

## **TRADE A BOAT BLUE WATER OBRIEN 44 TEST**

Every now and then a boat comes along that we just can't wait to test. The O'Brien 44 was one of those vessels. It's a boat designed to do what we love most, catch marlin!

We have been following the progress of the O'Brien 44 since its inception, and we made sure that Mr O'Brien Boats himself, Peter O'Brien, knew in no uncertain terms that we wanted to be the first ones to test it.

Our first opportunity to look at the new OB44 was at the Townsville Billfish Challenge, where our editor in chief Mike 'Sinkers' Sinclair made a flying visit and checked out the boat just days after it was launched. While Sinkers was suitably impressed, we both agreed that this boat deserved a more thorough review, so I put my hand up for a four day live aboard trip to the Great Barrier Reef.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking - it's a tough job, but someone has to do it.

Peter O'Brien has been building O'Brien boats in Townsville, North Queensland since 1980, and the tradition is set to continue with Peter's son Leigh and business partner Steven Menso by his side. First boat in production was the popular 33, which was stretched to the 40. And then came the 43.



While O'Brien boats were never classed as the prettiest vessels on the water, their widely-held reputation for excellent seakeeping ability and no-nonsense simplicity has seen their popularity with serious fishermen and charterboat operators unwaveringly remain strong.

The O'Brien 44, however, is indeed a pretty boat. Take a quick glance - with its sweeping modern lines and mirror-like finish, it could easily be mistaken for many

of the world's finest custom gameboats. In fact, the only indication that it's an O'Brien is the company's signature reverse sheer.

### **SWEET HULL, CAROLINA**

The hull on the new 44 shares the same deadrise as its 43ft sibling - 18 degrees at the transom and variable to the bow. However, the 44 hull is 250mm wider on the chines, is rounded aft and features a small keel. There's also a touch of Carolina flare in the bow that we haven't seen in previous models.

The really interesting thing about the new OB44 though is that it theoretically started its life as a 47-footer. You see, O'Brien has ingeniously designed one hull mould from which he can pull either a 47 or a 44-footer. The hull mould is parallel from the forward end of the cockpit aft, so if you want a 44-footer it's simply a matter of blocking out the last three feet of the mould.

In theory you could build a boat anywhere between 44 and 47ft with the same mould; however, O'Brien has done his stability calculations and layout designs on just the two

models at this stage. A moveable aft bulkhead provides the additional room in the saloon of the 47.

The cockpit on the 47 is substantially longer than the 44, answering the critics who say the 44 looks a little stubby in the aft end. Personally I thought the cockpit on the 44 was plenty big enough, but the illusion of a small cockpit is probably created by the flybridge overhang. O'Brien hopes to have a 47-footer in the water by mid to late 2005.

### TESTING, TESTING

As mentioned earlier, this was a boat test with a difference. It would certainly be nice if we had time to fish all the boats we review for three or four days, but unfortunately that just doesn't happen.

On this occasion, however, that's exactly what we did; and during a four-day live aboard, you get a real feel for how the boat runs and works, both at sea and at anchor.

We departed Townsville Marina mid-afternoon and pointed the bow for the outer Barrier Reef With 15kt of northerly on the nose and the associated short chop, I was immediately impressed by both the softness and dryness of the ride. With all the clears rolled down it quickly became evident that the OB44 is drier than its predecessors.

First stop was Brewer Reef, where we had no trouble putting a few mack tuna in the freezer. These would become our skip baits over the next couple of days. O'Brien's cockpit freezers are designed to hold big baits, and whole 6kg mack tuna fitted with ease.

As light was fading fast, we decided to spend the night at Brewer. It wasn't the best anchorage, with plenty of roll coming over reef; but we still managed to cook up a feast of chicken kiev, chips and salad before calling it a night.

### SLEEPING GIANTS

The 44 has ample accommodation. There are four comfortable bunks in the forward cabin, a double in the master cabin amidships, a dinette lounge in a saloon, and another bunk on the flybridge.

Personally, I'd configure the saloon differently so you end up with another settee. Many of the previous O'Briens were configured this way.

There was also a common bathroom on the port side with a separate shower stall and duplicate ensuite adjacent to the master stateroom. Tecma toilets were the best we've used, and they were mounted on the floor instead of the wall so your legs weren't dangling in the air.

Our plan was to spend the next few days fishing for giant block marlin around Myrmidon Reef, but because the reef edge around Myrmidon is now a Green Zone, we had to stop at Faraday on the way out to catch some more bait.

As it turned out, the bait fishing at Faraday was fantastic - it was one of the best bait



fishing sessions I've had! Scad and scaly mackerel were coming in hand over fist, and it took no time at all to get plenty of bait needed for a few days of heavy tackle marlin fishing.

Once we got out to Myrmidon, the baits were put in the water and it looked very fishy indeed. Lots of birds and schools of tuna working, although most of them were inside the Green Zone.

We would have loved to have been able to work the reef edge where most of the big blacks feed, but we had to stay out in the deep water where our chances of finding a black marlin were reduced dramatically.

I really feel sorry for the gamefishers of Townsville, as Myrmidon is the only real place where they can tangle with a giant black marlin and get a safe anchorage for the night.

That privilege has now been taken away from them by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

As it turned out, in four days we only saw two marlin.

