

Seeking the perfect dinghy

Here's one that comes pretty close to ideal

by Bill Kinney



Bill and Lisa were surprised at how well Pudgy sails, given its blunt bow and wide beam.

SPACE ON THE DECK OF ANY CRUISING vessel is tight. Because we have so many things to carry and still need space left over to actually do the work of sailing our boats, it seems we can never have everything. This was brought home to us in a big way when we started shopping for our cruising dinghy. Small is best when the dinghy is on deck, but small is quite the opposite of what we want when hauling supplies out to the mooring. Our friends had advice based on strongly held opinions. It seems that sailors feel as sure about their choice of dinghy as they do their choice of religion, and they seem to make both choices pretty much for the same kinds of reasons.

We tried to approach the dinghy problem with open minds. Rather

than select a specific approach and then try to see how we could make it work, we tried objectively to list all of the things we hoped a dinghy could do for us. Maybe, we thought

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optimistically, the solution would then be obvious. The standard solution for dinghy service these days seems to be the 10- to 14-foot inflatable, either a RIB or a hard floor powered by an 8- to 15-hp outboard. This seems to be a functional, useful boat for the job, but we wondered if thinking outside the box would get us a solution more suited to our needs.

Although our boat, *Fetchin' Ketch*, is not small (40 feet overall), its cen-

ter-cockpit design breaks the deck space into smaller sections than an aft-cockpit boat has. The center cockpit occupies the space under the boom where many dinghies live and

because it is a ketch, the mainmast is farther forward and the foredeck quite a bit shorter than a sloop of the same length. The mizzen-

mast is an additional obstruction.

The wish list

Like any wish list involving boats, several of our desires were mutually exclusive and would have to be compromised.

- We wanted a dinghy that would fit on the foredeck with enough room left over to work the windlass and sails.
- For convenience, safety, and secu-

Limitations of double-duty dinghies

by Dan Spurr

On a small boat, it is indeed tempting — for reasons of cost and space — to rely on one rigid dinghy or inflatable that can function as both ship-to-shore transport and also as a life raft, should that dread day come when one must abandon ship. There are scenarios in which such a dual-purpose craft can succeed in its duty, mainly in relatively calm seas. Let's say your big boat begins taking on water. You look for the leak, man the pumps, try to contact help on the radio, and begin collecting your abandon-ship bags. You also lower the dinghy/raft over the side and tether it to a breast or stern cleat, ready to throw into it your stuff and yourself at that last fateful moment.

But it seems that the majority of sinkings occur in bad weather; indeed, it's the weather — mainly big seas created by high winds — that, for one reason or another, cause boats to sink. So the life/raft must be extraordinarily stable to stay upright when slammed by large, breaking waves. The test begins immediately, with the raft tethered to the mother ship. Can it survive slamming against the topsides? Are the tether and its attachment points strong enough to survive the shock loads on it?

All quality life rafts have some sort of ballast system. Most common are ballast pockets arranged around the perimeter of these rafts that automatically fill with water when deployed. The Givens hemispherical ballast system is a large inverted cone-shaped bag that fills with water and is reputed to keep the raft upright even in hurricane-force conditions.

Even ballasted life rafts can flip in the right combination of wind and waves. Survivor accounts of persons trying to board rafts from the water describe having to right upside-down rafts. Once part of the bottom is raised from the water (usually opposite the boarder), wind and wave action can easily

flip them. In the cold and wind, it isn't easy to right a raft, not even in magazine- and safety society-sponsored tests in calm water. Try it sometime, and you'll begin to understand the vulnerability of rigid dinghies in survival conditions. During my 11 years as editor of *Practical Sailor*, we tested many life rafts and found boarding and stability to be important issues.

Once the weather and seas moderate, yes, in a rigid dinghy you can rig a sail and attempt to make progress toward land, rather than drift with the wind and currents — but only if it's upright and clear of water. So you must weigh this advantage, and a cost-savings of perhaps a few thousand dollars, against the superior stability and habitability of a dedicated life raft.

