



Fisherman & Boatowner #58 FIELD TEST

OMC Haines Hunter 635SF Challenger

Introducing one of the most interesting new boats to come from the Haines Hunter stable for years.

Report & Pics by Peter Webster

It's been a good month for boat tests. Here's another that not only surprised, but provided a great deal of pleasure to drive and operate during the test, and left us with the feeling that the future of the Australian boating industry is in good hands.

This Haines Hunter 635SF Challenger is another from the drawing board of Haines Hunter designer and production chief Ben Hipkins.

Ben has had a particularly difficult time with the R&D development at OMC Haines Hunter. It is common knowledge that the American parent company (Outboard Marine Corporation) is strapped for cash on the International stage, and local budgets have been paired back to the absolute minimum. For Ben, this translates to having to achieve big miracles on very small budgets – and it manifests itself on boats like this where he's re-worked an existing Haines Hunter hull with as much new



**ABM
RETRO
BOAT TEST:**
Unchanged, as first published, written and photographed by Peter Webster in September, 2000



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Haines Hunter 635 W/A**

tooling as his budgets will allow.

This makes the challenge considerably harder for him, but he's certainly risen to the occasion with this very fine walkaround fibreglass sports fisherman, aptly named the Challenger.

The Haines Hunter 635SF Challenger produced one of the best test results we've experienced for some time, and shows just what a competent package you can build in 6.35 m overall. In fact, it really throws into question the whole issue of just how big a boat do you need? And how much horsepower do you need to hang off the transom to get real comfort, safety and fishing convenience in a bluewater fishing rig?

Design

The 635 hull has been around since about 1985 when it was first produced as a very slick sports cruiser. The original hull has always been considered one of the finest of its kind ever produced in Australia so Ben had a classic pedigree to work with when he set about re-working the moulds for about the seventh time in their history.

Targeting a sports fishing rig that would provide spectacular performance from a 150hp FICHT engine, or the heady combination of economical performance and reliability from twin smaller 90-115hp V-4 FICHT engines, Hipkins consolidated the mass of data he's accumulated these past few years from his national dealer network. He's also taken onboard the input from Haines Hunter owners across Australia and produced a very simple, practical deck and cabin layout that achieves class

winning status.

Essentially, the 635 SF Challenger is a walkaround sportsfishing boat with a surprisingly big cabin in the middle. It's much bigger than the photographs indicate. It has a pair of 2.2m long berths in a cabin that isn't just a poky little hideaway - between the berths there is a full pump-out toilet and plenty of headroom to sit in comfort out of bad weather. Frankly there's almost as much room in this cabin as there is in most competitors' cuddy cabins.

It's a clever piece of design and tooling. The secret clearly lies in lifting up the side walkaround trenches to such an extent that you can lie down underneath the trenches in the cabin.

The measurements of the walkaround are interesting, with Haines Hunter allowing 220mm wide x an average 310mm high for the walkaround trenches - the same as they use in their bigger Patriot models. But as Hipkins points out, your feet don't get any smaller just because you've got the smaller boat!

Keep in mind that having these walkaround trenches this "high" (or more accurately, "shallow") allows more than just a bigger, more user friendly cabin. If by chance you have to run the Tweed River bar, and you get stuck at the wrong time in the wrong place and just have to cap a breaking wave, having such shallow trenches around the side will almost certainly save the day.

The 635 SF could easily cope with a green wave coming over and around the side - unlike a number of pressed tinny walkarounds on the market which will almost certainly go belly-up in the same situation.

Haines Hunter then take this 'green' water aft to the rear cockpit drains, which drop into the lower bilge where the water is pumped out. This bit I'm not so happy with - I'd NEVER rely on a single 12V bilge pump - but there's a perfect spot to mount a bloody big Whale or Jabsco double action manual pump on the transom. These pumps will empty the whole cockpit in seconds - especially if the crew figures the alternative is the Long Swim Home.

(Readers note - these big manual pumps are available from good chandlerys like Whitworths & BIAS, and cost in the \$500 - \$600 range. Easy to install yourself, they are a terrific investment in boating safety - and should be mandatory if the boat is regularly coming and going through a barred inlet like the ones at Tweed, Port Macquarie, Narooma, etc)

Looking at the cockpit, there's 1.75m behind the foldaway helmsman seat, and a constant 2.0m beam between the coamings.

The cockpit is flanked by a very wide 1.5m moulded fibreglass transom box. This is divided into a series of compartments to provide either a good

area for the catch, plus a live bait tank and bait tray, or you could take the dividers out and just use it as a big kill tank - or combinations in between.

By the way, I wouldn't mind seeing this transom moulding dropped down even further. When the box is filled with ice, there's not going to be much room left for the sort of catches people take home in Queensland and West Aussie.

Other design features of note include a clever walk through transom opening - but curiously, it doesn't have the doorway as standard equipment. It has to be asked for specially, and again, for people working in white water bar areas, this would surely be a mandatory option.

