Mike looks ahead from the helm, the small screen helps prevent spray coming over the dash.

"We went through a couple of other boat's wake and the boat went over it fine, undeterred and not a drop came in the open boat."

STORY AND PHOTOS: MATHEW HEWETSON

OCEANPRO 440 CENTRE CONSOLE

Editor Matt Hewetson visited Pauanui's only local boat builder, Mike Bush who has launched his new Oceanpro pontoon trailer boats in 2020.

Mike Bush advised over the phone before starting Oceanpro Boats, that most of his boat building experience was with RHIBs, where he worked for many years at Naiad here in Godzone and the USA. Mike commented "RHIBs generally have a high bow with a fine entry hull and as a result, they handle rough seas better than most boats. However, the inflatable collar doesn't suit the type of boating that I normally do. So I've taken the great hull features from a RHIB and applied it to a pontoon boat to produce something that has the best of both worlds – strong and tough hull sides, combined with a great sea-keeping hull shape."

This was Mike's general design brief and I can understand where he is coming from. I have fished from many RHIBs over the years, they have always surprised me for their handling and often in big seas, even when in such a small vessel (under 4m).

SLIPPER ISLAND

I drove up from Tauranga to meet Mike at the Pauanui boat ramp, he arrived towing the centre console with his station wagon. He was out in a flash and launching it single handed without any effort. That is the good thing about a lighter boat under 5m, it is a simple launch and retrieve for a person going solo and this appeals to many on days when fishing mates are hard to find.

Mike and I caught up and the conditions were perfect to head out in the boat off the coast around Slipper Island for a good run and fish. He hadn't been out in a while considering he was busy boat building and was also interested in how I used softbaits. Mike has traditionally used bait as his main fishing method but was keen to see lure fishing first hand.

I had bought plenty of Zmans along for the day and we loaded my gear into the boat and slipped away from the wharf to make our way out the channel and over the Tairua bar and out towards the southern end of Slipper.

The sea conditions were calm, with little swell as the Yamaha 40hp 2-stroke pushed us along at a quick pace. We went through a couple of other boat's wake and the boat went over it fine, undeterred, and not a drop came in the open boat. The hull ride in fact was nimble and smooth, the hull cutting through swell and we were out around the eastern side of the island in no time.

Coming back in to Pauanui and powered by a Yamaha 40hp 2-stroke, the 440 got along fine with two passengers and is rated up to 50hp.

A nice sized roof provides shelter from the elements, especially the sun on those long summer days when fishing.

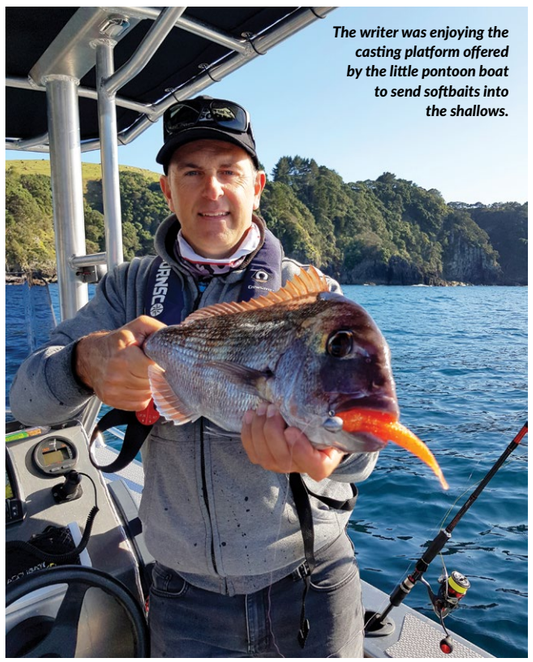
Mike slowed as we went into the shallows and I pointed out a spot on the rocks where I had land-based off the island many years before and got busted off on a big snapper! I knew there were good kelp covered rocks offering food and shelter for snapper around here, ideal targets for softbaiting. I also mentioned to Mike that the women's NZ and world record snapper going over 30lbs came from Slipper Island.

PONTOON STABILITY

As we settled down to set up and start fishing while drifting on the current, the boat's pontoons offered exceptionally good stability. We moved around the boat often casting and it didn't do much, keeping us steady on the water and I was enjoying being out on the water in such good conditions.

"As we settled down to set up and start fishing while drifting on the current, the boat's pontoons offered exceptionally good stability."

The water was crystal clear, like the tropics as I started to get strikes on the softbaits. Drifting right in to under 6m and I picked up a few nice pannies which went into the Icey-Tek bin on ice. As we repositioned the boat and moved in again on the drift, I could see a lot of big kelp on the bottom with large rocks and said aloud this place looks really good.



The writer was enjoying the casting platform offered by the little pontoon boat to send softbaits into the shallows.