To my mind, if you're going offshore you really ought to have both a good rowing and motoring dinghy, and a life raft. Your preparations and planning should give you the best possible odds of surviving a calamity. I tend to discount the money excuse because, given the cost of the big boat, sails, electronics, travel, and other expenses of cruising, the price of a life raft isn't that much. Besides, in some areas you can even rent them. Space a problem? The raft might live on deck underneath the lashed, upside-down dinghy, or (and I've done this on small boats) stored in a valise in the cockpit where it minimizes the volume of water in the footwell. A custom bracket on the stern pulpit also is possible.

Having said all this, I must admit to not having tested the Portland Pudgy and would welcome hearing from anyone who has. It certainly appears to be a clever concept with much thought given to its multi-functional design. Noteworthy are features such as handholds on the bottom for aiding in righting the boat from a capsize, a compass, and intelligent stowage.

It should fit on deck in a "ready-to-go" state. In other words, if it was an inflatable, it had to fit fully inflated.

- Our new tender had to be able to carry the two of us, our dog, and a reasonable load of supplies.
- In the water it had to be stable enough to use as a fishing or diving platform.
- We enjoy rowing for exercise and sightseeing, so a good rowing hull was high on our list.
- A sail rig would be a nice plus.
- Durability was important. We did not want to be stranded somewhere by a dinghy with a hole in the side.
- Light enough to get on deck easily.
- Did I mention we wanted this whole magic package at a low price?

While it might seem as though we were asking for a boat to do everything, there were characteristics that we did not consider to be very important to our situation. A high-speed hull was not something we had on our list. We were also not looking for a boat that would fold up and store belowdecks. We did not anticipate towing our dinghy often, so towing characteristics did not matter. All of these characteristics were not considered to be negatives; they were just things we were quite willing to pass on if the rest of our list was a match.

Needless to say, after making this long list the choice was still not obvious. The length restriction seemed to be the one that was the most difficult. To have room to run the windlass we really needed a dinghy to be no more than 8 feet 6 inches overall. Our first try was an 8-foot Fatty Knees. This classically handsome, well-built, and fun boat, is the dinghy of choice for Lin and Larry Pardey. We found that it rowed and sailed very well. After a couple of months of use, however, we decided that it was too small on the inside for the two of us to use in comfort. It also lacked the overall carrying capacity we felt would be needed while cruising. Although as seaworthy as a boat that size can be, it was tender enough that it took some care when boarding, and there was no way we could see ourselves climbing back into it on a routine basis after swimming or diving.

It was beginning to look like we

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were going to have to compromise and go the route of an inflatable that could be stowed belowdecks.

Aha! The solution?

At the spring boat show in 2004 we saw a new dinghy design. It seemed to come as close to meeting all of our criteria as possible and had unexpected benefits. Designed from the beginning to be a useful dinghy and to meet the requirements of a four-man life raft, it met our size needs and looked like it had a good collection of features and a thoughtful design. Unfortunately, the display boat was just a prototype, and the company was not yet ready to take orders. We figured we had some time yet before leaving on our cruise, so we put the Portland Pudgy at the top of our dinghy list and kept our eyes open to see if something else came along in the meantime. Two years later, the Portland Pudgy went into commercial production, and we were among the first to send in our money.

