

Do-it-all dinghy

Row, sail or motor this potentially lifesaving crafty craft

If there was an award for the most ingeniously designed and well thought out vessel at the show, the fittingly named Portland Pudgy would get my vote. It is an unusual hybrid, an attempt to take a multi-function dinghy and by dint of a well designed (optional) inflatable canopy, allow it to double as a liferaft in an emergency.

Given a cursory glance, some might conclude that its only appeal will be to boat owners whose mothership is too small to carry a conventional liferaft as well as a tender. Having sat inside the Pudgy in its liferaft form, I would disagree – given the choice I'd opt for the Pudgy over a proper liferaft every time. Unlike a conventional liferaft, the Pudgy's hull cannot be punctured, and its high-on indestructible polyethylene form is unsinkable even without the inflatable canopy. It can be rowed or sailed or motored, an invaluable psychological as well as practical bonus, especially if your grab bag contains a hand-held GPS. And with its solid form and integral seating, it will be far more comfortable than a squidgy and invariably soggy-floored liferaft.

Scrutinising its underwater shape and its modest 54ft² sail (there is a choice of two rigs) it's clearly not going to threaten Ben Ainslie's America's Cup challenge. However, with its full length keel, beamy form and twin daggerboards, the manufacturer's claims that the Pudgy tracks well, tows beautifully, rows great, and is very stable under foot all seem entirely credible.

At the show it was selling for £2,695, while the liferaft canopy is an extra

The Pudgy can take outboard motors up to 3hp



£1,610, and the rig costs £1,055. So it's not cheap. However, I reckon it justifies its price tag by dint of being remarkably well designed throughout. The stockist, Soundless Marine, emphasised that every last scrap of equipment, including the canopy and the rig, has a dedicated storage space on board, so there's no fumbling around in an emergency liferaft situation. There are two seating arrangements, thanks to the midships seat hinging through 180°. The rudder stows neatly under the aft seat when the outboard is in place. The rig can be used with the canopy in situ. Drainage channels keep the water off the floor. And so on and so on. All told it's a great bit of kit, and the only limitation I saw was that compared with a conventional liferaft it is USCG (US Coast Guard) approved for just four people, whereas larger conventional liferafts can hold more people if required.

Contact www.soundlessmarine.com



The inflatable canopy is an optional extra that turns the dinghy into a liferaft