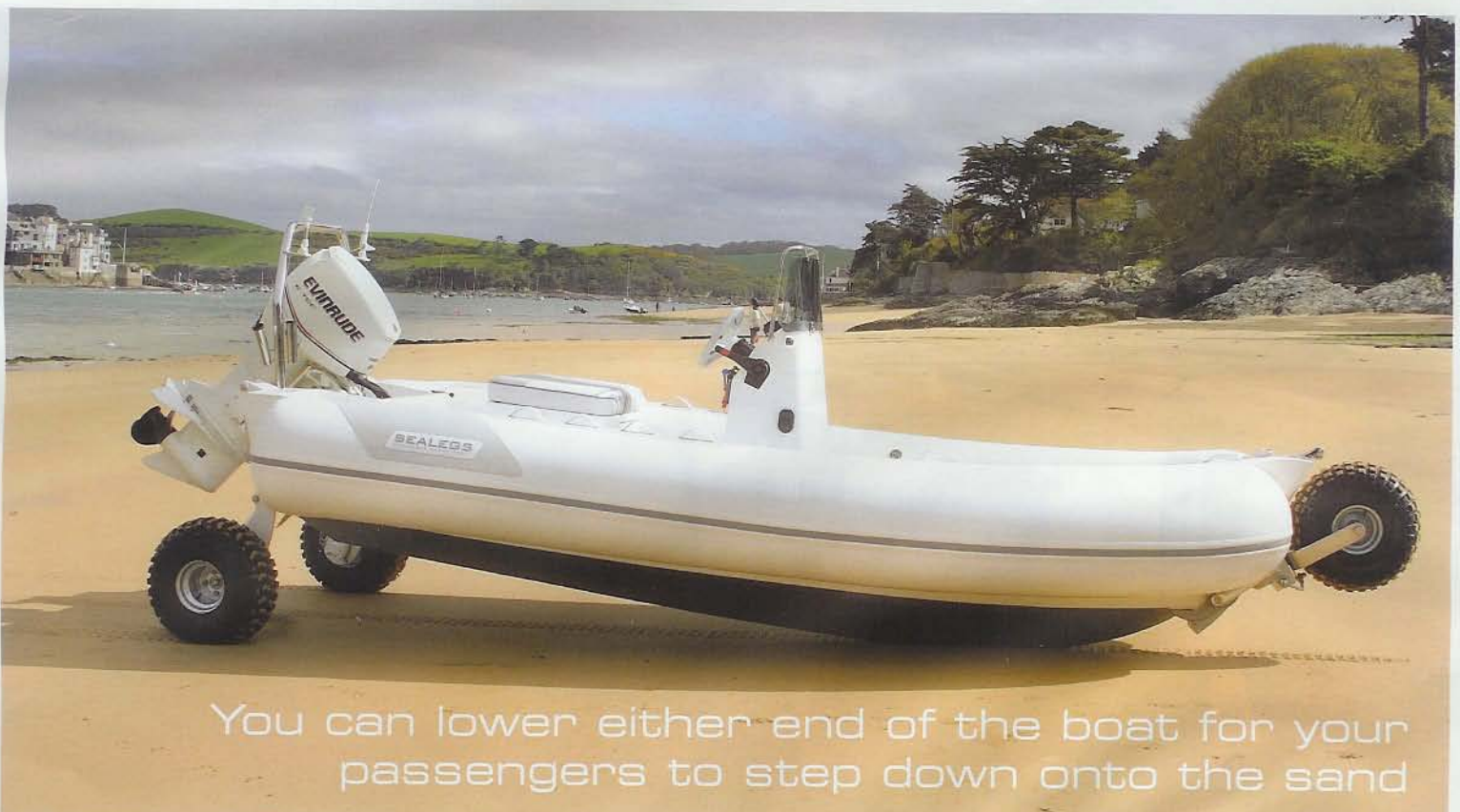


Sea Legs

Tedious isn't it, launching a boat. Beaching is no picnic either. How nice would it be if you could just drive straight in - or straight out for that matter? Alex Smith reports.