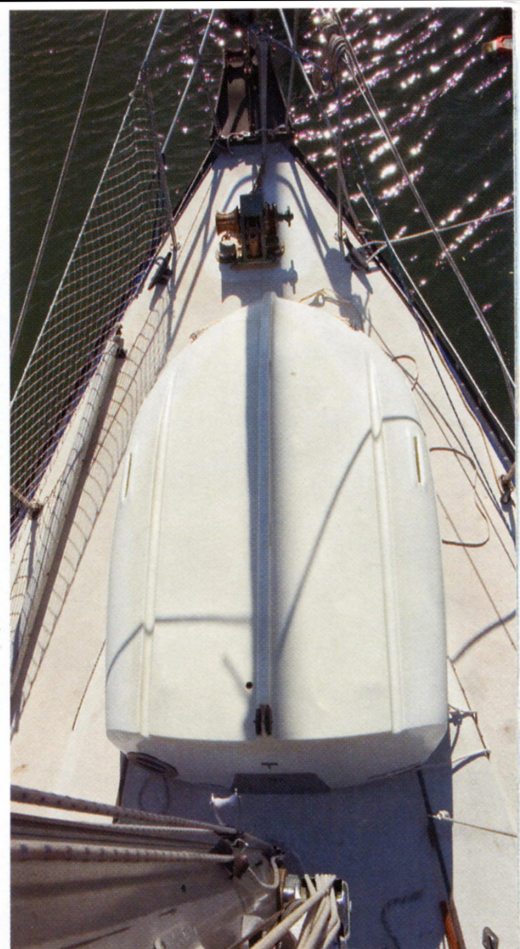
Several well-known authors have expounded on the benefits of using the ship's dinghy as the primary life safety vessel. If one has to leave the mother ship, it is particularly attractive to be able to sail and/or row toward safety instead of drifting helplessly waiting to be found. The Roths

and the Pardeys have made this case, the Pardeys going so far as to create additional flotation and stability for their Fatty Knees tender using fenders. A decade or two ago, the only commercial alternative was the inflatable Tinker. This boat came close but did not match enough of the items on our wish list to get us excited, and this British-made boat was expensive.

The Pudgy is a hard-shell boat, designed to serve the dual functions of everyday dinghy and lifeboat. With its unsinkable construction, the (optional) specially designed sea anchor, and exposure canopy, it seems to meet most of the criteria for a lifeboat. (See sidebar.)

Met the criteria

Plus, this little boat met all of the criteria we set for our dinghy. At just over 7½ feet long, it gave us all the room we could hope for on our foredeck. Despite the short length, its wide beam, carried nearly the full length of the hull, offers lots of cargo room, even with two adults and a dog aboard. Admittedly, a Pudgy would get a bit cozy for routine use with more than two people. For a boat of its size, it is amazingly stable, almost as stable as an inflatable. Through the magic of good design, it manages to still look good even with proportions



Even though their boat is 40 feet long, the Kinneys' dinghy could not be longer than 8½ feet. At 7½ feet, the Portland Pudgy leaves a little space for working the windlass and headsails, above. At 128 pounds, Pudgy is too heavy to launch and retrieve by hand over the lifelines, but using a halyard and bridle, it's easily raised with a winch, below.



But be reasonable about it

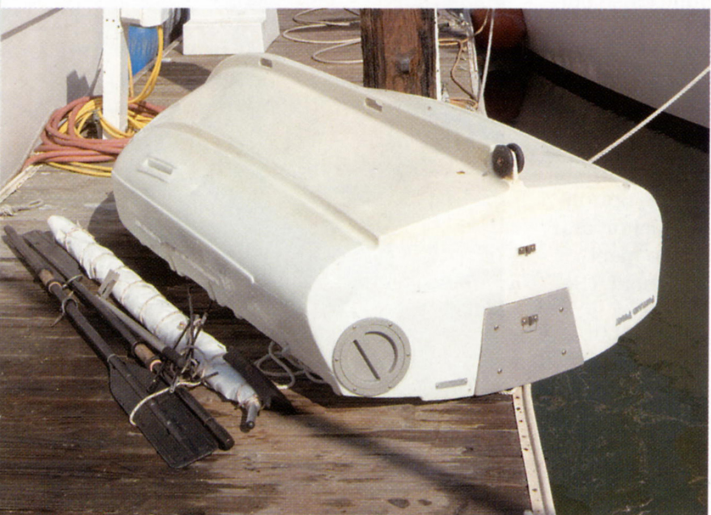
by Jerry Powlas

On *Mystic*, we have a kayak for a dinghy and two survival suits as provision against losing the mother ship. An inspection of most marinas would show that perhaps one boat in every 100 or 200 has a dedicated life raft. The rest have dinghies of one sort or another, most of which would be of limited use in an abandon-ship situation. The Portland Pudgy certainly looks like it would offer her crew much more protection and utility than an ordinary dinghy in such a situa-

tion. She also looks like she would be less stable than a dedicated life raft, but she would be more mobile.

