



BY PETER A. ROBSON

I

I'd been waiting anxiously for a chance to test the latest True North Outboard Express from Catalina Yachts. True Norths are known for their Downeaster (lobster-boat-style) aesthetic, with a hull design said to be able to handle the roughest conditions, though unfortunately the waters of English Bay on the day of our sea trial were pancake flat. Since I'd viewed earlier versions of the 34, Catalina has made numerous smart upgrades and I wanted to check them out. That's one thing about Catalina, they tweak every new build and each seems to have substantial improvements—a sign that they are paying attention to their brokers—and their customers.

DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

The True North line was developed by Everett Pearson in 2001, using resin infusion at TPI Composites in Rhode Island. They were later built by US Watercraft, also on Rhode Island. US Watercraft also built several models of C&C yachts and J/Boats under license. In 2019, sailboat manufacturer Catalina Yachts purchased the engineering, tooling, molds and manufacturing process for the two True North models, the 34 and 38, and entered the growing market for Downeast-style powerboats.

In the years since, Catalina has extensively tweaked the two designs. The 34 ▶





True North 34 Outboard Express

This US-built Downeaster keeps getting better and better!



The planked headliner and teak woodwork give the pilot-house a traditional yacht feel.



remains the 34 while the 38 has been extensively redesigned and renamed the 39 and will soon be on the market. Both are built at the Catalina Yachts plant in Largo, Florida. They are characterized by plum bows, smooth sheers, and sharply reversed transoms. Both models will be powered by outboards, while most of the earlier models were powered by a single engine with shaft drive.

Local dealer Specialty Yachts showed me a sample of the layout of the solid fiberglass hull below the waterline (and extending six inches above), almost an inch thick and looking bulletproof with its tight, well-bonded quadaxial fibres. Above the waterline, Catalina uses a variety of coring products depending on the stresses involved in specifically engineered areas, such as the use of Co-

sa in the transom. This system is the same way Catalina builds its sailboats. Composite stringers are used to strengthen the hull while the forward hull liner has additional structural reinforcement. A watertight crash bulkhead in the bow provides additional safety. To accommodate the outboards, the modified V hull has a deadrise at the transom of around 18 degrees. The buoyancy gained by

removing the tunnel (integrated previously when inboard power was offered) and reconfiguring to a standard running surface offsets the weight of the standard twin 300-horsepower or 350-horsepower outboards.

The test boat was ordered with the optional upgrade from 300 to 350-horsepower Suzuki outboards with highly efficient duoprops. Without inboards taking up room under the cockpit sole, this space has become a large storage area, despite housing the engine starter batteries and a 3.2-kW generator. Optionally, this area could also be fitted with a Seakeeper gyro stabilizer. The cockpit is compact with a fixed, aft facing settee with storage under and a forward-facing folding settee. The latter allows clearing the deck for fishing or folding down for entertaining. Four, high-end and versatile Burnewiin universal mounts on the coaming can be used for rod holders, a table, cutting board, barbecue, prawn puller or electric downriggers. I was further impressed by the ample storage in the transom and cockpit lockers and an overhead SureShade telescoping cockpit shade.

ON DECK

Boarding is relatively easy via the starboard swim platform and through a hinged transom door. Alternately, one can step over the cockpit coaming into the cockpit. I was surprised at how little the 34 rocked when stepping aboard from the side, another benefit of the flatter aft section. The portside swim platform incorporates a swim ladder and is accessed from a walkway in front of the outboards. Handrails on the aft end of the cabin and cabin-top rails provide safe access to the generous 18-inch (46-centimetre) side decks. All the cleats are pop-up types and as such, don't create a tripping hazard. A nifty foredeck shade can be deployed when stationary to create another entertaining space with the addition of cabin top cushions. The an-

chor and windlass are mounted above deck and the chain/rode can only be accessed through the bow cabin. The cabin top itself has several handy tie-down fittings for SUPs, kayaks or a small inflatable dinghy. For those wanting a bit of flash, the test boat was fitted with Hella multi-colour underwater lights.

INTERIOR

In warmer climates, the 34 would likely be ordered with an open back, but Specialty Yachts came up with the idea of installing a hardback instead, which is far more practical in our cooler climate, and this has become a popular option. The beefy bi-fold pilothouse door and a hinged bulkhead window open the cockpit seamlessly

to the pilothouse. To port, a beautiful, gloss-finished triangle-shaped dining table (which drops down to provide another berth) fronts a spacious L-shaped settee. Across, the galley is also triangle shaped and this allows angled passage forward between the settee and the galley. Catalina/True North uses teak woodwork throughout and engineered teak and holly-look soles. This contrasts very nicely with the off-white Ultraleather upholstery. I especially like the planked-look headliner. The combination of all this gives a traditional yacht feel to the pilothouse. An opening window in the three-panel windshield combined with an opening sunroof and sliding glass windows on either side of the pilothouse should provide ample ventilation. Visibility ▶



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shallow-water running) and tilted in several configurations to obtain the best performance. It is similar to a jack plate but is much more adjustable. It also permits the outboards to be raised clear of the water when docked, unlike many others where the intakes remain submerged just below the surface, which is not ideal. A single smart flushing system flushes both outboards and can be set for different time durations.

