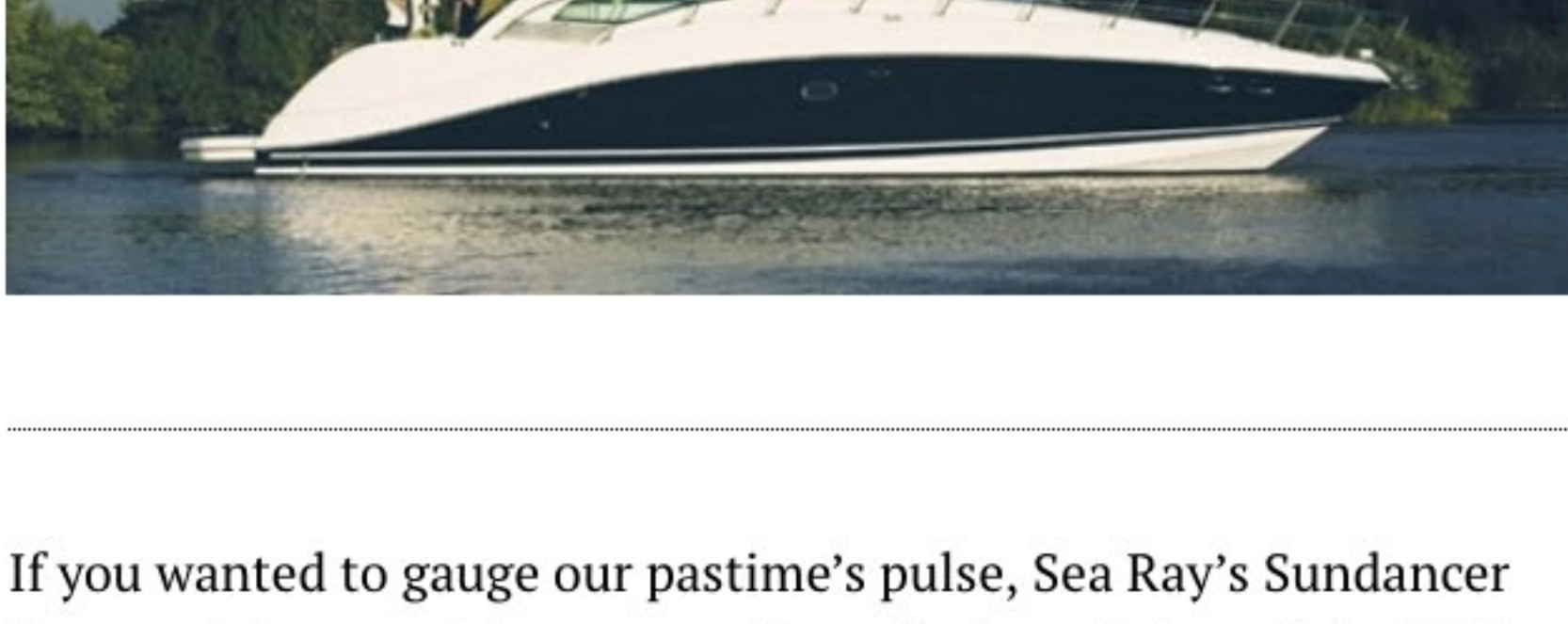


YACHTS

Sea Ray 55 Sundancer

For Sea Ray's sleek new Sundancer, the fun begins at 55-feet, that is-and never stops.

By Jay Coyle | October 4, 2007



If you wanted to gauge our pastime's pulse, Sea Ray's Sundancer line provides a useful measure. Since the brand's launch in 1974, few products have been a better match to Sea Ray's market. It was a simple concept, a family cruiser with a mid-cabin that offered reliable performance and plenty of interior and exterior play space. At the time, the ideal measure was just 24 feet; now the market has grown and so, too, has the average length overall. The new 55 Sundancer features Sea Ray's latest thinking on the subject and should cause enthusiasts' hearts to race.

Sea Ray has never been shy in terms of styling, and the first Sundancer's untraditional sheer and elliptical portlights defied contemporary thinking in her day. Even in a market rife with challenging European competition, the 55's blend of shapes and form take the eye on a visual adventure that voyages far from tradition. In profile, our test boat's black hull accentuated the gentle slope of her sheer forward and its pronounced descent aft to just above the waterline. A series of hullside windows are cut at an aggressive angle and complemented by conventional portlights in stainless steel. Her tiered superstructure incorporates a sunning area forward and frames a molded-in swim platform aft. Our boat was also fitted with a hydraulic tender lift (an optional passerelle is targeted at the European market). The finishing touch is a rakish windscreen and hardtop that is crowned by a low-profile arch.

Arctic White gelcoat remains standard for the 55, and the Midnight Blue that has been popular in the Sea Ray line of late is available. Our test boat's black hull is new for 2007 and very pleasing to the eye. Dark colors and shades tend to bring out the worst in tooled fiberglass parts, and the excellent gelcoat finish is an indication of the merits of Sea Ray's process. The 55's hull and superstructure tooling were cut at Merritt Island on the builder's five-axis mill. It's quite the high-tech process: Information fed from the designer's computer defines the forms that are cut to paper-thin tolerances. The hull is laminated by hand with a blend of stitched and woven reinforcements and polyester resin, while a skin coat of vinyl ester resin is applied below the waterline to prevent blistering. A network of fiberglass stringers supports the solid bottom laminate and balsa coring is used to stiffen the exterior decks. A five-year structural warranty on the hull is standard on all Sea Rays.

