review

Oceanpro 540 GTS side-console

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Over the past several years a quiet boating revolution has taken place in New Zealand, which has only gained momentum since the enforced lockdown of 2020 and 2021.

PAUANUI'S PRIDE

Centre- or side-console boats had always been popular overseas, but they hadn't really been widely accepted here. Most Kiwi boaties wanted a cuddy or hardtop vessel in which they could shelter from the conditions or overnight. However, a console boat offers many advantages to anglers, and with their popularity gaining ground, most New Zealand boat manufacturers now offer one or several such models in their line-ups.

Being a super-keen lure angler, a console boat as my first choice is a simple no-brainer. To be able to stand in the bow, casting lures as you drift, takes advantage of the best fishing spot on the boat. I don't need a cuddy cabin to throw gear into or bunks to sleep on in my boat – as an angler, a console boat is a platform to cast from and I love them. These days hundreds of other Kiwis feel the same way.

LOCKDOWN GENESIS

For most people, launching a new boat company in 2020 sounds like asking for trouble, but that didn't stop Pauanui-based boat builder Mike Bush, who founded Oceanpro in the midst of an epidemic. Mike grew up in the small Coromandel township so, after spending many years with Naiad, here and in the USA, building RHIBs for markets all over the globe, he wanted to return home to Pauanui to build his own alloy boats.

Knowing RHIBs as well as he does, Mike understands that they generally have a high bow and a hull form with a fine entry. As a result, they handle rough seas better than most other boats, which he wanted to emulate with his Oceanpro range.

However, inflatable tubes/sponsons didn't suit the sort of boating he enjoys, so Mike built his first

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440 centre-console incorporating some of the hull features of a RHIB, but with aluminium chambers/pontoons instead. He aimed to produce something that provided the best of both worlds: the tough, rigid hull sides of a pontoon boat and a hull shape that offers great sea-keeping.

I tested the 440 for *Fishing NZ* magazine in 2020 and was impressed by the sea handling of such a small vessel. Since then, Mike has built a range of larger Oceanpro boats, including cuddy and hardtop models, and appointed a couple of dealers (Family Boats in Auckland and Sportcraft Boats in Tauranga). He also works directly with clients.

At the beginning of 2023, Mike told me he was keen to start work on a new a 5.3 or 5.4m console model as soon as possible. Surprisingly, the chance came more quickly than he had imagined when a customer put in an order for a special boat to be custom-built to his own requirements. He was seeking his dream: a 5.4m side-console vessel boat packed with fishing features – and after owning a MAC 4.2m, which he liked for its stability and uncluttered layout – it had to be pontoon style in aluminium for ease of use, safety and durability.

Overall, the finish, features, and handling of this 5.4m boat are impressive...

TWIN SUZUKIS

At the time, Mike told me the new 5.4m design would feature a large casting platform and a side-console configuration with a good-sized folding T-top. The owner also specified twin Suzuki 50hp outboards, with a view to offering good fuel economy along with the additional safety twin motors provide.

Suzuki's DF50A in-line, three-cylinder, 941cc, 12-valve, EFI engine features a DOHC powerhead with four valves per cylinder. The air intake system is optimised for maximum efficiency higher in the rev range.

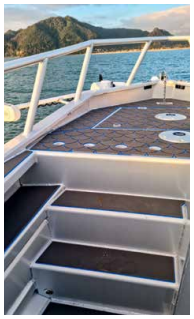
When designing this engine, Suzuki focused on improving mechanical efficiency. Suzuki says each component was analysed and then redesigned to reduce mechanical loss, giving better engine efficiency. As an example, a new oil pump design improves oil flow inside the engine, ensuring moving parts are better lubricated so they use less energy. The combined reduction in mechanical loss from hundreds of components throughout the engine contributes to better fuel economy overall.

Using twin 50hp motors on a five-and-a-half-metre boat is an unusual choice, but it makes good sense, offering its owner additional peace of mind when he's out boating in remote areas or well offshore.

The build was finished in July, so I met Mike at Pauanui's Royal Billy Point ramp to try out the 540 GTS. Launching the

TOP The console is offset to starboard, for better access to the expansive casting platform in the bow (opposite page).

ABOVE Twin Suzuki 50hp outboards provide the go while underwater lights add a touch of class.



casting platform as a fishing seat, which is a handy feature.

Since the 540 is a fishing-centric boat, a Minn Kota Ulterra electric trolling motor is fitted to a purpose-designed bracket on the port bow. The electric trolling motor is a key fishing tool for the owner, along with Exploding Fish rotating rod holders, a custom bait board, a decent-sized live bait tank and pop-up cleats. All together they offer a higher level of function and style than seen on most alloy boats of this size.

