REVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID LOCKWOOD

An Open Book

David Lockwood put the Luhrs 31 Open through its paces at the Port Stephens Interclub Tournament, finding it to be a nimble express boat and a mean fish finder.

It's all about expediency. Fishing the modern way. A tournament here and there, some competitive seasonal club fishing, and plenty of spur-of-the-moment runs in between. A quick fish, a wash down, pack the rods away in the indoor lockers. Lock the cabin door and skidoo. Express by name and nature.

The express-style Luhrs 31 Open also wasted no time making its mark on the local fishing scene. The first of the new-generation boats lobbed in Sydney underwent a lightning-quick PD (that's jargon for pre-delivery), with just two brief runs up Pittwater, before voyaging north for the Port Stephens Interclub.

Its crew – loaded with gamefishing heavies – hit the water running. They included Steve 'Hoggy' Haygarth on the throttles, Mario Zac and Dean Butler on deck, and Mark Stevenson on the leader or tagpole. And for Ladies' Day, Peter Pakula took the reins. The Luhrs agents, two ex-sailors turned keen-as-mustard anglers, Tony Poole and Ron Jacobs went for the ride. And, as quick as that, the fish hit the deck or were, rather, tagged.

Day One: three marlin. Day Two: two marlin. Ladies' Day: three marlin and a win. Day three: two more marlin. And the final tournament day, well, they drew a blank. But that's 10 black and striped marlin in the blink of an eye. Not bad for a boat still fresh off the cargo ship. And one of those tagged marlin was an estimated 130kg striped on 15kg.

A nimble and tournament-ready express boat, the Luhrs 31 Open impressed Capt Haygarth, who has been retained by the local agents for his shipwright and fishing skills. "It's very soft riding and we overtook plenty of 40-footers on days when 18 to 20kt of nor' easter was blowing. I would happily fish this boat all season," he said.

Predictably, the factory-supplied aluminium half tower plays a big part in the 31 Open's appeal. "You can see tailers... everything... with the fish right beside you. And it's very comfy up top. I wasn't thrown around [thanks to the stability of the hull]. I would drive out and back home with the boys at the lower station and jump up top when fishing started. Just great," Haygarth said.

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

This is the second Luhrs I have driven, but a completely different animal to the boat I tested perhaps as long as eight years ago. In the interim, Luhrs has been something of a forgotten badge. Not now. And how the finish and engineering have been upgraded from that old boat. On the back of that alone, Luhrs is sure to hook plenty of interest.

But, with the 31 Open, you also get some very sexy styling and while fudging around Pittwater, as a fleet of 60 battlewagons was filing in for the Broken Bay Invitational Tournament, I noticed that I was being noticed. Although not patently obvious at first, the boat's visual appeal owes a lot to traditional design. There is tumblehome in the aft flanks, a full beam carried a long way forward, and a Carolina flared bow concealed the huge hull volume.

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While it looks great tied to the marina and on the troll, it's not until you see the boat up and running that you begin to understand just how much boat there is under water. This really is a b-i-g 31-footer. The beam of 3.61m is generous, but it's the constant deadrise of 19 degrees that makes it among the sharpest in its class.

I actually got quite excited driving the boat offshore and admiring it from behind the viewfinder. With such an outstandingly deep forefoot, names like *The Axe*, *The Cleaver* and *The Wedge* came to mind. The forefoot splits the waves and creates a hole through which the rest of the boat follows. Thanks to the Carolina flare it remains remarkably dry, especially for a 31-footer. And with such a big footprint in the water it's also a stable boat, which bodes well for the skipper in the half tower and the crew on deck.

Yet for all this volume, not to mention the accommodation and amenities below, which we will explore in the goodness of times, this remains a low-maintenance gameboat. As noted earlier on, you can put this baby to bed in a jiffy. Capt Haygarth says 30 minutes and you're walking back down the dock. Hands up who doesn't like the sound of an express clean-up after a long day at sea?

BUILDING BLOCKS

A production boat from the Luhrs Group, itself a big player in the American boating seascape, the 31 Open has an impressive build specification. The company uses Baltec-cored hull sides, a solid GRP bottom, and a moulded one-piece deck and liner. To this the importers, BlueWater Power Yachts, added some carefully considered factory options and engaged local tradesfolk wherever possible.