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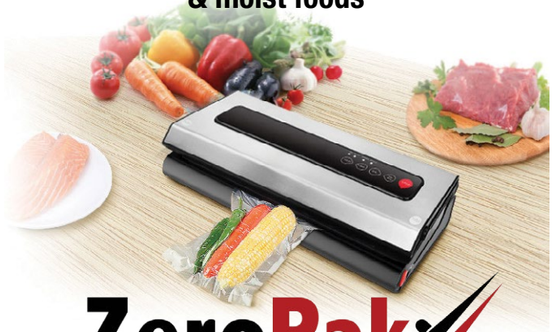

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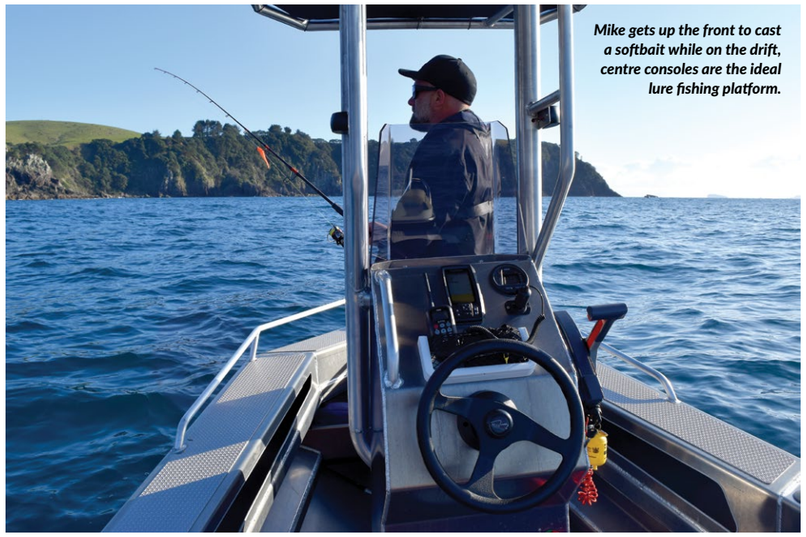
You can see the RHIB design cues in the 440 centre console's bow that Mike has taken his ideas from.

The new Ocean Pro 440 is a great handling pontoon designed centre console. Photo credit: Paul C Schrader



Mike gets up the front to cast a softbait while on the drift, centre consoles are the ideal lure fishing platform.

"Made strong, stable, and easy to launch and retrieve. Small enough to go right into the shallows lure fishing and not worry about it, while large enough to head further offshore in good sea conditions when needed."

Not long after casting and I was hit by a good fish and it took line, Mike started the boat up and we followed it into the shallows (under 4m) but it was too late as it had reefed me! The water was so clear we could see a large red tail below us and we moved around the rock trying different angles. I couldn't budge it, so I lifted the bail arm and let out some line to try and trick the fish. It worked and I soon managed to get line back and bring the snapper up to the boat. It was a good 60cm sized snapper and we decided to let it go, recording the release on the Go-Pro as the water was so clear.

Mike was now starting to realize how good softbaits on this approach are and was keen to take up the casting position in the bow as I manoeuvred the boat along the coast while he continued to cast. He was soon into a few fish himself and was now understanding how a flat platform in the bow would be even more beneficial for anglers stationed up front, with a couple of extra rod holders. Something to add to his list of minor refinements in the boat's design.

The cockpit offered plenty of room for a couple of anglers to fish from with a bait station with rod holders.

We had a great morning out on the water fishing from the 440 and headed back in around midday, while I decided the boat was my kind of craft. Well thought out, made strong, stable, and easy to launch and retrieve. Small enough to go right into the shallows lure fishing and not worry about it, while large enough to head further offshore in good sea conditions when needed.

Back on land and Mike advised he has just had orders from Auckland's Family Boats for his new centre console and larger 520 Cuddy Cabin, while Sportcraft Boats in Tauranga also have taken a 440 Centre Console. Both boating retailers have long standing reputations in the industry and obviously know what makes a good boat, so they know when they are onto a good thing.

The boat as tested with Yamaha 40hp is $29,800 including the DMW single-axle trailer (excludes a GPS/sounder). The hull and outboard each come with a 3 year warranty. FIGZ

Key Specs

OCEAN PRO 440

+ Length: 4.45m
+ Beam: 1.83m / Internal 1.35m
+ Deadrise: 16 deg
+ Power: 25-50HP
+ Hull Weight: 250kg
+ Hull / top sides: 3mm
+ 795L Reserve Buoyancy
+ Max Load: 4 people
+ Fuel capacity: 25L tote tanks

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Contact Mike 027 388 4717
Visit: www.oceanpro.co.nz