ON THE WATER

We ran the boat out of the estuary and over a flat Tairua bar with the twin-Suzuki's purring quietly. After safely crossing the bar and opening the throttles, the boat was quickly up on the plane, the pair of 50hp engines providing plenty of power and response. The boat's hydraulic steering is light and responsive, even with twin outboards, and although the sea state was calm with little swell, we purposely punched through another boat's wake without reducing our speed to get an idea of how it would handle bigger seas – no worries, the GTS was unfazed.

The visibility from the helm is superb, with the windscreen providing good protection from the cold bite of the wind and plenty of head clearance above to the T-top – the owner is over two metres tall and needs ample height.

The 540 feels like a much larger vessel and the pontoon design provides a good, dry ride – I got the impression, since confirmed by the builder and owner, that it would be comfortable in more challenging sea conditions when the

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large, shiny, Nyalic-coated 540 side-console from its custom-made GFAB trailer at dawn on a cold and clear winter's morning with the boat's underwater and gunwale lights glowing, made for a cool photo.

Inspecting the side-console for the first time, it was the huge casting deck with its large, ergonomic bow rails and ingenious rod holders set into the floor of the casting deck, that really stood out for me. This was my kind of boat!

I loved the fish scale design in the U-Dek on the cockpit sole and platform, and also embossed on the hull plates – very cool. U-Dek is such a practical flooring product, it – or something similar – is a must-have for open boats like this that have so much deck area exposed to the elements. Ask anyone who's owned an alloy boat how hot the floor can get on a sunny day!

The side-console layout also offers a lot of cockpit space, while the boat's large folding T-top provides good shade and some protection from the elements. It can be lowered for better storage. Twin Vetus seats are comfortable and easily removed. They are designed so one can be moved up front onto the

OPPOSITE The T-top provides shelter for the helmsman; Well laid out dashboard and excellent access to the foredeck.

ABOVE The sturdy bowrails offer good support when fishing from the bow.

BELOW Performance is lively with 100hp, but the 540 can accommodate up to 115hp.

swell or chop was up. In the calm conditions we experienced, the ideal cruising speed was around 25-26 knots, which returned good fuel efficiency.

When we stopped to check over the Garmin sounder and Suzuki gauges, I noted the boat's excellent stability at rest, thanks to its sealed pontoons. The 540 GTS provides anglers with a great fishing platform, which is a big part of what makes this boat so good. When I climbed up the steps (two) to access the high casting platform in the bow, I had such a great view looking out over the water. Large bow rails come up to just above knee height, and since I was up there, I couldn't resist making a few casts with a soft bait – it certainly is the best place to fish from on this boat.

Overall, the finish, features, and handling of this 5.4m boat are impressive, and Mike was a happy boat builder to see the finished vessel out on the water and ready for its new owner.

"It was a real pleasure to work with the customer on this project. His clear vision and passion for the perfect layout and specification have inspired us to create this remarkable alloy pontoon boat. Collaborating closely with our in-house design team, we meticulously crafted a boat that is not only visually stunning, but also built to withstand the test of time. We take immense pride in our work and every detail was carefully considered to ensure the customer enjoys years of fishing adventures," said Mike.

The starting price for the Oceanpro 540 side-console is $75,000, but the boat as tested is $154,000 with a long list of extras. These include: twin Suzuki 50hp outboards with hydraulic steering; GFAB alloy trailer; folding T-top; Minnkota Ulterra; Garmin 16" MFD with radar and VHF; twin transducers; Zipwake Interceptors; a drum winch; live bait tank; washdown pump; custom bait board; Ultralon U-Dek; Exploding Fish rotating rod holders; pop-up cleats; Nyalic coating; fish scale hull plate finish; OceanLED underwater lights; gunwale lighting; light bar; battery charger and shore power.

On the GFAB aluminium trailer, all up towing weight is 1,400kg. BNZ

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HIGHLIGHTS

Brilliant sport fishing platform, twin engines for safety

Impressive handling and a layout packed with features

Exceptional finish, fish scale detailing on hull plates and U-Dek covered decks and coamings

GFAB trailer is light and strong

SPECIFICATIONS

loa 5.4m
beam 2.07m
deadrise 17°
tow weight 1,400kg
hull bottom 4mm (5083)
engine 2 x 36.8kw/50hp Suzuki DF50A
fuel capacity 75 litres
full throttle operating range 5,300–6,300rpm
power 75-115hp