But for an oil-change system, *Luhr 'em In* arrived as a standard boat. It was then fitted with an after market Phoenix 1600W invertor, local Muir windlass with dash and deck remotes, and two Furuno 10-inch Navnet screens, one at each helm, linked to a 1kW transducer. And Capt Haygarth added some other deft touches.

If not on the seamless moulded decks then the roots of a serviceable boat become evident in the engineroom. Access is through an accommodating hatch with ladder and, with the assistance of a hydraulic lift and switch you get even more servicing room thanks to a raised bridgedeck floor.

The battery boxes near the foot of the ladder were aft to create an extra large void where tubs of tackle could be stowed. Irrespective of this detail, there was a surfeit of servicing room around the twin 315hp Yanmar motors with electronic Glendinning controls – Cummins options to 380hp – and space around all sides of the blocks.

A continuous raw-water pump services the boat's two bait tanks and deck hose and it and other water pumps were located aft. The sea strainers for the Yanmars had easily-sighted glass inspection bowls and their oil dipsticks on the centreline. I noted reasonable two-inch shafts and dripless shaft seals and obvious prop tunnels that reduced shaft angles and boosted efficiency.

The Racor fuel filters were forward before the transverse fuel tank, which is linked to a deck filler on the gunwale. There is no provision for a dipstick and, even though the boat had a fuel gauge, I would fit a sight gauge so I *really* did know how much fuel I had left. Also, it would have been nice to see a watertight aft bulkhead, which by the looks of things wouldn't be hard to create.

Thankfully, some after market foam insulation and a new catch made the lazarette virtually watertight. Believe me when I say that is important with Capt Haygarth at the wheel. I'm told he filled the cockpit more than once when backing up and that water made it all the way to the base of the second step leading up to the bridgedeck, yet there was nothing in the lazarette and engineroom.

Above: A broad uncluttered transom makes a great cockpit for fishing action.
Below: The twin seat of the upper helm offers unobstructed views that can greatly enhance your fishing success.

Back in the engineroom, I found the main breakers, invertor for 240V outlets including microwave, and battery charger, while a separate plumbing room was located under the saloon floor holding the shower sump, macerator and bilge pump. Under the berths or saloon lounges I found labelled seacocks for various overboard discharges and the boat is packaged with a fire-suppression system.

A generator is optional in case you want to fit air-con and icemakers, but as it was I thought the 31 Open was better engineered than many production boats and that is in stark contrast to the older Luhrs I have seen. I am now told the company is striving for even greater improvements, so it's certainly a marque to watch.

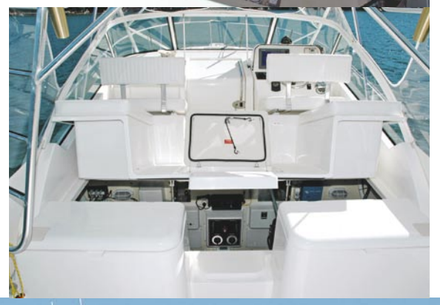
FISH READY

It's my guess you won't see a boarding platform on future dedicated Luhrs fish boats as it makes the transom dig in when reversing. A lift-off stainless steel and teak platform is a likely replacement. Some handiwork had been put to good use to make the outward opening marlin door more watertight. The sacrificial padded coamings were made locally, as was a clever fish-cutting board, but all the other fishy features are an integral part of the Luhrs 31 Open's wonderful moulded decks.

But first, it's worth noting the tackle storage inside the lockup cabin. An accommodating sub-floor hold has room to stow six rods and tubs of expensive tackle. A further six rods can be racked away under the saloon lounges. This way, you can secure light and heavy tackle aboard to assist with that quick exit at the end of the day or when switching between fishing styles.

The transom has a decent livebait tank with a bi-fold door so you can pitch baits. The Luhrs team had fitted innovative slimy mackerel tubes inside the tank, which I'm told easily accommodated a dozen big baits at a time. And the continuous-rated deckwash pump kept them nice and lively. Underfloor was the boat's only fishbox, an oval lift-out number, not the biggest of moulded boxes. So dress your catch on deck and package it up as you go. Or, if you're not using the livebait tank, it can double as a second fishbox. Then there is the option of carrying a loose cooler.