The Sea Legs amphibious RIB from New Zealand is marketed as "A whole new experience". It's a boat designed to allow you to explore a coastline without having to slide the hull into shingle, anchor in shallows or leap off into waist-deep water. It's a boat that can drive you up a slipway or a beach without the need for additional crew or unnecessary delay. Sounds good doesn't it... >



You can lower either end of the boat for your passengers to step down onto the sand

Watch out for creep when parked on a slope



Looks

On the water, topped and tailed by spectacularly over-engineered hydraulic legs and bulbous knobby tyres, she actually looks very good. The prodigiously fat tubes are perfectly in proportion with the hydraulic units, while the black rubber, far from seeming ungainly, adds a sense of industrial resilience and a secondary degree of fendering to an almost absurdly manful collar.

But it's simply not possible to create an amphibious craft that looks good on both land and sea, and the name 'Sea Legs' is surely an unqualified recognition of this fact. The crowds that gather as you emerge from the deep and negotiate your way around the car park, will witness a boat on stilts, tiptoeing from curb to curb like a gangly slow-witted insect.

But don't let that upset you. The Sea Legs RIB is not road legal in any case. Once out of the water it's only in drive mode long enough to wheel itself up onto the trailer. Once there, she rests on her belly like any other trailered boat and you tow her home from the comfort of your car.

The details

While the Evinrude 90hp outboard is a rather lovely piece of kit, the inboard Honda 15 (used to power the wheels) is basically

a lawnmower engine. It makes a fair racket and it won't produce much more than 6mph, but it's geared to take the boat up a slimy slip or a weed-strewn beach, so reliable traction is far more important than outright pace.

Like any engine it needs air, but the intakes are located at deck level. A few cheeky swells and some moderate helm mismanagement could have seawater lapping at the Honda with gusto, particularly as the boat's capacity for rapid drainage looks quite restricted. It's fairly simple to elevate the intakes, but it's definitely a job that needs doing.

The screen folds down to lower the boat's profile, allowing you to garage her without fuss. The accoutrements on the radar arch do the same, and though this might be overkill on a boat that can lift and lower itself on its own wheels, it illustrates the Sea Legs' very likeable commitment to excess. Why do enough when you can do far more?

The boat comes with metal rod holders built into the arch and a toeing eye for sport. Sadly though the price, which is already quite juicy in the current leisure RIB context, doesn't include the modified trailer. That'll set you back somewhere in the region of an additional £3000.

There are no brakes so the boat will creep downhill if left on a slope, but it's not a problem. The wheel units are quite bulky

'She may look like a gangly buffoon on dry land but on the water she cuts a decent dash'



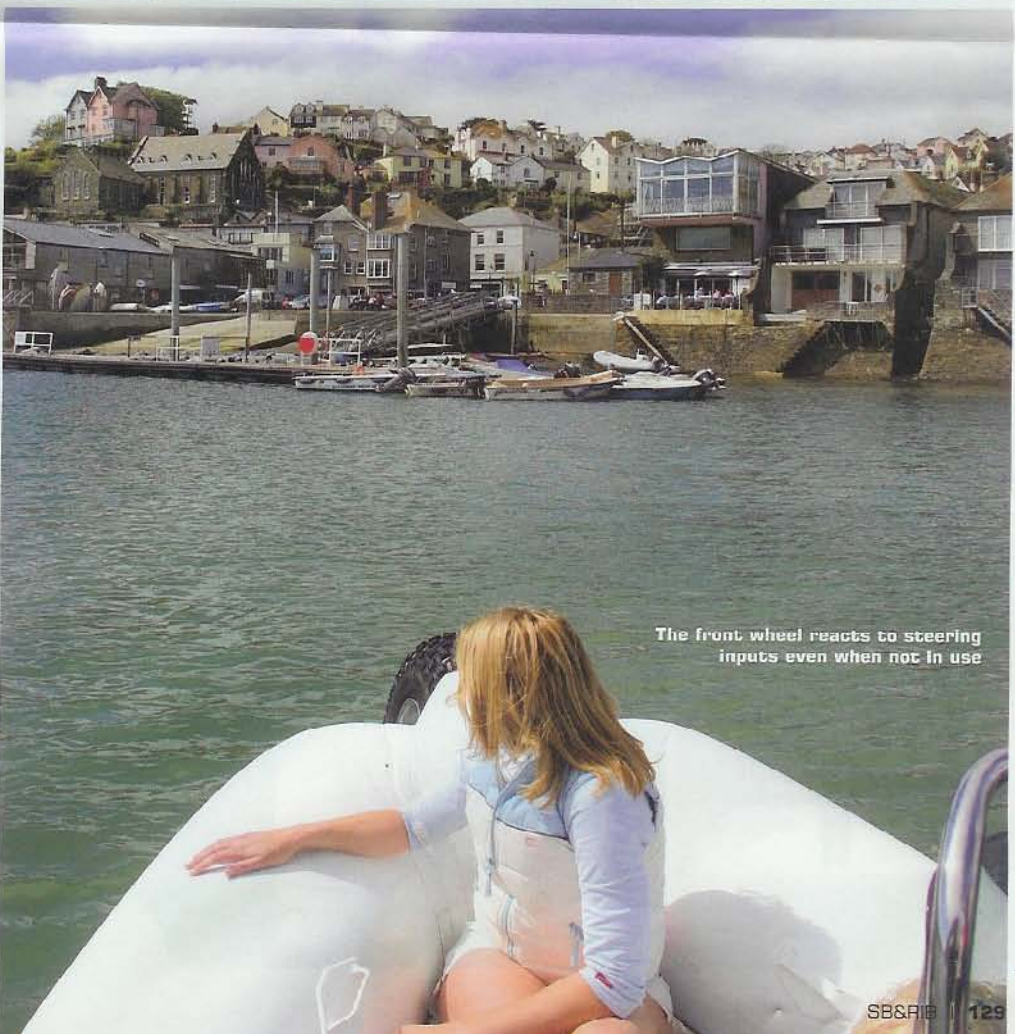
enough without the added complication of bakes, and it's not hard for your average genius to knock up a couple of chocks.

