

THE PORTLAND PUDDY • SAN JUAN 24 AROUND THE WORLD • LAKE PEND OREILLE

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# BOAT REVIEW: The Portland Pudgy

*Our Editor-at-Large, marine author Larry Brown files this report on the smallest boat we've ever reviewed.*

I'm getting old and my back's been getting after me. Sailing my Potter 15 wasn't hard on me; it was all the rest of it, launching, pulling out, cleaning the bottom. I might be the first sailor batty enough to sell his Potter because it was too big.

Also, I sail mostly alone. My grandsons haven't taken to sailing as I'd hoped. So I began thinking about something smaller—much smaller.

Here were my requirements:

A boat I could take out in almost all sailing conditions—self-bailing when left on a mooring—capable of self-rescuing if capsized—easy to row and ship oars handily when not in use—and capable of being man-handled effortlessly on land.

There are few boats that can meet all these. Most dinghies, once swamped, may not sink, but cannot be bailed out and require outside assistance. An online search uncovered a roto-molded plastic boat made in Portland, Maine. I went up, met owner Dave Hulbert, and drove home with an 8-foot Portland Pudgy. We called it *Fearless*.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Pudgy is designed as a sailor's lifeboat and tender. Consequently, it is the most exquisitely well thought-out small boat I've ever seen. Sailors can order the boat with a complete canopy, but unlike typical inflatables, the Pudgy can be sailed with the canopy up. No passive waiting for rescue. Sailors can do the Captain Bligh thing and go looking for sea-lanes or landfall.

The actual lines of the boat scream "Dutch" with the leeboards, bluff bow, shoal keel and pretty tumble-home aft.

The Pudgy is made of roto-molded plastic, like a kayak. The result is tough as a football with the color molded into the boat, not applied to the exterior like gelcoat. Between the thickness of the hull and the quality of the fittings, I expect the Pudgy to stand up well to years of constant use.

The side decks and floor have a diamond non-skid that really works. Grooves



strategically molded into the underside of the hull and the floor add strength at no cost in weight—and the grooves in the cockpit floor take up splash water so you're not sitting awash in an inch of water all day. The floor-channels lead to a shallow sump and the drain plug that lets the Pudgy self-bail at a mooring.

As a lifeboat, everything must be self-contained, so oars, supplies, a drogue, and the complete sailing rig can be stored inside the hull. The Pudgy is double-walled for this purpose with four access ports on the interior hull and a big access on the transom to extract the oars and rig. Such a hull configuration allows the boat to self-bail when empty and drain its contents of water as it's pulled upright after a capsize. Two hand grips are molded into the shallow keel to help right the boat if needed. This is an almost unheard-of safety advantage in a small boat. It means Pudgy sailors can self-rescue in a seaway without requiring outside assistance. It means Pudgy sailors can almost immediately get themselves back out of the water after a knock-down, reducing risks of hypothermia in colder waters. Safely back in the boat, dry clothes and even thermal blankets can be waiting in dry storage between the inner and outer hull.

Another small but useful amenity: The Pudgy's keel houses a set of small wheels

that enable you to pick up the bow with the towing harness and easily wheelbarrow around on a hard surface without scratching the hull. In case you actually do lift the Pudgy, it weighs a 128 pounds.

With the right vehicle and a couple strong sailors, the Pudgy could be cartopped. With the light utility trailer I've adapted to the purpose, the little boat tows like it's not there. With the knobby wheels, there's no need to submerge the trailer at all... just roll the boat a few feet down the ramp to and from the water's edge.

The Pudgy is astonishingly stable for its size. I weigh 190 pounds and can sit on the rail, legs dangling outboard, and the hull will not capsize. It took the USCG 1865 pounds to submerge the Pudgy to its gunwales. The Pudgy is USCG approved for four persons. Under sail, it's very resistant to heeling. So far, in all sorts of conditions, I've never even had to sit on the rail to hike out.

*"Since the boat is our tender, we haven't been aboard in really heavy weather. Three-foot seas and gusts into the 30s have probably been our max. The stability of the*

ABOVE—A big little boat.

OPPOSITE—Footling along with one of the author's experimental rigs. She rows well.







boat made her feel perfectly safe. The Pudgy is self bailing when unloaded. Pulling the plug while not in use keeps bailing to a minimum. While the boat is not self-bailing, I have never taken on more than a slight amount of water. She does float with the plug out even while loaded, although there's a foot and a half of water in the bottom.." Kyle Webb, 2007 and 2012 models.