The 55's exterior play space extends forward for almost half her length. Stairs lead from the swim platform to a curved seating area aft. A built-in grill top and icemaker are steps away. Moving forward under the protection of the hardtop, you step up onto the teak sole of the bridge deck. A circular seating area has a varnished teak table set on a stainless steel base. The sectional seating rides on a track that allows positioning facing either fore or aft—the sort of clever touch that will one day be an industry standard. A weather-resistant 20-inch flat-panel TV can be positioned for easy viewing, and a nearby wet bar is fitted with a refrigerator. Helm and companion pedestal seats are fitted with armrests and can be rotated aft when the captain is off-duty. The bridge area is air-conditioned and can be enclosed with isinglass, which qualifies the 55 as a comfortable all-weather ride. Dual sunroofs provide plenty of natural light and can be opened in pleasant weather. The vented windscreen is operated remotely from the helm.

Below, the saloon and open galley benefit from the natural light that filters in from the topsides windows and two overhead skylights. An L-shaped seating area is positioned to take advantage of a 32-inch flat-panel TV that rises from the cabinetwork with a push of a button. The galley is finished with faux granite countertops and is fitted with a cooktop, a microwave-convection oven and under-counter Sub-Zero refrigeration.

The 55 is available with either a two- or three-stateroom arrangement, the choice being a full-beam master stateroom amidships with a private head or two guest staterooms with a master stateroom forward. Our boat's master was impressive, enjoying the natural lighting from the topsides windows and the benefit of the 55's full beam. The queen-size island berth has tip-up access to stowage and an innerspring mattress equipped with electric massage—no quarter required. A 26-inch flat-panel TV is fixed to the bulkhead just ahead of the berth. A seating area with a table is to port, a bureau with drawers to starboard and a walk-in cedar-lined hanging locker finish off the space.

The VIP/guest stateroom forward has a queen island berth, a 20-inch flat-panel TV and private access to the second head. A crew quarters option will likely appeal to European customers. The 55's interior fit and finish is on par with Sea Ray's high standard and her wood flooring, fitted table and stemware stowage more than live up to the upscale mood set by other recent Sea Ray releases.

I caught up with the 55 at Sea Ray's Merritt Island, Fla., facility as she was being prepared for her debut at the Miami International Boat Show. This is the home of the company's yacht program, as well as Sea Ray Product Design and Engineering. I mention the latter as Sea Ray's investment in this department is second to none in the industry. As always, our test boat was dockside ready to go with a company captain at the helm. Unfortunately, we were unable to complete our test run because the computer that controlled one of the 800 hp MANs identified a bad sender and limited the engine performance in a safe mode—a good test of engine systems, not so good for taking data.

Fortunately, the 55 had already undergone Sea Ray's own evaluation and certification—a process the builder puts all its products through before releasing them to the market. A review of those numbers for the 55 reveals a top speed of 31.6 knots (2350 rpm) and a comfortable cruising speed of 27.2 knots (2100 rpm) with a fuel burn of 64 gallons per hour. At this throttle setting, Sea Ray estimates a range of approximately 316 nautical miles. For those looking for a bit more speed, the company offers 900 hp MANs as an option.

While maximum speed during our run was verboten, the MAN electronics allowed a cruise of 2100 rpm, which gave me enough oomph to gain a feel for the boat. She responds easily to helm input, and her large windscreen and sloped bow provide more visibility than is typical for large express-style boats. The windshield defroster system will be useful in colder climes and the washer-equipped wipers a plus in unpleasant seas. As our test boat was fitted with a bow and stern thruster, wiggling about in tight situations was hardly a challenge. With a transom deadrise of 17 degrees and a form similar to other Sea Ray products in her class, the 55 felt comfortably familiar. This consistency is a plus for those moving up through the Sea Ray line.

Our test boat was equipped with the Sea Ray Navigator III system, as well as a Raymarine radar/chart plotter. As has become popular, the large displays associated with these systems were located center stage on the dash, and engine electronic displays were overhead in the cheap seats. While the logic of this arrangement is reasonable, it took me a few minutes to find my way around. Sea Ray's efforts to simplify the complexities of operating a 55-footer also include the latest update of the power management system that the company introduced last year. A central programmable touchpad controls the electrical panel; presets start and stop the generator and switch service from ship to shore, all with a push of a button. The transition is so fast that electronics, such as TVs that would normally shut off, remain online. While the system has been proven on other Sea Ray models, a conventional panel with breakers is near at hand. In terms of systems, the more traditional meat and potatoes are found in the engine space accessed from a hatch in the cockpit. Once inside, I found plenty of room to move about the MANs and the 21kW Onan generator. Other equipment also appeared accessible, and I was pleased to spot a bank of air-conditioning condensing units—a better choice than noisy package units hidden beneath berths.

While it is tempting to pigeonhole the 55 in the avant-garde Euro-yacht camp, this would be misleading, since Sea Ray has never been one to follow the crowd on any shore. Sea Ray's design influence and the market it has set its sights on are international. While the playing field is rather busy these days, the 55 is a fresh face offered by a company that few can match in terms of customer service and support. Whether you're a Sundancer enthusiast or new to the marque, you'll find the 55 is worthy of inspection.