

A MULTIFUNCTIONAL LIFESAVER

The American magazine Soundings calls it a floating Swiss army knife. The Portland Pudgy is designed to do it all: sailing, motoring, rowing and even saving lives. Sailing tests it as a sailing liferaft.

TEKST JAN VERSCHUUREN ERNST STEINMEIER FOTO'S ROB BONTE ADVIES HENNIE TEN DAM



The Portland Pudgy is a design by American designer David Hulbert. He came up with the concept of the Pudgy when he was in a marina and saw a life raft floating in the US state of Connecticut. The designer in him said there must be a better way to tend to yourself at sea. Back home in New York, he started sketching and in 2001, after a long career in industrial design, started the Portland Pudgy Inc. company. He settled in Portland, Maine, where the Portland Pudgy grew into what it is today.

What is It?

The Pudgy is a little bit of everything. The small boat, almost two and a half meters long, is double-hulled, unsinkable and made of polyethylene. The bottom is fully foamed, giving it an unprecedented buoyancy

We stow the harness, survival kit, flares, and first aid kit between the double hull



The waterproof compartment between the two walls can be used to store things (in waterproof bags). The designer has done everything possible to keep the boat as compact as possible. The Pudgy should be able to be carried on boats of a reasonable size. Initially, it is intended as a dinghy.

A special dinghy, that it is!. The Pudgy can be supplied as a rowing boat, motorboat, sailing boat, special fishing boat, and as a sailing life raft. The retractable mast with Dacron sail can be stored in the watertight compartment through an access hatch in the rear of the boat. The small rudder and the two leeboards that provide stability can also be stored in handy places. The space inside is limited: 1.4 m² Yet Ernst and I fit in reasonably well. The boat is also equipped with a fixed compass in the front, benches, oars, and a sea anchor. A small electrical system for navigation lighting is also an option.

LIFEBOAT

The version we are testing is not only equipped with sailing rigging but is even fully equipped as a rescue boat. An automatically inflatable canopy is attached to the edge with straps. When inflated, that adds 115 pounds of buoyancy to the light - 58-kilo - boat, transforming the Pudgy into a fully-approved four-person rescue device by US Coast Guard standards. A hole with a neck has been made in the roof, through which the mast can be inserted. It ensures that theoretically you can also sail covered, although with reefed sail there is very little surface left to compensate for the increased wind sensitivity. The Pudgy, in the lifeboat version, comes with a full survival kit including water, flares, and a first aid kit. Fitted out, the boat can be laid out on deck for long journeys or hung from davits. In short, the Pudgy promises to be a very versatile and complete boat.

TEST

We test the Pudgy on the open sea off Hrnuiden. We sail on a fairly calm day about fifteen miles out to sea with the Pooh, the 60-foot expedition ship of Sailing employee Hennie ten Dam. That's what we want! and we let ourselves down in the evening to see if we can return the Pudgy to Hrnuide

This unusual boat can sail. The wind is blowing just a force two to three from the northeast and will turn to the southwest during the night. The weather forecasts do not promise much good; a violent thunderstorm is coming our way from the east this evening. We hope to have little trouble with that at sea.

After some discussions, we choose to be dropped off south-west of IJmuiden. The current will still be against us for the first few hours, but around eleven o'clock in the evening the tide starts to turn and we have current with us.

As the wind changes during the night, we can test both the upwind sailing characteristics and the boat's behavior in close to broad reaching winds. We expect, given its diminutive size, that we will hit a knot or two of boat speed at most. Because we also have to cross, it will therefore take at least ten hours to reach IJmuiden.

OVERBOARD

The Pudgy is ready on the back deck of the Pooh. After a hearty meal of pasta with cream sauce and a steak we decide it's time to go. Ernst and I put on our survival suits and put on our life jackets. We are both still quite nervous, although we have an escort boat with us. Especially in the dark we will be hard to see despite a white flashing light and the Pudgy looks very small on the open sea.

We attach a line to the boat and leave it onboard for towing. The Pooh is an aluminum ship, so a few scratches don't matter. And he gets scratches, because it turns out to be quite a job getting our lifeboat safely across. One can get out of the water to direct access to the cockpit, and we have little trouble with this with these weather conditions.

Getting on board. This can be quite dangerous in emergency situations and with bad weather. However, the Pudgy can also be simply tipped, as it is equipped with a line to turn it over in the water. And who in dire need

cares about a scratch more or less?

When we're both seated, we inflate the canopy with two gas cartridges and throw out the sea anchor. The Pudgy stays nicely behind the anchor and makes a stable impression. At the same time we can move well without the boat rocking excessively. What we immediately notice is the space between the edging and the inflated arches of the canopy. It would have been better to sew another overhang flap on that. Now has with the cover still on. The tip of sail that is still up when it is reefed is in no way sufficient to compensate for being pushed away by the wind. With the roof on it, just like with a normal life raft, you are a toy of current and wind. A hand pump is supplied with the Pudgy to be able to inflate the canopy again if the weather deteriorates. Due to the small capacity of that pump, it costs us some time. It does not seem a superfluous luxury for long journeys either to put extra cartridges in the standard equipment or to buy a larger pump.

