



As much as we consider them sporting foes, if not the ninth state of Australia, New Zealand's boat and yacht builders are revered. After all, most things in this world are a product of their environment.

In the Shaky Isles, it's more often tumultuous seas, howling winds and driving rain and spray than the balmy weather we are accustomed to – at least some of the time – across The Ditch.

Enter Formula Cruisers, a 26-year-old Kiwi company attracting the attention of hardcore gamefishermen in Australia – the ones chasing a boat built for the rough stuff, which can be tweaked to suit individual needs, and that doesn't cost a motza to run.

Oh, and with the present exchange rate, you get about 25 per cent more boat for your buck.

With just four boats in its range – starting with the Icon 54, and running through a 58, 62 and 68 – Formula should be considered a semi-custom boatbuilder.

In better times, the yard can trot out eight boats per year. All its boats have enclosed flybridges, with three moulded sides and a rear, aft, clear curtain around the helm station on the 54.

Unlike your average production boatbuilder, Formula works closely with each customer from conception stage.

They happily change internal layouts and, moreover in the case of this boat, cockpit fitouts and fittings to suit specific needs, such as hardcore gamefishing.

Along the way, the customer is given log-in details to their own website, so they can monitor the progress of their boat.

FANTASTIC FITOUT

Kiama Charters, the Icon 54 tested here, was the seventh Icon 54, but the first with a (Black Marlin) tower. It also boasts a no-expense-spared fitout for serious fishing that, from my experience over the past 20 years, rivals any I have seen in a gameboat.

"Ordinarily, the 54 takes 24,000 man hours to build," says Grant Senior, Formula's general manager, owner, shipwright and marine architect, "but this was a 30,000 man-hour boat."

Grants adds that he likes nothing better than to be on the floor, getting his hands dirty and finding solutions to challenges. "As for electronics, you won't get change from half-a-million (Aussie) dollars," he quips.

When I caught up with the Formula boys, the Icon 54 was fresh off the ship. It had arrived in Botany Bay, NSW, whereupon the owner and his son leapt aboard for a quick run to Sydney for our test.

Following this, the boat was delivered to its new home port of Kiama on the NSW south coast. And with that, the fetching fishing village suddenly earned itself a five-star gamefishing charter boat.

All those trailerboats at the Kiama and Jervis Bay canyons (18 and 24 nautical miles from the harbour respectively) will be looking on and up with envy.

The owner, who was formerly running a Steber 48, first stumbled on the Formulas at the Sanctuary Cove International Boat Show the previous year. He took one look and said 'this is it'. His list of criteria was headed by quality, and not just price, and on this score he considers the Formulas rated right up there.

As with many Kiwi-built boats, the mouldings and finish are superb.

A Formula for SUCCESS

Formula Cruisers are a semi-custom boatbuilder from New Zealand that are now making a big splash on the Australian side of the channel. As David Lockwood found, this new Icon 54 is a thoughtfully planned, no-expense-spared sports machine that has the ability, and the electronics, to find fish wherever they may roam.

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Rather than gelcoat, the entire hull is finished in two-pack oyster-white paint for extra sparkle and easier maintenance.

He also wanted an enclosed flybridge for fishing in fair and foul weather. Although just 60 nautical miles or so south from Sydney, the weather changes tend to be more severe and brisk on the NSW south coast. Last, but not least, there are length restrictions on boats kept in tiny Kiama Harbour. Keeping within that limit was imperative.

Of course, being a charter boat, the Icon 54 is in 1E and 2B survey for fishing up to 200 nautical miles to sea. There are also plans to take the boat north and, although yet to be fitted, I'm told a heavy-tackle Chatfield (another revered Kiwi brand) chair will be fitted.

With a convertible double bed in the flybridge, the accommodation plan can sleep 11, but it's been configured to cater for six anglers during extended liveaboard charters. An FCI watermaker was fitted to complement the 1000 litres carried onboard.

KIWI CONSTRUCTION

Construction is solid 2.5cm GRP for the hull bottom, with vacuum-bagged Corecell foam composite sides and deck. The flybridge is infused, or bagged, to save weight. The Kiwis enjoy an international reputation for building boats, superyachts and maxis this way.

The 54 displaces about 30,000kg loaded – lighter than some solid glass numbers, heavier than other Kiwi composites – and is backed by a 10-year warranty, which is twice that from some Australian production yards.

The hull is an interesting one. It's a warped plane and, thus, variable-deadrise design, with a sharp 58-degree entry at its forefoot, 21 degrees of deep-vee just ahead of the engines, and with a relatively flat 10 degrees of deadrise at the transom.