There are levels of safety. Most small general aviation aircraft do not carry parachutes. Hunters do not wear flak jackets and, although I wear a helmet when riding my motorcycle, I do not wear it when I drive my car. Until Big Brother interferes, recreational boaters may choose how safe they need to be.

I like that.



High freeboard helps keep water out. With just one person — and maybe a dog as lookout — the transom is slightly elevated, and the dinghy skims along easily, at left above. With two, the transom is immersed and the boat is trimmed well. Wide beam and generous buoyancy make Pudgy almost as stable as an inflatable, above. High freeboard helps keep water out. Upside down, at left, you can see the rollers for maneuvering on land, and the twin daggerboard trunks. The sailing rig and oars break down to fit inside the hull.

that one normally would associate with clunky.

The boat is double-hulled, with the space below the deck filled with foam for flotation. The remaining space is accessible through three hefty hatches. The sail rig and the oars fit inside the hull with room to spare for emergency supplies or routine storage.

The Pudgy comes with a robust pair of jointed oars. The oarlocks are a clever interlocking design that holds the oars so that a moment's clumsiness doesn't send them for an unscheduled swim. For really serious rowing, oars a foot or so longer than the standard 6-foot 6-inch ones would be a good addition, although they would not then store inside the hull. Rowing was obvi-

ously something the designer expected to be done in this boat, and the hull form supports that intent.

A deep skeg gives the Pudgy a nice straight track. With one person aboard, the transom is clear of the water, resulting in minimum drag. It slows down a bit when loaded with two full-size adults and gear, but it still moves along in a well-mannered way.


Good stability

The sail rig is a fun addition. The hull has such great initial stability it stands up to sail well even to gusty afternoon winds on San Francisco Bay. Of course a boat with a 7-foot waterline is not going to set speed records, but with the two leeboards and the deep rudder, it does well even to windward. The reefable gaff rig can be carried above the exposure canopy, allowing a shipwrecked crew to make progress toward civilization. We haven't used it to save ourselves, but we have had a lot of fun with it as a sailing dinghy. Even fitted with the rated 2-hp outboard, the Pudgy will not set speed records, but we are not type-A personalities who need to get somewhere in a hurry.

At 128 pounds, it is neither remarkably light nor heavy for a boat this size. It is not a boat that we can simply

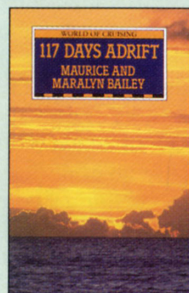
manhandle over our lifelines, but using the whiskerpole and spinnaker halyard as a crane, one of us can lift it aboard without help.

Here are current prices: \$1,895 for the boat, \$895 for the sail rig, \$1,298 for the carbon-dioxide-inflated canopy, \$295 for the sea anchor, and \$99 for a boarding ladder. Other options such as a bailer and solar panel, also are available.

Clearly, no single boat design works for everyone. But all things considered, for our current and anticipated needs, this little boat seems to do everything we require and was the best compromise we could find. Working through the same process could get you a very different "right" answer. 

For further reading...

In their classic, *117 Days Adrift*, Maurice and Maralyn Bailey tell of survival via life raft and dinghy after their sailboat was sunk by a whale in the Pacific. This book is available from the Good Old Bookshelf <<http://www.goodoldboat.com/bookshelf.html>> or by calling 763-420-8923.



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