

SWEET RIDE

Richard Milner reviews his second Highfield RIB and by all accounts loved it.

Once again, I had the privilege of testing a Highfield Boats manufactured RIB. Now it's probably a good time to get the preconceived experiences out of the way. Having spent a great deal of time on 5m inflatables from various brands and used them for yacht club events, coaching, diving, towing the biscuit around and getting easily from A-B it's fair to say I've got a bit of a feel for them... or do I.

From experience, the 5m rigid inflatable boat is often a bit of a lemon as it's such a compromise. Small enough to tow and berth in tricky spots, large enough that it's not just a tender. They usually come with an oversize console making them cramped, overloaded with seats and often sports that small tube design, to maximise what little space there is. This often results in a wet boat. So, I went into this boat test significantly underwhelmed. I had a sense of well it will be what it will be.

STRONG PRESENCE

From the ramp, the Highfield OM500 had a presence and looked like a much larger inflatable boat. I did ask as I climbed aboard to be sure. It had a look about it that it meant business and had a pleasantly well laid out helm and seating arrangement. What stood out was its 100hp Suzuki engine. By all accounts, I was in for a treat – and a treat it was.

The team at Aakron Xpress – the New Zealand dealer for Highfield inflatable boats will tell you they were disappointed at the weather. The previous test I conducted on the 6m model was on a picturesque glassy day, and this time I really wanted a

typical Hauraki Gulf 30kt NorEaster. It was not rough or windy but still, and beautifully calm. Bad boat testing conditions really. Awfully bad. Well, in my true fashion I found a ferry wake which I'll explain more about that later.

Loading the RIB with my usual plethora of camera equipment and wet kit. I never go out without a good jacket and jersey, especially on a small boat, but that can come with issues as where do you store everything so it will remain dry. Inflatables of this size usually have a storage compartment in the console that shares with batteries, cables and electronics often with little space for storage. The Highfield OM500 RIB having been carefully designed for recreation and commercial use has four good sized and well laid out storage compartments and plenty of space for my gear. I am confident there is enough storage for 3-4 peoples gear and of course the tackle box.

TRULY SENSATIONAL

Heading out, we again selected the playground towards Rangī Light, and initially I went with Jonathon from Aakron on the larger 6m camera boat. This gave a prime opportunity to watch the OM500 RIB perform and perform it did. It struck me immediately the sharp 24deg deadrise bow and how it sat level in the water and cut through everything. The tubes effortlessly cushioned the ride. Sure it was calm, but as we moved around the harbour, our wake soon took effect. The Highfield OM500 RIB was shaping up to be a genuinely sensational mid-sized inflatable. I could not wait to get my hands on it.

'The Highfield OM500 RIB was shaping up to be a genuinely sensational mid-sized inflatable.'



A mirror smooth Auckland Harbour was our test playground.

The Highfield OM500 is a well thought out design with plenty of space,



In the lee of Rangī Light, we swapped over, and I took the OM500 solo. With a full 90L tank of gas, camera gear and my larger self, the boat sat beautifully in the water at rest. As I moved around the boat, it did not rock or become unstable, demonstrating the tubes do assist with balance at rest.

The layout was also perfect. Highfield has elected to design their console in a Z shape, maximising legroom, and console space but not taking up a considerable box section of the boat. This is a stroke of genius on a mid-sized inflatable. The helm bolster is also another neat feature. Its not just a stainless tube with a cushion, but it is well utilised for storage and is a great place to put the tackle box or the soft baits. My only gripe here is that it's designed only for facing forwards towards the helm. A pool noodle along the back would be an excellent addition.

The seating forward has two seats; one in front of the helm that lifts for more well thought out storage and a cushioned seat in the bow. Not the best spot when underway but at rest makes for a comfortable viewing position.

Aft, towards the engine, is a well-sized area large enough for four dive tanks, a large fishbin or water toys. Over the outboard is a hoop giving the OM500 RIB a sporty but functional look. There is no dedicated place for the bait board, but with a couple of Railblaza Starports on the tubes, that is easily fixed. This OM500 was fitted with two-rod holders in the aft area.