Between the cockpit and raised bridgedeck is a portside insulated icebox of reasonable capacity for holding drinks or bait that can be optioned up with a 12V fridge plate. A second fully plumbed livebait tank or deadbait cooler was part of the starboard bait prep centre, which included a sink and cutting board. With the lids down these moulded units



Access to the easily servicable engine room is through a deck hatch or, with the flick of a switch, a hydraulic lift raises the whole bridgedeck floor.

double as impromptu crew seats and, with a carpet square or some non-skid rubber matting, a bigger area on which to rig baits.

Should you want to fish heavy tackle, there's a plate for taking a chair in the cockpit floor, I'm told. Deckies and anglers will like the clean gunwales with under-toe and thigh support, the below-gunwale cleats and hawsepipes, the spread of six heavy-duty flush-mount rodholders, and the clear-away rodholders and closeness of the rocket launcher in the aluminium half tower. The boat comes standard with recessed trim tabs.

With the outriggers and, moreover, the Reelax junior bases mounted on the hardtop, this remained a walk-around boat. The foredeck is so accommodating that you could pitch baits at small marlin and sails, cast flies, or propel poppers from the non-skid area. Traced by wide gunwales and backed by toe rails, aluminium grabrails and a big bowrail, the decks are a snap to negotiate even at sea.

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BRIDGE AND TOWER

Up two steps and therefore safe from a flooded cockpit, and kept dry behind the deep and pretty Taylor Marine safety-glass windscreen with wipers and freshwater washers, is the social bridgedeck. Its layout will keep a crew happy when running to and from the grounds. The Vybak clears were cut and fitted locally, so they're easy to replace, and the vision was pretty good to all points of the boat. One-up, you should be able to dock it.

The seating layout includes opposing two-person lounges with storage under their bases, and navigator and helm seats with a series of neat tackle drawers beneath them. All the upholstery and mouldings are white, but you'll be wearing shades anyway. The shade from the hardtop will be welcome and you can unzip the clears for ventilation. I'm told the chartholder ahead of the navigator has proven handy for stowing tag cards, if not *BlueWater*.

Besides the Furuno Navnet 10.5-inch, the lower helm has a VHF and 27-meg radio, a full spread of funky Faria analogue engine gauges, chain counter (chain and rope rode) and trim tabs, which proved themselves to be superfluous during the test and previous tournament. The Glendinning electronic controls come with warm, synchro and troll modes and are lovely to use.

The half tower is a big two-person number, yet I never felt like I would be thrown overboard when driving hard into a 1.5m south-east sea or laying beam-on to the sea. The twin bench seat and rails provide security and there are spots for crew to sit just a rung or two away from the action. Incidentally, those ladders proved easy to navigate.

An unobstructed view extends over the dash, which features a pod-mounted Furuno 10.5-inch Navnet, windlass controls, engine gauges, high-water alarms, and in-dash dry storage, to the flared bow and along the flanks where you might see a tailer, and to the cockpit where the crew should be at work. The spotlights will come in handy at night, as will the boat's dockside shorepower, water and television connections. An autopilot was all that was lacking.

SALOON LIVING

In keeping with a low-maintenance fishing boat, Luhrs' 31 Open had an elementary open-plan interior with a galley, convertible sleeping quarters and dinette, and a generous head. While you can sleep four aboard, the amenities and accommodation will cater best for a couple during a tournament while the crew rent ashore. A couple will find it comfortable for a weekend or more. Fish one day, sleep up the river the next, fish home on Sunday and put the boat to bed in a jiffy. Makes sense.

Headroom was a highpoint, further underscoring the voluminous nature of the hull, and there were practical hanging lockers at the foot of the stairs for crew or wet

The bow of the Luhrs features a dinette that converts to sleeping quarters for four, or a spacious berth for a couple. The galley, storage facilities and generous head all make for comfortable short trips.

weather gear, plus that subfloor and under-bunk tackle storage. I also noted a mirror and impressive owner's manuals in a locker elsewhere.

Though small, the L-shaped galley has a single-burner electric stove, deep sink with hot and cold water, and a microwave oven that's been put to the test reheating fresh-baked Port Stephens meat pies. The counter fridge has a freezer compartment for a steak or two in case you luck out. The water gauge was easily sighted and 189lt should suffice for a weekend and possibly longer if you're careful. Storage is plentiful in cabinets for additional appliances like a sandwich maker, too.