When we have calmed down a bit, we convert the boat into a sailboat. It is difficult to maneuver with two on this surface. We lower the hood and Ernst fixes the rudder with some effort. I take the rig and the mast, which are already attached and rolled up, from the storage space. Setting up is a bit of a puzzle. The mast can be extended in parts and is inserted through a hole in a bench into a recess in the bottom. We tie the mast to the bench, so that it can no longer move.

The boom simply clicks onto the mast and we fix the sheet with a knot

A rope is stretched along the stern and serves as a attachment for the mainsheet. We remove the center bench by pushing the walls of the Pudgy slightly apart, insert the leeboards through the side cutouts and are ready to sail.

I have to catch my breath, because the little boat swings uncomfortably on the waves. That lasts not less than ten minutes before I give my pasta and steak to the sea. Especially while you're at it and not able to

see outside, it's a sickening experience.
Ernst follows my initiative - you never have
good ideas alone! - and we retrieve the sea
anchor.

SAILING

We sail, on the high seas. There is little
wind, but still, we sail. In that respect, the
test has already passed. It is possible to get
into the boat, ride out the storm, put the sail
on it and sail away from the disaster. We
notice that it is a utopia to sail

We sail, but are we sailing well? On the GPS
we read that we are walking a speed over the
ground of two and a half knots. We point the
Pudgy as high as possible into the wind, After
all we have to approach north. Crossing
upstream turns out not to be possible with this
wind force. The boat is too light and the lee
boards are too shallow to provide a lot of
course stability



The Pudgy is ready for use on the aft deck of the mother ship. With the cover off we can go overboard. After some pushing and pulling, the Pudgy floats. Under sail there is room for two.

TRIALS

PORTLAND PUDGY

Under The Blown Up Canopy you can sit outside again.

We simply don't make enough speed to kill the current well and although we can sail just fine towards the coast, we are simultaneously pushed away by the current and the waves to the south. We can steer about ninety degrees into the wind and

Scheveningen is sooner within reach than IJmuiden. With more wind, you can probably steer a little higher, but whether it is sensible to sail above wind force four is the question. The Pudgy is open, wide, and low on the water, all ingredients for danger are present.

With plenty of wind, it's a different story. Then you notice that the Pudgy really wants to sail. The boat immediately picks up speed and is easy to steer. The two of you can find a sitting position in which you can hold out for a while and you never have the idea that it is getting dangerous. The Pudgy is stable and quite dry undoubtedly

LOST MISSION

We sail for a few hours but realize that we will never arrive in IJmuiden. After the tack, we will try to head north, but the boat speed is not high enough to do us before the next turn resulting that we will just drift the other way again. There is no other option than to switch to the Pooh and let us sail a bit to the north. Numb and stiff we climb back on board and tie the Pudgy behind the boat.

A lot closer to IJmuiden we get back in. Setting up the sail is immediately smoother the second time and with some cursing and a sigh we sail towards the coast. Now we just need to make west and have patience do what we promised. We were in the middle of the sea and now we are back on dry land with both feet

Less affected by the current. There is still not much wind, but we get a decent speed of two knots. Anyone who can sail away at a speed of two to three knots slightly higher than half the wind will always end up somewhere where people are. This advantage of the Pudgy over a normal liferaft is undisputed in that regard. We reach the coast at IJmuiden at dawn. Our nausea has subsided and we resolutely set course for the beach. The surf is light this

morning and we have no trouble steering the Pudgy straight through the waves. Near the beach, we run aground and with united forces, we pull our lifeboat onto the beach.

CONCLUSION

Although there are some snags to sail with the Pudgy, we believe it is a successful boat. The Pudgy is many things in one. As a dinghy with a motor, it is even suitable for four people, even if it is a bit tight. In the harbor, it is a great boat for teaching children to sail or for a nice cross-country cruise.

You can row with it and it also works well as



The sailing characteristics at sea - this will be different on inland waters - are limited. It is possible to steer on a beam to broad-reaching wind, but sailing close to the wind is impossible. The Pudgy is too light for that, too little deep draft and carries too little sail. Now the boat is of course not intended for pleasure trips at sea. In an emergency, however, it's a nice idea you can get away with. The Pudgy can undeniably take you to safety, although it won't go without a fight. Especially because of the multifunctionality, it has become an interesting boat. On deck, it takes up quite a bit of space, but the advantages are obvious. On the coast, use it as a dinghy and before the next big crossing, prepare it as a lifeboat. You can put it on deck or hang it in the davits. For a relatively friendly price, you buy a very nice tool that certainly has its functions.

THE PUDGY CAN DEFINITELY TAKE YOU TO SAFETY

PORTLAND PUDGY	
DESIGNER	David Hulbert
LENGTH	2,33m
BEAM	1,35 m
WEIGHT	58kg
LENGTH	4,5 m'
CAPACITY	253 kg
FREEBOARD	25 cm (fully loaded)
MATERIAL	polyethylene
PRICE STANDARD	€ 2.195
PRICE w SAILING RIG	€ 3.045
PRICE COMPLETE	€ 4.240
IMPORTER	Portland Pudgy Europe BV
WEBSITE	www.portlandpudgy.nl



We try to cross back to IJmuiden., Through the surf on the beach., We have land under our feet again!