The Paguro 4000 generator requires a separate 20-gallon diesel tank. Full ducting for a heating system (and defrost) was installed on the test boat, though Specialty leaves it up to the buyer to choose between the various hydronic and forced air systems. As with other Catalina/True North boats, I'm always disappointed that the insides of lockers are not better finished, but that is purely a cosmetic concern. Structurally and as far as fit and finish goes, there is little to find fault with.

UNDERWAY

With the Optimus joystick system, the combined bow/stern thruster control is essentially redundant, but it does give an added sense of control. With myself, Specialty Yachts principal Lawrence Fronczek and broker Gabriel George aboard, we pulled out of the company's Granville Island docks into a clear winter day—unusual but welcomed considering this past December's wet weather. Once out of False Creek, we increased our speed to a slow cruise in displacement mode of nine knots (2,200 rpm) while sipping only 6.7 gph. We accelerated onto the plane in just over four seconds—which is excellent—with no prop slip. The steering was tight and very responsive. The 34 leaned nicely into high-speed turns without being laid on its side or any cavitation, thanks in part to her duoprops. Fuel economy was quite reasonable. At a slow cruise of 25.5 knots (4,050 rpm), our fuel burn was 25.1 gallons (95 litres) per hour, which translates to just over a mile per gallon (3.8 litres) and a range of about

is great through almost solid expanses of smoked side-window glass. Headroom in the saloon is a generous 6' 5" (1.98 metres).

The galley was finished with Corian countertops, a pull-out Isotherm drawer fridge/freezer and an electric cooktop and microwave. Under the saloon sole is a roomy storage area, with plenty of space for storing totes for food or other gear. A 32-inch (81.3-centimetre) Smart TV monitor folds down above the galley with the push of a button.

Forward, there are the comfy Llebrog helm and companion seats. By removing a short section of the settee, that companion seat swivels nicely to face aft. The helm console is cleanly laid out with a large 16-inch chart plotter, digital engine readouts, Bennett trim tab controls, bow/stern thrusters (in a single unit), autopilot and the requisite bank of push button switches. Along the starboard side are the electronic engine controls, the Optimus joystick control and the VHF radio. The steering wheel is a small but beautifully finished wooden destroyer type wheel. The helm seat itself is fully adjustable, including the footrest. The companion seat also has a well-placed folding footrest.

ACCOMMODATION

Down below are the head/shower and a double island berth in the bow. The hull sides are planked in maple as per many other Catalina/True North models for a traditional look. There's also plenty of teak woodwork here. A small hanging locker is topped with a sizable countertop with fiddle and 110 V and USB charging outlets. Above, on the bulkhead, is the DC and AC electrical panels tucked away behind smoked glass doors. Additional storage is in two drawers under the berth.

The head is compact with an electric toilet, sink and wet shower with opening portlight and heating duct outlet.

ENGINE AND SYSTEMS

According to Specialty Yachts, the 350-horsepower Suzuki 4.4 L V8 engine with duoprops is considered one of the best 350s on the market because it has twin injectors, a 2.29:1 gear ratio and of course, dual counter-rotating props. Specialty says it believes these outboards deliver more torque to the water than any other 350-horsepower outboard. Another unique feature of the power system is the innovative Porta hydraulic transom bracket. This allows the outboards to be lifted (in part for



SPECS

LOA 11.9 m / 39'

LWL 10.06 m / 33'

Beam 3.72 m / 12' 2"

Draft 0.86 m / 2' 10"

Displ. 6,350 kg / 14,000 lbs

Fuel 946 L / 250 USG

Water 284 L / 75 USG

Holding 114 L / 30 USG

Standard power

Twin 300 hp outboards

Built by

Catalina Yachts
Largo, Florida
truenorthyachts.com

Sold by

Specialty Yachts, Vancouver,
604-689-7491
Marine Servicenter, Seattle,
206-323-2405

225 miles (with 10 percent reserve). At 30 knots (4,850 rpm), our fuel burn increased to 35 gph (132.5 lph), just under a mile per gallon (4.42 litres per mile). Top speed was 39.5 knots (5,750 rpm), though it is unlikely owners will cruise at that fuel-quaffing speed.

I noted that the bow rise when accelerating onto the plan was a bit high, but not enough to completely block visibility forward. With practice, the combination of adjustments to the height of the hydraulic transom bracket, the trim tabs and the engine trim, bow rise could be minimized. Those adjustments could add an extra half knot to the speed too, but unless one is a perfectionist, little adjustment is required.

Overall, the ride was surprisingly soft and the 34 was comfortable and easy to drive. Her sharp, plumb bow, flatter

aft section and balanced displacement should allow for a better entry and overall ride when conditions get a bit rough. While we could only jump our wake, there was absolutely no pounding, something too common in many other similar vessels.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This is one fun boat and a delightful day boat or couples' cruiser. The 350-horsepower outboards provide excellent performance and decent fuel economy. Not only is the 34 a great looking Downeaster, but she is also easy to operate, performs very well and is nicely finished inside and out. I could easily see this as a both a day cruiser or a yacht capable of cruising to Alaska and back in comfort. As equipped, the TN34 was being offered at US \$714,000. ▶



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