Lift is generated by the flat run aft, as is stability. In reverse, the boat scoots back – and around the corner – without digging in like a traditional deep-vee.

All-important shaft angles, which are an indication of efficiency, are a low 7.9 degrees. Thus, the MTUs impart plenty of horizontal thrust and, I'm told, the calculations for a Volvo Penta IPS version give no more fuel efficiency.

The Icon 54 has a lovely profile, with a pretty sheerline and a usefully high bow. More unusual is the gunwale line – that area where the hull sides meet the top decks. Looking down at the Icon 54 from the bridge or tower reveals a huge amount of flare and a graceful, arcing bow, rather than a pointed one. It's almost reminiscent of an overgrown banana boat.

You will also notice the knuckle in the hull sides. As Grant explains: "It's free real estate."

Boosting the volume of the boat in this area allows for more internal storage, while also creating a high spray rail that, during our test, visibly shed water. The Icon 54 did displace plenty of ocean, but most of that was tossed aside with a certain degree of Kiwi disdain.

The engineering is another highlight, beginning with a Seaworth engine vent system from New Zealand, with intakes high up the hull sides,



“The Icon goes back as hard as any 54-footer I have driven and turns at speed like a sports car.”





Above: The massive foredeck is large enough to hold a significant party – or a team of anglers casting or cubing for tuna.

“Formula should be considered a semi-custom boatbuilder.”

and washable membranes and dorades to shed water.

Access to the engines is via a hatch back in the cockpit, which leads into a utility space housing batteries and the sight gauge for the aluminium fuel tank under the cockpit sole.

There are fuel shut-offs and a manifold system in keeping with survey requirements. The primary fuel filters are from Racor.

A watertight door forward of the utility space reveals the twin Series 60 825hp MTU electronic engines, built on 14-litre, straight-six blocks and linked to underwater exhausts.

There were heavy-duty stainless steel sea strainers, laminated sheet insulation and soft panels in case you have to remove an engine. An oil change system was to be fitted, and I noted CCT cameras and fire-fighting kit.

The engineroom was set up to retrofit one of the ZF gearbox maker's new station-hold devices that will operate engines and bow thruster and speak with satellites to hold you in position (a story for another day).

The ZF 2.192:1 gearboxes, four-blade ZF Faster 34- by 41.5-inch props, plus big 2.75-inch shafts and rudders, complete the serious running gear.

I liked the abundant servicing room in the big, white engineroom, too. But more than anything, it was the Furuno CSH-5041 commercial/ trawler-standard scanner – hey, we're talking almost \$100,000 here – that caught my eye. Which brings us to that half-million worth of electronics, comprising the latest and greatest of everything.

In case you're in the dark, the Furuno CSH-5041 is a full-circle, multi-beam, colour-scanning sonar for finding bait and marking fish in a large cone around your boat. Looking at the transducer, which descends below the hull surface when engaged, I reckon the sprats will come up battered and fried.

All told, the boat has 11 electronic display screens, including two 12-inch Raymarine screens in the cockpit, four 12-inch screens in the tower, and three 17-inch screens and two 12-inch screens in the custom helm console in the bridge. The transducer is a 4kW model for true deep-water discrimination.

Besides gamefishing, Kiama Charters targets blue-eye, hapuka and bass grouper on the canyons. And get this: an Australian electronics bright spark was responsible for the electronics fitout.

Furthermore, there was CCT fitted in the cockpit, connected to two hard drives to capture the day's

action. “Nothing we asked for they couldn't do,” explains the chuffed owner, pointing to the huge floodlights overhead and telling me of the underwater lights astern.

The DC power side of things is largely 24V, with a Mastervolt 16kW genset for Crusair air-con throughout. A 3kW inverter looks after the fridges and AV systems overnight.

CUSTOMISED TO PERFECTION

Now things get really interesting. The custom specification of this Icon 54 reads like a gripping novel, opening with the Black Marlin tower and ending with my white-knuckled climb up there.

Additional steps are needed to safely reach the tower from the flybridge, and they will be fitted in due course. But with the boat's 5.65m beam, it wears the tower beautifully. And skippers will find less pitch than in towers on deep-vee boats.

Back down at water level, the external staircase was deleted to create more cockpit space – there are 11.6 square metres of serious fishing room – which allowed the creation of a second aft-facing crew/ charterer lounge to starboard.

You won't find a better perch for spotting fish within arm's reach of the rods. Moulded toe kicks were added for better crew and angler purchase.