One jumped. off and the other didn't even bite. We caught a bunch of mahi mahi, wahoo and yellowfin, but nothing to give me a chance to test the boat in reverse. We did live bait one of the yellowfin we caught but unfortunately the local sharks got to it well before a marlin could.

## **LETS TALK POWER**

Anyway, enough about the fishing - back to the boat. The test boat was fitted with a set of Cummins C-450 deisels, whilst these engines performed admirably, providing a top speed of 28kt and a comfortable 22kt cruise burning just 901t/h, according to O'Brien the standard power for the OB44 is going to be the new 540hp QSC also from Cummins.

O'Brien says the 8.31t electronic QSCs will be a perfect for the OB44, while the QSM11's should be just the ticket for the OB47. O'Brien expects the 44 to have a 24kt cruise and a 30kt top speed with the QSC's.

All O'Brien boats are built to survey standard, so even if an owner doesn't want his vessel put in survey, if he ever sells the boat it's a simple process for the new owner if they want it for charter work.

It is interesting to note that a large percentage of O'Briens are working as gamefishing charterboats along Australia's east coast. After 25 years of valuable feedback from charterboat captains, as well as running a number of boots himself O'Brien has a pretty good idea of what's required to build a boat that can work 100 days straight without missing a beat. Low maintenance, easy-to-clean, easy service and economical are just a few of the descriptions that come to mind when I think O'Brien .

Things like an engine-driven deckwash. Simple but essential. Close the door, give the cockpit a blast and 20 seconds later it's clean. What about a fully moulded headliner? Simply wipe clean. No smell-absorbing fabrics and no vinyl to stick a rod tip through. Everywhere you look on the O'Brien, there are things that make clean-up at the end of

the day easy. Practicality is obviously a word close to O'Brien's heart. The engine room was also designed with practicality in mind, heaps of room, two-pack gloss finish for an easy clean, oil-change system; double insulated and ducted wiring; and easy access via the cockpit step or through the saloon floor.

### **THE VERY HEART OF IT**

The cockpit was designed with heavy tackle marlin fishing in mind. Nice high freeboard, nothing to bang your knees on while wiring fish, plenty of freezer space, big outward opening transom door, teak decks and covering board, Relax rod holders and 1301b chair.

The shade over the freezers provided by the flybridge overhang is a godsend while rigging baits on a hot day, too. My only personal additions would be a brine tank, tuna tubes and a livewell - all O'Brien options that could be fitted very easily.

The flybridge on the OB44 is another example of years of experience in knowing how to fit everything you need, but nothing you don't. The flybridge is very large, and although there is plenty of room to walk behind the helmsman, vision to the cockpit from the helm is still very good. The helm console features a recessed area with black background to house sounder and plotter screens. This makes viewing display screens so much easier in all light conditions.

O'Brien has gone for a raised steering wheel pod on the 44, which houses the Cummins gauges and allows you to fit side-mount single-lever controls. While this pod looks very modern and sexy, I feel it has brought the wheel too high. I like to fight fish while sitting my bum on the wheel; but as it is, the wheel was sticking in to the lower part of my back.

I would have liked to see the autopilot mounted closer to the wheel also, so you don't have to get out of your seat to change course. Further, I thought the passenger seat was mounted too close to the helm chair - when you spun around, you kept banging into your mate.

### **GET HOSED**

Like the rest of the boat, the flybridge is very low maintenance. With a non-skid moulded floor, non-absorbent cushions and a waterproof drop-down cover over the electronics, it simply requires a hose down at the end of the day.

I really liked the fact that you could lower the outriggers from the flybridge too; it's much better than on models where a crew member has to trample up the side of the boat to release them.

The riggers on the OB44 are custom made for O'Brien by Relax. They are double-reinforced for towing big baits and are also powder coated - so there's no fading fibreglass, and you can have whatever colour you want.

I also liked the fact that the clears roll down instead of up, so they're not flapping around in the wind or obstructing your view.

The test boat was fitted with the new C-series electronics from Raymarine. While I have had a lot of experience with Raymarine gear, this was the first time I had used the C-series, and I must say they are excellent value for money. We managed to hold the

**bottom in over 1000m and also found a few new pinnacles wide of Myrmidon Reef that O'Brien never knew existed.**

**As 1 was driving at the time, we named these pinnacles Granville's Peaks. Peter is very keen to get back there and spend some time working them. So to speak.**

### **SOMEBODY STOP ME**

**1 feel as though 1 could write all day about the little things that set the O'Brien 44 apart from many production boats; but alas, we're limited by space.**

**Spending a few days on the boat running, trolling and at anchor gave it plenty of opportunity to display any weaknesses, but it showed none. Every duty we asked the boat to perform it did - with integrity.**

**And even though I didn't get to back up on a real marlin, I did chase an imaginary one around the ocean. I was most impressed with the boat's speed, agility and dryness in reverse. In fact, even with both motors full throttle in reverse I couldn't get any solid water to roll over the covering board.**

**Being a semi-custom boat builder, O'Brien is happy to customise the internal layout to suit the customer's requirements. That's nice to know, because in my eyes that's all that I would change. He's got the hull as close to perfect as 1 reckon you could.**

**With the capacity to build only a couple of boats per year, you'd better get in quick if you want one sitting at the end of your dock. Something tells me O'Brien's order books are going to fill up fast.**

**O'Brien describes the 44 as the culmination of 25 years of game boat evolution. From what 1 can see, it was 25 years well spent.**