthy primary boats. We rounded up 11 that stand out, and there are many more, both within these 11 and others that stand alone.

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MAINTENANCE

Last generation's rubber boat may have been more fragile and needed constant care, but that's not the case today. RIB materials and construction methods have changed. Fiberglass hulls have been made lighter with vacuum infusion and have been shaped with chines and vents for better performance.

Most RIBs share the common aesthetic of a V-hull and a flotation collar that is made of PVC or a neoprene-coated nylon fabric called Hypalon. PVC is a less expensive material and is easier to work with — it can be welded without melting — so construction is faster. Hypalon is more expensive, has better UV-fighting properties and its seams must be glued, since it cannot be heated. Both materials are durable and take little maintenance. Just wash with soap, rinse with fresh water and

Squared off bows help block spray

RIB Negatives

There are a few negatives to RIB design:

- > Large inflatable tubes eat up room in the cockpit more than the straight gunwales of a hard boat.
- > Gear such as fishing rods may be more difficult to stow.
- > The really high-end fully loaded models get expensive.

Swim platform with ladder and ski tow

periodically apply a sun protectant. For best results, a cover will keep the sun, bird droppings and dirt off; it's an inexpensive way to get 10 to 15 years of service from an inflatable boat.

DURABILITY

RIBs are durable enough for new boaters. Docking or joining a raft-up can go very wrong for a nervous driver. In a hard boat, the damage incurred may require (at the very least) a buff and wax of the ding. With a RIB, not only can that driver maneuver easily, but the boat bounces off docks and other boats, so new boaters are likely to drive more frequently and with greater confidence.

Anyone who argues that RIBs are too fragile to be used as a fishing boat should take note: "I've never had anyone come back to me with a tube punctured by a fishing hook," said Brandon Ricci of

Highfield Boats. "Not one."

As for a misplaced fishing knife sinking a RIB, that's a myth. RIBs are constructed with multiple separate buoyancy chambers, so they stay afloat even if someone gets careless while cleaning a fish.

"Inflatables are used as river boats where they bash against rocks all day long," said Michael Carroll of Walker Bay Boats. "They're tough, and even if there's a puncture, a RIB still floats."

Perhaps the best argument for sheer toughness is that the military, law enforcement and the Coast Guard have all chosen



Whether an open model such as the Highfield DL 500 (above) or a T-top model such as the Zodiac Open 5.5, a RIB can be a family boat, not just a yacht tender.

To the Web

BrigBoats.com	SEArite/tn
BullHogBoats.com	Technohull.com
FishingRibs.com (Hyflo)	WalkerBay.com
HighfieldBoats.com	WilliamsJetTenders.com
SAFEBBoats.com	Zodiac-Nautic.com



Smaller outboard means less fuel and weight



RIBs for heavy-duty work. SAFE Boats, which works with these organizations, just unveiled a Multi-Mission Interceptor (MMI) that includes an aluminum hull and T-top. Civilians can probably get one — minus the gun on the bow. And by the way, military organizations take RIBs to gunfights, so you should be OK with fishhooks and knives.

Anyone who likes the idea of a RIB but just can't make peace with a soft boat should check out Bullfrog Boats. Aluminum V-hulls carry "tubes" or flotation collars made of rigid polyethylene. The Washington company has built more than 700 hulls and calls its boats indestructible.

VARIETY

Here's the best part, standalone RIBs can be whatever owners need them to be. They come in a wide variety of styles and can be outfitted a number of ways. Options on larger models include Biminis, swim platforms with ladders, dining tables, refrigerators, grills, rod holders, baitwells, heads, cabins, sunpads, embroidered upholstery, serious navigation and communication electronics such as chartplotters

and fishfinders, entertainment options and towing pylons for watersports.

Fuel tanks are integrated into the hull to keep the center of gravity low, and built-in coolers and underwater lights add customization options.

VERSATILITY

Imagine a day on the water in a 16-foot RIB such as Highfield's new DL500. Dad can run to the Canyons to fish in the morning and return in plenty of time to take the kids wakeboarding or tubing. When the kids get tired, the family can cruise nearby coves or go whale watching. A family that's more into underwater action than on-the-water thrills can drop anchor, prep the scuba tanks and go for a dive. Later, owners can take the neighbors out for a cocktail cruise while cool tunes and an underwater lightshow bring the "wow." Later, mom and dad can take the RIB to dinner. An added benefit is that a RIB may be allowed at a dinghy dock even if it exceeds the 14- or 16-foot limit, whereas a 15-foot bowrider will be shoed away.

"Like pontoon boats, RIBs are great

for entertaining," Watson said. "They're popular at the bar zone because you can sneak up to the dinghy dock or you can beach them, so they can go anywhere. Try that with a hard boat."

Rear platforms are making fishermen happy by providing a place to stand or stow buckets of bait, and more handholds, both textile and metal, provide added safety for kids. Brig models come with SeaDek premium flooring, which adds a nonskid surface, so everyone, including the dog, can be surefooted.

VALUE

Finally, it's a matter of value. Short of the large and fully loaded models, RIBs are usually more affordable, foot-for-foot, than similarly sized and equipped hard boats. Furthermore, resale values of standalone RIBs have been good.

"Because these boats are still catching on, they're valuable on the secondary market," Highfield's Ricci said. "When my customers come back to upsize, we're finding little depreciation on boats that have been well cared for."

While the Technohull Omega 45 (top) might be a bit big for some folks, models such as the Brig F570, Walker Bay Venture 14 and Williams Sportjet 435 provide smaller platforms for diving, wakeboarding and day cruising.



Brig's Eagle 6 (below) includes a prominent ski tow, pop-up cleats, a fully equipped helm and seating for seven.

Cool Stuff

Today's RIBs are head-turning sport utility vehicles packed with features found on traditional upscale center consoles, tow boats and runabouts.

Brig's 19-foot Eagle 6 comes with a retractable ski pole and pop-up cleats. Some of the builder's larger models (33 to 36 feet) offer a refrigerator, a sink, outriggers and a suite of Garmin electronics.

"With our stepped hulls, we don't need trim tabs either," said Boyd Tomkies of Brig Boats. "We reach 55 mph and can carry twin 350 hp engines, no problem."

Walker Bay is coming out with a 21-footer destined for its Generation Series that's positioned more as a dayboat than a tender. It's expected to run with a 200 hp outboard and potentially include numerous amenities including a deck shower. Meanwhile, its current 14-foot Venture model reaches 40 mph with a 70 hp outboard and has a 150-mile range with a 17-gallon fuel tank. Options include four flush-mount rod holders that can be used to hold a wakeboard rack, a flush-mount ski pole, a ladder, and a 9-inch MFD on the dash beside a stereo head unit and a VHF.

With three seating areas, Zodiac's 21-foot Pro 6.5 center console offers 25 percent more interior space to accommodate up to 10 people. With increased tankage — 50 gallons of fuel — it can go farther with either a single 175 hp or twin 80 hp outboards.

For 2019, Zodiac launched the 24-foot single-engine Medline 7.5. The dual-seat center module lifts to reveal a wet bar and a refrigerator. The bow accommodates a massive sunpad while the aft end will seat six around a table. Twin swim platforms provide easy access to the water and the through-stern anchor can be retrieved with an electric windlass. Add a composite arch loaded with speakers and lighting or a watersports tow bar.

Every builder I spoke to agreed on one point: Once people actually drive these new versatile RIBs, the benefits hit them.

"The biggest hurdle to changing the American mindset about the use of the RIB is getting people in one," Tomkies said. "Then they wonder where these boats have been all their lives." **BW**