



“All I want is somewhere to make a cuppa - and have a good lie down . . .”

By Di Ross & John (“JB”) Batty. Additional Editorial Comment (Captions) by PW

It sounds simple enough - (and it is!) but despite falling sales, reduced margins and a monumental lack of boating interest by young families, boatbuilders of all persuasions still haven't got the message:

“Good fit-out” no longer means two pedestal seats and a canopy! In this special report F&B regular, Di Ross explains why she and her partner John Batty are having so much trouble finding a new boat . . . and it begs the question: Are any of the boat builders listening?

Our current Honda 130 powered Signature 550C (pictured above) is approaching six years in age. She's in very good condition having served us well, proven totally reliable, feels safe and has provided us with endless hours of enjoyment.

There are many aspects of our Signature that we particularly like. We appreciate the deep floor to topside height which is a feature of most Signatures, contributing to that safe feel of being in the boat, not on the boat. The full height transom affords more than usual storage, probably more than you would find in some larger craft. The offset to this storage space is a reduction in the area between the helm seat and the rear bench seat – of around 800mm. We have further reduced this space by adding a jury rigged fresh water sink which attaches to the starboard side hand rail. The cockpit is hence congested, and we would like more aft space.

On the other hand, roadway access to the 550 is demanding. The ladder is virtually useless both on land and in the water. I tried it once and failed; JB managed to retrieve me from the water using the outboard leg to lift me onto the boat – never again! We live in hope that we never need to undertake such a manoeuvre in an emergency. Access at the ramp or at home is a-la throwing a leg over the side from the trailer guard. Increasingly this feat is becoming an accident looking to happen as the birthdays roll

around - and for sure these legs ain't going to grow any longer at this stage of life!

We have a full set of camper covers for the 550, which we have had up on very few occasions, mainly because of the time and effort required to erect them. They are truly a pain to put up in cooler conditions (they surely “shrink” when stowed) and any sort of breeze invokes a battle (like wet washing).

Over the last few years we have had the good fortune to visit locations like the Gippsland Lakes (F&B #87 & #88), the west coast of SA (Ceduna to Whyalla F&B #95 - #99) and Kangaroo Island (F&B #116 & #117).

We have travelled many kilometres with the boat in tow, with two comfy bunks onboard - but did we ever use them for overnight accommodation? No.

Why? – it's too risky getting up there, albeit via a step ladder. Scenario - you've just had your evening shower at the caravan park, you've got your hands full with stuff, toiletries, your clobber, torch, etc and you're going to take on a makeshift ladder to get to bed... that accident is looming!!

We have however tried many and varied forms of accommodation - the double shuffle; taking two vehicles,

one a campervan and t'other towing the boat; putting the caravan on site and then returning for the boat and just about every combination thereof.

Both the caravan and the Urvan had only basic facilities, a gas stove, cold fresh water and a fridge. Anyway, petrol prices have put a stop to these silly moves and they were never a sensible option for long haul trips. And then there is the tent – that's the same as putting up those camper covers and pulling them down each night and morning. Tent erected, you then remove the beds from the boat to put in the tent... you have to question yourself at this stage!!

We have looked at the possibility of a “wind-off” camper unit and a light truck, which would need to be sufficient (as in footprint) and engine capacity to tote the all up weight of the boat plus the camper unit. This sort of move left us a bit cold; putting our pension \$s into a boat upgrade sits much better than having it tied up in a truck, with limited everyday use.

In this day and age one would think it not impossible to incorporate these basic camper facilities into a “cruiser” - and that doesn't mean a battle ship or a beer glass.

Our exploits to date tell us there has

Di & JB have looked long and hard at the Signature 600C and 630 (pictured) but despite having the hull shape they love and the seaworthiness they have appreciated for years in their 550, the difference between what they'd get for their 550 (“about \$35K tops”) and the cost of the new craft “means we're basically forking out another \$30-35K for an extra 400mm of cockpit space. We'd still only have two berths - and the same seats. Plus we go over two tonnes, and increase our fuel bill about 20% minimum. For the really serious bluewater fishos, cockpit space is everything, and these boats are magnificent - but for a couple of retirees looking for some better comfort options in lieu of cockpit space, upgrading just doesn't seem logical.”

to be a more efficient way, and with anticipated trips to WA shores and a Murray River extended cruise in mind, we have produced a list of capabilities we would like to see in an upgrade for the 550.

Concisely these are:

- Circa 6.0m, arrived at on