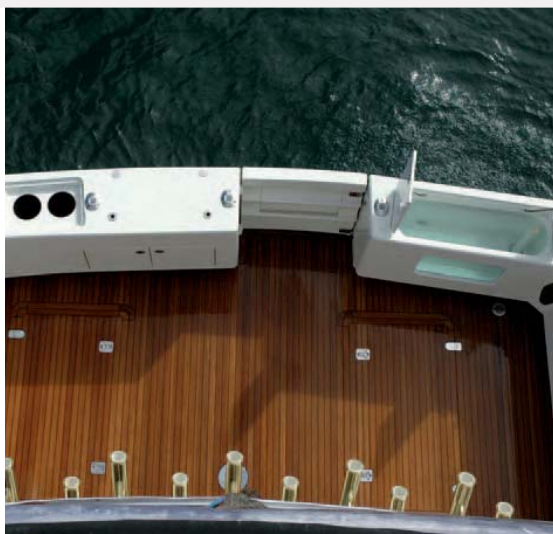
The usual outdoor dayhead was turned into an enormous walk-in washdown rod locker (racks to come, and it could do with an extractor fan), and the existing cockpit fridge was enlarged into a whopping, great bait-holding tomb.

Fish storage is underfloor by way of two slurry bins on slides, each of 280-litre capacity – big enough for carrying a brace of barrel-sized tuna. Rod storage exists under the boat's lounges and in the rocket launcher above.

The owner also tells me he is fitting clear-away rodholders. The coaming across the transom was reduced (it usually houses a barbecue) to improve access to the water.

Tuna tubes were then fitted beneath a clip-off lid, the livebait tank was deepened considerably and a window was added, while a big 'blow-out' panel in the marlin door was designed to dump water in a hurry.

Deck hardware includes flush-mounted cleats and 11 heavy-duty



Lees 'holders thoughtfully fitted in the gunwales, to suit the operator, and which drain overboard. I'm told covering panels will be fitted over the hawsepipes, so the transom is snag-free.

Next are the tag and gaff pole tubes feeding forward either side of the cockpit. Then come the outriggers: 10m (32ft) models from Chatfield Marine, with a 'shotgun' centre-rigger to come. Teak cockpit planking is 12mm.

Nice, wide sidedecks, backed by handrails, moulded toerails and ankle-high bulwarks lead to the destroyer-like foredeck that's almost big enough to land a jump jet, if not a wandering albatross.

The boat was fitted with a 350kg Davco davit and Aquapro 1401 duckie, with 40hp 4-stroke Yammie for, say, collecting provisions or charterers in Jervis Bay or landing ashore at Lizard Island. I also noted a Lofrans windlass, with 85m of 14mm survey chain and 66kg Delta anchor. Heavy-duty holding gear.

INDOOR LUXURY

Indoors, there's plenty to embrace, not least being the aft-galley that

Kiwis contend is superior for servicing crew. An electric window feeds the alfresco cockpit seating, with appliances ranging from four-burner cooktop and oven to dishwasher and oversized fridge and freezer (Fisher & Paykel, of course).

There's abundant storage space, upmarket Corian counters, soft-close drawers and a built-in wet bar, with glass and bottle storage nearby. A forward, clear, saloon window is an option, but the blanked-out setup on Kiama Charters is in keeping with game-boat trends.

The huge, U-shaped lounge to port can seat eight people around a dinette/coffee table with, it's pointed out to me, a high-low pedestal base from Australia that was faulty after installation.

A mere pre-delivery detail, I reply defensively. And a two-person lounge is opposite, with all seating enjoying good views of the Philips flatscreen TV in the cabinet forward.

The joinery was high-gloss cherrywood (but there are choices), while the suede headliner was

perfectly executed, and the bone-coloured leather upholstery luxurious.

Down the companionway is a three-cabin and two-head layout designed to accommodate charterers and crew. The latter get a starboard-side cabin with cross-over bunks, but, by and large, the 54 is a big-hearted boat and nowhere feels confined.

There's a forward stateroom with island berth and ensuite, with the usual owners' stateroom amidships to port changed from having an island berth to a double and a single. Here you will find the second ensuite, with a man-sized shower and upmarket Tecma head.

Some of the hatches in the amidships cabin are on the small side, but at least there are plenty of them. Ditto for storage space and hanging room and the two metres of headroom.

Although aft-facing, the internal stairwell to the flybridge proved intuitive to use while the boat was idling. Under way, I was parked up top in one of the two Navigator helm chairs, before the custom dash with the big spread of electronics.

Above: The cockpit offers tuna tubes and a large livebait tank, complete with aquarium window, in the transom.

Top: Cockpit lounges provide a comfortable perch to watch the lures. Above the port lounge is a large window that opens to the aft kitchen inside. And above the starboard lounge are large repeater screens that keep the cockpit crew in touch with the action.