The transom arrangement itself is very contemporary, being one of these swallow tail or portofino style transoms with such a big flat area right across the beam, Ben Hipkins has decided to make it available with a tuna style, stainless steel 'gut' rail just to keep the anglers safely onboard.

In the old days, we would have chastised the factory for creating such a "wasteful" wide, flat transom arrangement, but nowadays, it's all the rage to make the transom in such a way (like this) that it can be used for general fishing and diving activities as distinct from being a separate part of the boat with its own boxed well for the outboard.

Build Quality

There's not a lot of doubt about Haines Hunter's build quality, despite the recent correspondence in F&B's home workshop to the contrary! The fact remains Haines Hunter is doing a pretty good job with their build quality and standard of finish. We've looked at half a dozen different Haines Hunter models in the past month or so, and all of them have been distinguished by very high standards of finish and a very good build quality.

Hipkins in one of the veterans of the industry, with personal experience in fibreglass stretching back 30 odd years, so few people know more about the subject and frankly, it's reflected in the beautiful standard of mouldings and finish you'll find in today's Haines Hunters.

Performance

With two 90hp ram injected FICHT V-4 outboards on the transom, this thing was a thinly disguised rocket ship. There's no way on this earth you'd need more horsepower regardless of what you were going to do with the boat. The two 90hp Evinrudes provided so much grunt, we had to be very careful with the operation of the twin throttles.

Frankly, I didn't like the throttle set-up at all. These latest computerised fuel injected systems open up absolutely seamlessly with instantaneous response - so that if you are a bit "jabby" on the throttles and/or

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they're short and a bit stiff, it's very hard to deliver a take-off that's smooth and comfortable.

Allied to the tremendous grunt of the two Evinrude 90's, it meant that the skipper had to be very careful how and when to apply the power, otherwise he'd knock the passengers clean off their feet - such is the instantaneous response and thrust from the 2 x 90 hp FICHT engines.

Conversely, coming off the throttles, we had to be nearly as careful. As the throttle is drawn back, the computer instantly drops the fuel supply back. . . it's just like throwing on power disc brakes. If the skipper is not really careful, everybody is pushed forward in the boat as if you'd applied power disc brakes.

No kidding! As noted though, a lot of this has got to do with the rather poor ergonomics of the twin throttle controls. The skipper needs very strong wrists to get a smooth delivery from the throttle and gear shift levers, which seemed decidedly short for my taste.

But in terms of outright performance, the 90's work well. They were smooth, and they are much quieter than the non-FICHT equipped V-4's. The "rattle and roll" of the classic Johnson V-4 has all but disappeared, there is very little smoke to speak of - and they're much smoother than the older style V-4 carby model.

These engines are much more like turbines. They spin very freely, the power is seamless, and whilst no doubt Ben made sure we had the perfect props for the test, it matters not. The pair of stainless steel, 13 7/8" diameter x 17" pitch OMC SST props (standard with FICHT outboards) proved a perfect combination.

Interestingly, whilst we were coming back to the marina, Ben took a call from an interstate customer who was quizzing him about the viability of installing 2 x 115hp FICHT V-4's on this very model. As Ben spoke, I couldn't help myself - and opened up the 90's to "flat stick", so that we were travelling up the Broadwater at speeds approaching 40 knots. It certainly added some emphasis to Ben's strident comments that "Look, I'm sure you won't need any more than these 90 hp FICHT's to get this fantastic level of performance!"

Overseas reports suggest that these new 90hp



FICHT equipped V-4's are almost as fuel efficient as some of the latest 4-strokes on the market from Yamaha and Honda, so we look forward to being able to conduct F&B's unique fuel trials with the FICHT 90's in the future.

Handling And Ride

This is what drew us to the boat in the first place during the recent Haines Hunter press day. Then, we were genuinely surprised at the softness of the ride, and made a mental note to re-visit this model when we had a lot more time available to work it offshore in a variety of seas.

Thus it has been, and we've simply reaffirmed this has been one of the softest riding boats in this class we've ever tested. And yes, that does include some very soft riding boats from Signature, Seafarer, Cruise Craft and the like. In this class, I would go so far to suggest this is probably the softest riding 6.35 metre GRP deep vee in the business, and that's a statement that should make Haines Hunter very proud.

But it is - the ride offshore is superb. The hull is beautifully sensitive to trim, and it can be made to dance across the waves, with the perfect degree of bow lift against bow down pressure off the twin engines. Any lateral (side to side) pressure from beam-to winds can easily be trimmed out by just adjusting the engine's running angle.

Uphill, the very deep forefoot works exceptionally well, and although it liked plenty of trim to keep the ride soft, we could still travel uphill into 4' seas quite easily at 23-25 knots.

Coming about, we increased the throttles up to 4000 for a spectacular, mind-boggling ride across the waves at nearly 28 knots, which in a 6.35 metre hull is a terrific effort. Bringing it about yet again to run downhill, trimming the motors up and out produced the predictably soft riding response, a very dry ride with the water being flung back well aft, and with just a hint of ventilation on some of the steeper waves.