Short shaft also imposes limits of weight capacity and maneuverability. I use a 3.5 HP Tohatsu with long shaft when I want to motor about, but mostly use oars." George Kegebein, 2009 model.

### ROWING THE PUDGY

The rower's seat can be flipped over to move the rower forward, allowing better balance of the hull with a passenger seated

water, and the tiller can be pulled off so it won't get in the way while rowing. (Or the rudder can be removed, folded up and stored in a slot under the rear seat.) I use 6-foot homemade oars, but the factory offers a good set of 6' 6" knock-down oars. When the wind dies, as it has on many already, it's nice to have an alternative way home. The shallow keel helps the Pudgy track well. Oddly, my back seems to like



"Of the many dinghies and skiffs I've owned, Pudgy is my wife's favorite for ease of boarding. High freeboard and low center of gravity yield above average stability in rough weather—Pudgy climbs over chop with ease." Richard Soto, 2009 model.

"Very limited 'legal' engine options. The Honda 2HP long shaft is the only one I know of in long shaft for a gasoline engine.

in the stern. A pair of oarlock sockets is provided for each position. I've rigged some tie-downs to hold the oars along the gunwale but otherwise they can be stowed internally. (Doing so does block some of the space that could be used to store water, extra line, food, etc. along the side where the oars go.)

The Pudgy rows easily. The rudder can be folded up so it won't drag in the

the exercise.

The Pudgy has two solid attachment points at the bow for a towing bridle, guaranteeing a stable tow for folks using it as a tender.

"Built-in keel mounted wheel makes for easy moving about on docks. The Portland Pudgy is rated for up to 4 adults but really only comfortable for two adults plus 1 or 2



The Pudgy is higher sided than most boats its size, offering good back support and a drier ride in a chop. Having no seats, sitting on the floor takes a little getting used to but once your body develops a few new habits, it's nice to just lounge around in the boat and, with a life cushion against the back seat, face forward and not kink your neck. As you might expect, the boat is sensitive to fore and aft trim and prefers weight amidships. When I took my wife out for a moonlight sail, we removed the rowing thwart to gain extra space and got a nice ride.

A towing bridle attaches just above the waterline so the Pudgy rides high and easy. The shallow keel helps the Pudgy track straight, too. This is also my mooring attachment when I leave the boat out.

*"Pointing is fair. We did get the standard (short) daggerboards as they stow better aboard. Ground track while tacking in slack water seems to be about 55 degrees off the wind. I think the Portland Pudgy is a marvelously engineered and built boat. Every piece of hardware is of the highest*

*quality. There was no question in our minds after our first that we would replace it with another. The only shortcoming I can think of is in the rudder for the sailing kit. Our first broke one windy day from the strain. David Hulbert at Portland Pudgy sent us a new one, which he had redesigned to be beefier which is now the standard model. The rudder now seems strong enough, but since it is still designed to be thin enough to fit under the aft seat, it lacks stiffness."* Kyle Webb, 2007 and 2012 models.

*"Very stable...have been caught away from mother ship when weather turned nasty and felt safe and in control returning under power of 2hp Honda. In such conditions, I flip seat back and sit on floor. High freeboard keeps me dry and snug inside vessel."* Richard Soto, 2009 model.

In general, the Pudgy is an ideal boat for solo sailing. This is what I'm doing 99% of the time. An adult could certainly bring along two small children. My wife and I have enjoyed some moonlight sailing—but I'd separate what the Pudgy can do in a

pinch as a lifeboat and how you might use it as a family boat. It's a superlative dinghy, ideal sailing for one adult, adequate for two, cramped for much more. There are some small sail-training craft that sail a bit faster than the Pudgy, or offer bench seating for maybe one more adult, but like the extreme stability, simplicity and light weight.

In the Pudgy, I've found an exceptional and versatile small craft that tows, sails, motors and rows well and, most of all, adds a margin of safety unheard of in such a lightweight craft. It's even a life-boat—an option to the passive inflatable rafts that cannot sail their occupants to shore—or into sea lanes for rescue. Its open floor and internal storage suggests micro-camping possibilities for an intrepid sailor. That it would be ideal for youngsters learning to sail, safe and stable, is an added bonus, nor is the boat shockingly expensive (base boat \$2595.) •SCA•

More information:  
[www.portlandpudgy.com](http://www.portlandpudgy.com)  
207.761.2428

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## Portland Pudgy

LOA: 7' 8"

BEAM: 4' 4"

Displacement: 128 lb

Capacity: 557 lb