SPEC CHECK

FORMULA ICON 54

PRICE AS TESTED

About \$2.7 million with MTU Series 60 diesel engines and options.

OPTIONS FITTED

Semi-custom gameboat fitout in survey, with a \$500,000 electronics package, including 11 flatscreens, Raymarine navigation and radar, Furuno commercial-grade sonar, Simrad autopilot and digital TV; Black Marlin tower; Lees heavy-duty rodholders; Chatfield outriggers and chair (to come); deeper livewell, tuna tubes and twin slurry boxes; starboard cockpit seating; davit and Aquarpro ducky; high-gloss joinery and lots more.

PRICED FROM

About \$2 million, with twin MTU Series 60 diesel engines.

GENERAL

Material: Solid GRP hull, with resin-infused, vacuum-bagged decks and hardtop

Type: Warped-plane variable-deadrise monohull, sans keel

Length overall: 17.8m

Hull length: 16.4m

Beam: 5.65m

Draft: 1.2m

Weight: 24,000kg dry with standard engines and no tower; some 30,000kg loaded

CAPACITIES

Berths: 11

Fuel: 4000 litres

Water: 1000 litres

Holding tank: 270 litres

ENGINE

Make/model: 2 x MTU Series 60

Type: Six-cylinder turbo-charged diesel with common-rail fuel injection

Displacement: 14 litres

Rated hp: 2 x 825hp

Max. RPM: 2300

Gearbox: ZF 2.192:1

Propellers: ZF FASTER 34- x 41.5-inch

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FISH ON THIS BOAT

Kiama Charters

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Sight lines forward were good, revealing at least the bowrail when seated, while a clear view unfolds over the cockpit when reversing.

The Edson wheel and ZF electronic shifts with go-slow, synchro and cruise modes fall to hand. Bennett trim tabs are provided, but not needed unless you are traversing beam-on weather when the boat might lean into the windward.

A bowthruster assists with docking, there are opening windows and air-con, but even more ventilation in the well-equipped tower. Concealed rod storage, a fridge, and pull-out double bed or U-shaped lounge for six complete the flybridge station.

SMOOTH RIDING

Put the pegs down and the boat is eager, gliding sneakily to planing speeds. But, of course, the most impressive figures are at displacement speeds, which is where professional skippers spend their time while passage-making from port to port.

With 4000 litres of diesel, the boat's range at 8 knots is said to be 2400 nautical miles, leaving 20 per cent of the fuel in reserve.

This drops to 1200 nautical miles at 10 knots and 500 nautical miles at 24 knots, which is still Kiama to the Gold Coast (in Queensland) on a tank, with some juice to spare.

I spent most of my time offshore at 24 knots at 2000rpm for consumption of 200 litres per hour. Pull back the reins and the boat cruises at 20.5-21 knots at 1830rpm for 170 litres per hour.

A touch of trim tab and throttle and we were running at 27.8 knots at 2200rpm for 280 litres per hour, whereupon the Icon remained smooth and delightfully quiet.

Top speed was 31 knots, with a little over half fuel and full water, with sea trials revealing that 31.7 knots is possible. And the MTU Series 60s are continuously rated if you want to throttle up and hightail it home from the grounds.

The sea was pretty lumpy, but there was never a hard landing. And while the fine

entry displaces plenty of water, only light spray landed on the flybridge windscreen. With wipers and washers, it was gone in no time.

I also noted there was no blowback on the aft saloon windows. I hate that station wagon or venturi effect that drenches crew and tackle.

Back at 850rpm, I found a nice, 7.9-knot troll speed for 22 litres per hour. The boat feels surefooted and stable and, thanks to its high bow, it doesn't ship water into a headsea.

Backing up was the surprise, the boat scooting around the corner smartly, with the only delay from the yet-to-be commissioned MTUs and ZF electronic gearboxes.

Engaged, I reckon the Icon goes back as hard as any 54-footer I have driven and, what's more, it turns off the wheel at speed like a sports car when heading for home.

"The handbrake was off and he [the owner] said, 'just do it,'" explains Grant in perfect Kiwi pitch.

And with that, Australia has a new icon on its charter scene. Apparently, half of Kiama came out to welcome the new boat in town. Expect plenty of fish to hit the deck in canyon-bound trips to come. 🐟

HIGHLIGHTS



- Great engineering, top-quality fit and finish.
- Warped-plane hull is slippery, with a huge flared bow that sheds water.
- Custom cockpit makeover is designed for serious charter and tournament fishing.
- No-expense-spared electronics fitout.
- Good views from the enclosed flybridge with custom helm station.
- New Zealand boatbuilder offers great service and customer support.
- Exchange rate is favourable for buying in NZ.