Overall, I think if I was buying this boat for extensive offshore use I would probably drop the engines down a notch, just to cut out this hint of ventilation and to give a little bit more trim power for head sea work.

We spent quite a deal of time offshore in this boat. Although I could get water across the boat by running into the sea three quarter forward, it was very hard to do it in any of the other directions, and took a conscious effort to drive the boat badly or trim it too far down for too long.

Downhill it was truly delightful. With the engines trimmed right up, the weight of the 2 x 90hp x 20" Evinrudes, combined with the two "steering"

Standard Equipment
Full walk around forward decks
Single tone hull
Two tone deck
Bow eye
Bow sprit
Recessed rear cleats
Rear tow eyes
Boarding ladder
Bow rail
Bow roller and split bollard
Rope ladder with lid
Self draining anchor well
Cabin side windows
Curved windscreen
Cabin deck hatch
Ergonomically designed dashboard & control centre
Passenger grab rail
Cabin bunks and storage
Bunk cushions
Cabin side shelves
Upholstered cabin back rests
Cabin bulkheads and footrests
Folding helm and navigation seats
Cabin carpet and lining
Cockpit carpet and lining
Under floor storage locker
Under floor fuel tank
Deck filler and breathers
Cockpit side pocket stowage
Recessed grab rails in cockpit
Aft fishing station with bait well & cutting board
Boarding platform full width
Through transom access
Hydraulic steering
Sports steering wheel
Water resistant switch panel
Navigation lights
Automatic bilge pump
Depth sounder transducer
4 rod holders
Cockpit drains

Price Check!

Basic model, 1 x 150 hp
carby V-6, from
\$46,600. The magic test
rig, with 2 x 90 FICHTs, all
the toys, top Tinka trailer,
\$63,600 incl GST

propellers, enabled this rig to travel downhill "hands-off" for miles. Steerage (Hydrive, as it happens) was silky smooth and powerful. The boat always remained easy to "pull off" a wave, and turn back over the top like a surfer on a board.

Haines Hunter make a song and dance about their "soft vee hull" but one has to agree that Hipkins' policy of minimising the underwater flat area of the 635's planing strakes is certainly providing a significantly softer and quieter ride on the seaway.

Coming back, we returned to the 4,000 r/min range, and just reveled in this exciting boat's handling of the increasingly choppy conditions.

Application

As a fishing boat, the Challenger SF is a ripper.

I don't know how much of the walkaround is going

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to be used, but there's plenty of room for a couple of blokes to sit forward and fish over the bow, and there's heaps in the cockpit for two or three guys to work quite comfortably without tangling their lines.

In a sportfishing sense, the outriggers were set-up very cleverly on the outside of the boat (so the 'rigger poles didn't cross over the transom as they do in so many boats) and with the optional overhead targa rod rack, this boat has a clear application to sportfishing.

It backs up surprisingly well, remembering to always lift the motors when you do that – but it trucks backwards at about 6 or 7 knots and that's more than fast enough to track a flighty sailfish or a little billy.

Of note, it travels like a blur on just one engine. Hipkins provided a fascinating demonstration (see centre picture, P-74). This is not a case of the boat just limping home on one engine.

Hell no, the 635SF trucks along very nicely at up to 26.8 knots (no kidding!) on just one engine, so it's comforting to know that if you drop one of the engines out on the day, you can come home at virtually your normal cruising speed.

Conclusion

With an all up weight of 2.2 tonnes as shown here on these pages with a tandem axle trailer, the Haines Hunter 635SF is another very welcome addition to the ranks of Aussie sportfishing boats. Soft riding, economical, very fast, plenty of fishing space and lot's of protection for the crew, it's very hard to see how the boat could be improved.

ABN November 2014

Hindsight: One Of The Best

I remember this test and report as if it was yesterday. Ruth Cunningham and the writer joined Haines Hunter's (then) designer and production manager, Ben Hipken for a remarkable test of a remarkable boat. This was arguably the softest riding 6.0-7.0m GRP boat we'd been in, an accolade that probably applies to this day.

Ben is another of those unsung heroes of the boating industry; the writer first worked with him back in the Pride days in Lansvale in the early 70s, then with Bruce Steber in the extraordinary 425/525 era, then across to Rod Wyllie's Monark boats, before he started to design and build the Outsider gameboats in Crowdy Head, NSW, (including the 48' Outsider Tracey-J(5) for the writer in the mid-1980s) and moving on (ultimately) to OMC's Haines Hunter.

A Kiwi born and trained traditional boatbuilder and designer, Hipkin has had an exceptional career, and made a significant (although largely unrecognised) impact on Australian small boat standards. Now retired, we see him occasionally, and he clearly still misses the cut and thrust of the day to day GRP production world.

Specifically, the HH 635 Walkaround is a beauty; a genuine classic with very distinctive (small) running strakes stopping well before the transom. It was Hipken's contention that most of the 'slap' common to GRP boats, and any ride harshness - especially in relatively calm water - came from said strakes. He was right, too. Still is.

If you can track down one of the original HH635 WA's, and the price is right, mortgage the kids to get it.

- PW, November 14

