

TESTING THE BERTRAM 31

Its neat, its cool, Ray Hunt designed it, and everyone loves it even if they wouldn't own one. And despite the fact that Bertram made 3 additional variants of the 31 hull, when you hear people talking about the Bertram 31, this is it. Possibly the most famous sport fishing boat ever built, continuously in production for 25 years right up to 1986, with the last year dubbed the "Silver Aniversery Edition."

We get a lot of requests for a review of this boat, but we have to wonder where the requesters have been living for the last quarter century. We didn't think a review would be necessary. Still don't, for that matter. But when we stopped by the Merritt Boat Works in Pompano recently and saw this one being gussied up, we took a look see and a few pix. Merritts, of course, is one of those places where, if you have to ask the cost, you are probably in the wrong place. But someone had sprung the sluice gates open on this little beauty, starting with a new paint job.

Its one of the few you'll see with a full tuna tower, whereas most with towers will be a marlin tower which is probably a much better choice for a small boat. All that weight up top can make a boat, well, a bit wobbly. This is a fishing boat and you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that its good for much of anything else, except scuba diving, for which use it also excels. I once did a Bahamas trip with four guys for a week. intending to sleep aboard, after two days we were off in seach of hotel rooms. The cabin is good for storing stuff and taking a leak, but not much else. Its mainly for the hale and hearty, for there is no escape from the sun and weather on this boat unless you want to relax in a box.

There is plenty of horizontal space, but little vertical space. As you can see in the above photo, there is no depth to the hull; its designed to place you close to the water -- and that's all. Storage? Forget it. What little there is won't keep anything dry. If you are 6-2 and 240, you probably won't like this boat much; its better scaled to smaller people. Like 5-8 and 160. A lot of folks think that this boat is built like a tank. Its not. The weights varied over the years from 10,000 to 12, 000 lbs., very light for a 31 footer. Actually she's 30'-7".

At that weight she does okay with smaller engines, which are desiraeable from her limited fuel capacity standpoint. But who the heck wants small engines in a boat like this? Damn the torpedoes, etcetera, full speed ahead. Chop a hole anywhere and you'd be surprised at how thin the laminate is. Fortunately her builders knew how to get strength from thin laminates. And they did. Although they're not beyond stress cracking along the toe rails, which is quite prevalent. The early models had wood decks and you know what that means

Its a wet boat. Big time wet, because its got a full bow with little flare. And its a southern boat, because I sure wouldn't want to be out in cold waters in this one. You won't stay dry even on the bridge. Speaking of which, on the older models is much too small. The side coamings are a good 14" in on each side, making it terribly cramped with a bench seat (which was standard) or two chairs. Notice on this one there is only one pedastal chair. On later models the bridge was mercifully widened.

The very wide (for her time) 11'-2" beam without chine flats means that shes not as deep veed as you'd expect of a Bertram. She does very well, but she's

not going to carry 22 knots into a three foot head sea. You'll get by with 16 kn, and can do 22 in two footers with a bit of kidney crunching. But her real strength is sea kindliness at trolling speeds. This is not a boat that does whip-snap rolling or pitching to throw you off your feet. That's a critical feature for any serious fishing boat where the ability to remain standing up is so important. Her VERY low center of gravity and engines amidships makes this as stable and smooth rolling a boat as you're going to get.

The cockpit deck is a whopping 14 feet long, although the engine boxes take up the forward third. Even so its a huge deck where even a full tournament chair won't cramp the action. But the cockpit depth is also a little disconcerting from the standpoint that it will hit the average sized person just at, not above the knee. There's a real problem here when leaning over the gunwale to grab a leader, as your foot wants to slip and send you over the side. The Blackfin 29 and 32, whose designers I suspect more or less copied the 31 SF, corrected this by adding another 4 inches of gunwale height. It makes a world of difference.

This is also a very simple, uncomplicated and easy boat to maintain. It just doesn't get much easier than this because there isn't much there, and what is there is easy to reach. *Its the kind of boat to own if you don't use your boat much* because there's so little there to go to rot and ruin. Note the emphasis there, guys?

Unquestionably what made this boat such a big seller are her gorgeous lines. Here it is three decades later and it is still just as attractive to contemporary eyes as ever. Once again proving that good design is timeless. In the last ten years a lot of these boats went into decline and you could pick up a run down copy pretty cheap. But they're making a comeback now and prices are escalating, though there's still a few bargains to be had. This is definitely a boat worth dumping a bunch of money into.

For a project boat, they don't get any easier than this. Just remove the engine boxes and the engines come right out. The decks are loaded with hatches and a very large removable section over the fuel tank in the center on models with glass decks. They're easy and inexpensive to paint, and with a new AwlGrip job these boats can really sparkle. If you're going to buy one, spend some money on paint. It will look absolutely like new and you'll never regret it. Even if you have to finance it. Accented with teak covering boards, or even a teak overlay on the cockpit, the boat really shines. But while teak has justifiably gone out of fashion because of high maintenance, the teak deck looks incredibly good on this boat, nicely setting off all that whiteness.

Owning one of these is about pride in ownership. Its about people who love fine boats.