Wet

There's nothing like a bit of weight to dominate a ripple. Combine that with the build of a tank and this boat could only ever behave one way. She sits deep and cuts through with very little respect for water shape. No great surprise either that with three on board we could achieve no more than a very well behaved 33mph at 5,200rpm.

Crank her over, and you'll discover an element of slip in the turn. She's steady and sure-footed, but she doesn't lean in and there's no tremendous G-force to contend with. She merely alters direction like a well-behaved sports boat, and to be honest you can't reasonably ask any more of the Sea Legs. In any case, if she heeled over with much greater aggression she'd dip her rubber knobblics in the wet stuff, and that would be a serious drag.

The driving experience is competent and comfortable, but the real moment of truth is the beach party. It's a surreal feeling. Find yourself a beach and line her up for the approach. You trim her out a little, fire up the inboard Honda and lower the legs until they're fully extended. Point the nose at the beach and the tyres act like anchors, >



The front wheel reacts to steering inputs even when not in use

"More practical than you think and a doddle to use"




slowing and stabilising the boat until they make contact with the bed and start driving you out.

Keep the prop turning to add a bit of encouragement, before bringing her into neutral, switching off the outboard and driving yourself up the beach to your desired location. You can let down the nose, the backside or both, by retracting the independently operable hydraulic legs and the job's done. Simply step down onto dry sand and set about enjoying your beach party.

When the time comes to leave, things are just as simple. Get everyone on board while she's on her knees and let the hydraulics do all the work for you. They'll elevate the whole craft back onto her knobbly tyres without the slightest effort. Reverse the process for beaching, and within 15 or 20 seconds, your wheels are lodged up above the waterline, your outboard's taken control and you're throttling on to your next destination.

Summary

The Sea Legs is not a gimmick. At £44000 it looks costly, but it obviously does more than your average boat. True, any small boat can be launched, recovered and beached, but this thing makes it all so easy that a seamanship chore, sometimes fraught with doubt and risk assessment, becomes simplicity itself.

If the mechanical efficiency of this craft can cope with regular exposure to the marine environment, it will leave you free to appreciate the authentic ease of the whole amphibious operation. Head up the beach, set her down and step onto the sand – I know I'm tempted. 

For ✓

- Forgiving ride
- Authentic amphibian capability
- Ease of operation
- Quality of build

Against X

- Weight slightly hampers on-water performance
- Dedicated trailer required
- Inboard Honda's air intakes are prone to water ingress
- Internal space



Contact

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