The dinette, with vee-shaped lounge, quickly converts into four bunks, with two upper Pullmans and provision to create a double bed below using an optional infill. The berths seemed long and wide enough to me and the escape hatch will help with ventilation. There was a huge storage locker under the forward transverse cushion in which to stow the bedding.

Though there is no hatch in the portside head, the extractor fan kicks in when you switch on the light. The long moulded room will help placate fish wives during leisure outings, with an electric loo, sink and handheld hot/cold shower that you can relocate to a wall mount. All the counters in the boat are moulded Granicoat and with the upholstery and cushions you get a stylish and modern look down below. There's also an LCD television/DVD to watch fishing films.

OFFSHORE PATROL

Even in my limited testing I saw things from the tower that would have gone unnoticed had I been tucked behind the clears of a flybridge: seaweed, bluebottles, and a shearwater on the wing. These are all signs of life that can point you to the action. Such is the advantage of a half tower. Another advantage is that it's lightweight aluminium and, on a wide-bodied deep hull like this, it feels very surefooted and stable.

A sporty and fun boat to drive, it trolled at 7.6kt with a defined wake and some neat windows, and eased onto the plane with the tabs down for a 15kt rough-weather cruise at 2400rpm. The turbos kick in and provide plenty of acceleration up to 2800rpm and 21kt, whereupon the boat rides in fine fettle without trim tabs, just a slight bow-up attitude for a nice dry ride and with the forefoot slicing the water.

At 3000rpm and 23.7kt on the GPS, the Luhrs 31 Open and the 315hp Yanmars seemed really happy together. With the same four-blade props and 2.48:1 ZF gearboxes on a light ship, I was given figures showing 24.6kt, which sounds about right. So working on the supplied figures, at 3000rpm the Yanmars will use a very economical 60lt/h for a range of about 400 nautical miles. Even if you use 70lt/h for a 350-nautical mile range, it is still a very affordable-to-run gamefisher.

I clocked a handy fast cruise speed of 25.4kt at 3200rpm, a maximum continuous speed of 27.7kt at 3400rpm, and a top speed of 29.9kt at 3600rpm. The Luhrs agents have seen 30kt before, but by the time you load the boat with crew, fill the tanks and fridges, you should expect 28kt flat out.

Though the boat wanders a bit at high speed, it's a lot of fun to drive. The electronic shifts are sophisticated and the steering is light with lots of turns. Standing in the half tower you feel almost invincible. The boat also proved highly manoeuvrable in my hands, thanks to the shafts being a fair way apart. The electronic shifts might take a little getting used to, however, as there is some initial delay before a big jump back.

Quite a flotilla of fanciful American express fish boats have landed here in recent months, but the Luhrs 31 Open is the most successful and affordable of them I've been aboard thus far.

The boat outmanoeuvred plenty of big-ticket battlewagons and sprightly billfish.

And no-one can argue with 10 marlin in five days.

SPEC CHECK

Luhrs 31 Open

PRICE AS TESTED: About $411,000 fish-ready w/ 315hp Yanmar diesel motors and options

Oil-change system, dripless shaft seals and internal sea strainers, swim platform, clears, cockpit bolsters, cockpit fridge, Furuno electronics, windlass, outriggers, underwater lights, cutting board and more

PRICED FROM: $349,000 with 315hp Yanmar diesel motors.

GENERAL	
Material:	GRP Fibreglass with balsa-cored sides and decks
Type:	Deep-vee planing hull
Length overall:	10.47m
Hull length:	9.58m
Beam:	3.61m
Draft:	0.76m
Deadrise:	19 degrees at transom
Weight:	Approx 6129kg dry

CAPACITIES	
Berths:	2+2
Fuel capacity:	1136lt
Water capacity:	189lt

ENGINE	
Make/model:	Yanmar 6LPA-STP
Type:	Straight-six cylinder diesel engine w/ twin turbocharging and aftercooling.
Rated HP:	315 @ 3600rpm max.
Displacement:	4.1646ltr
Weight:	Approx 408kg dry
Gearboxes (Make/ratio):	ZF 2.48:1
Props:	Four-blade 19 x 27-inch

SUPPLIED BY:
BlueWater Power Yachts, Gibson Marina, 1710 Pittwater Road, Bayview, NSW, 2104. Tel (02) 9979 9755, see www.bpy.com.au, or www.luhrs.com