

Wilbur 34 Hardtop Express

BY CHRIS CORNELL

Rarely does an editor like me have more than three hours to examine and “test drive” the boat to which he has been assigned. So, although I always welcome a chance to get out of the office and onto the water, sea trialing is often frustrating, because it’s impossible to develop a full appreciation of a particular vessel’s strong and weak points in such a short time.

It was therefore a real treat when *Power Cruising’s* Michael Tamulaitis and I spent two days and two nights aboard the latest Wilbur 34 launched by John Kachmar and his crew in Southwest Harbor.

This boat is based on a well-proven hull that was developed back in the early 80s for John’s father-in-law, company founder Lee Wilbur. The designer was the almost legendary

Ralph Ellis, who — with his friend and partner, Raymond Bunker — built fine wooden boats right down the street from the thoroughly modern Wilbur shop.

Some seventy-five of the company’s 34s have been produced to date (no two of them alike), and the newest, appropriately dubbed *Ocean Spray* in honor of her deep red color, represents a serious entry in the currently hot, competitive market for express cruisers in the 32- to 36-foot range.

Our forty-eight hours on board, both in the slip and underway, left Michael and me with many strong impressions, the vast majority of them positive, and here’s a summary of the most lasting. (For those wanting more, I’ll post additional notes on www.powercruisingmag.com.)

In part because of the design’s substantial beam, but even more because



BILLY BLACK (3)

that beam is carried so far forward, there is a lot of space in this 34-footer, both underneath the canopy top and down below. Rarely did Michael and I, both over six feet tall, get in each other’s way as we moved around. The long, well-equipped galley — located below, along the port side — would easily accommodate two enthusiastic cooks preparing a big meal for guests topside.

There is a minor penalty for this much beam in the forward third of the boat: At the high cruising speeds possible with the massive 500-hp diesel that’s under the hood — er, floor — the Wilbur throws a lot of water. John Kachmar not only admits this but addresses the point in the company’s literature: “[Down-east boats] tend to be a bit wet. We try to take care of this with spray rails and they certainly help, however ...”

The fact is, as we ran the *Ocean Spray* up breathtakingly beautiful Somes Sound (in calm water) and

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA: 34' 4"

Beam: 12'

Draft: 3' 8"

Displacement: 14,500 lbs.

Fuel capacity: 208 gals.

Power: Single diesel, 380-500 hp

Price range: \$375,000 to \$525,000

Information: 207-244-5000

www.wilburyachts.com

slowed to what John and I agree is the cruising speed for which such down-east designs were intended (14-16 knots), the water peeled away from the hull as it was supposed to. “I continually try to convince customers, for all our models, that they can save a lot of money in fuel and in the boat’s purchase price by going with a smaller diesel,” John laments, “but they want the ability to go 25 knots, so I give it to them.”



With John Kachmar and his family aboard, the 34 cuts a fine figure (top) as she runs at her preferred cruising speed of about 16 knots. The saloon (above) is surprisingly spacious, and it is both well lit and well ventilated. The long galley (left), located “down,” is a serious cook’s delight.

As modern express cruisers go, the Wilbur is set up exceptionally well. The twin, custom-made teak helm and companion seats are as functional and comfortable as they are gorgeous. The sliding-seat design is brilliant, functioning equally well as a sort of “leaning post” for a standing helmsman and a comfy perch for those preferring to take a load off.

Michael and I both found the manual hydraulic steering to be light and responsive, and we positively raved about the Kobelt electronic shifter and throttle — except that the traditional left-right position of these controls was reversed! There were a few embarrassing missteps as we docked in Northeast Harbor, but we managed.

Having recently written a feature article about the long-lost “convertible” cruiser (September/October, page 46), I really appreciated the long, half-



The custom-built, teak helm and companion seats (above) slide back and forth, and they sit atop sturdy, matching storage cabinets.

height bulkhead between the saloon and the cockpit on the Wilbur 34. Topped with a high-quality, zippered acrylic “window,” this feature quickly allows the boat’s two “entertainment” spaces — the cockpit and saloon — to open onto one another without compromising seaworthiness.

Speaking of safety, I give high marks to two features that rarely garner attention on this sort of boat: the nonskid and the main electrical panel. The former embodies a highly effective texture that resembles concrete, and because it’s created in the tooling (the molds), the nonskid areas sit flush with the gelcoated (glossy) portions of the decks. Nice.

As for the oft-used panel, Michael and I found its location — to starboard, at the foot of the companionway leading below — to be perfect. All the clearly marked switches are right at eye level when the observer is standing, and there’s an access door in the interior wall of the adjacent head in case the panel wiring needs attention.

While such details deserve both explanation and praise, there’s an even more important, though less specific, benefit in the layout of this express cruiser: Unlike its “factory-built” competitors, where the list of options is restricted primarily to equipment, the Wilbur is a custom boat.

Consider the long, L-shaped settee in the saloon of the *Ocean Spray*. Nicely cushioned and upholstered, this “furniture” will comfortably seat quite a few guests. Because my colleague Michael is both tall and big-boned, while I am tall but skinny, I gave him the forward V-berth below and camped out on one “leg” of the settee. It

worked — as long as I slept on my side — but I later asked John Kachmar why he didn’t make the seating wider for just such a contingency.

“We planned this particular 34 strictly as a day boat when there are more than two people on board,” he said. “But, we usually build our saloon seating to pull out into standard-width bunks.” In short, what you get in a Wilbur is precisely what you want — at about the same price as that of a high-quality “production” boat.

All in all, the Wilbur 34 Hardtop nicely demonstrates that at least one Maine boatbuilder fully understands the needs and tastes of today’s express-cruiser buyers, just as his company once met the tough demands of down-east lobstermen. ❁



The forward deck of the 34 features nonskid that’s effective even when wet, as well as beefy stainless hardware. Note the chafing plate for the anchor chain.



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