The helm was well appointed with a Lowrance Elite MFD, Fusion stereo, speakers, and Highfield OEM switches. There was plenty of real estate for larger MFD or other devices. The screen had a handle all the way around, however, at 1.9m tall the top of the handle was right in my eye-line when standing.

QUICK & AGILE

Getting down to business, the Highfield OM500 RIB launched out of the hole like a rocket and sat comfortably on the plane at 4000rpm, running at about 40km/hr and using 10.2litres/hr. The boat with its alloy 4mm hull was agile, with exceptional rigidity. You felt planted in the water, and the boat did not wallow around. It sat flat with three quarter down trim and answered well to trim changes. The centre placed fuel tank certainly assists with the boat's centre of gravity.

It was a pleasure to operate with a light helm and if you were not careful at higher rpm in the turns, would easily throw you out. The aggressive planning strake moves water away from the boat while keeping the boat firmly in place. It was effortless to operate and easy to handle.

Finding a ferry wake allowed me to evaluate its seagoing performance. It was a foregone conclusion that the Highfield OM500 RIB would cut through the wake with ease offering a smooth entry and dry exit. Beam on the Highfield OM500 RIB is wide enough to sit nicely in the trough and yet still be easily manoeuvrable. In a following sea, the Highfield OM500 has plenty of performance. However, it's worth noting with the low transom it would not be too difficult to get into trouble if you were not careful. Indeed, if you reverse hard the transom digs in and floods. Not to worry, as the self-draining floor with scuppers to take the water away.

The Suzuki 100 was quiet and enjoyable to operate. At WOT the throttle did tend to back off which was annoying as those that know me well, know I am guilty of mostly having two speeds, Nothing and you guessed it. At the you guessed it end, the OM500



The 100hp Suzuki was a good match.



The forward console seats lifts to reveal more storage.



The cushioned bow locker also houses the fuel filler complete with drain hole.



Highfield has elected to design their console in a Z shape, maximising legroom, and console space.



A dedicated bow step with an anchor roller is a nice touch.



There is plenty of real estate for large MFDs.

Boat Design Name Highfield OM 500 **Year Launched** 2020 / New Zealand **Builder** Highfield Boats **Price as Tested** \$43,000 **LOA** 5.00m **Internal Length** 4.16m **Beam** 2.28m **Deadrise** 24 deg **Construction** ORCA Hypalon or Valmex PVC tube with aluminum hull **Weight** (boat only) 441 kg **Power Type** Outboard Only **Max Horsepower** 100hp **Test Power** Suzuki 100 **Propeller** 20" **Max Speed** 38 knots **Fuel Capacity** 90 litre **Trailer** Aakron Xpress Single Axle **Boat Supplied by** Aakron Xpress, Ph 09 427 4613 sales@aakronxpress.co.nz | www.aakronxpress.co.nz

FUEL & PERFORMANCE DATA

RPM	Knots	L/h	L/NM	Range(NM)
1000	3.8	1.3	0.350	230
1500	5.0	2.2	0.440	180
2000	6.5	3.1	0.480	160
2500	10.2	4.8	0.480	160
3000	12.3	6.7	0.550	140
3500	18.5	8.3	0.450	180
4000	21.3	10.2	0.480	160
4500	25.3	13	0.520	150
5000	28.6	19.2	0.680	110
5500	32.3	25.5	0.790	100
6000	34.9	32.9	0.950	85
6300	38	33	0.87	9

Range is calculated on 90% of the fuel capacity.

performed at 72km/hr burning 33L/hr. Not too bad at all. Back at the ramp, the boat was easy to drive on the Aakron Xpress multi roller trailer, and before I knew it, our boating was done.

GREAT BOAT

I had indeed been given an example of modern technology meet modern boating with the Highfield OM500. It is a well thought out design with plenty of space, yet it's small enough to handle on your own or with a young family. It has plenty of get up and go and yet handles safely and without effort. Its soft riding and dry. I am certainly excited to see how kiwis will use this boat in the coming years. If I were in the market for another mid-sized inflatable, I would be hard-pressed to look in any other direction. ●

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