

Performance

RIBBING YARN

Well, if you'd crossed the Channel from Poole to Cherbourg at a record average of 72 knots, you'd want to say something about it too. Kim Hollamby recounts an hour he will never forget.

In a world where boats are most often created out of a symphony of different manufacturers' components, the craft which bear Fabio Buzzi's initials stand out as a plainchant of singular design and build.

The Italian's success at producing everything from hulls, engines and drives to the very seat you wedge your posterior in, is perhaps best illustrated by the many trophies and records his racing powerboats have claimed since the mid-1980s. But get hold of an FB Design brochure and you discover a wider brief, which extends from machinegun-toting 36ft RIBs to a triple-engined five-cabin 80ft motoryacht with a speed of 55 knots.

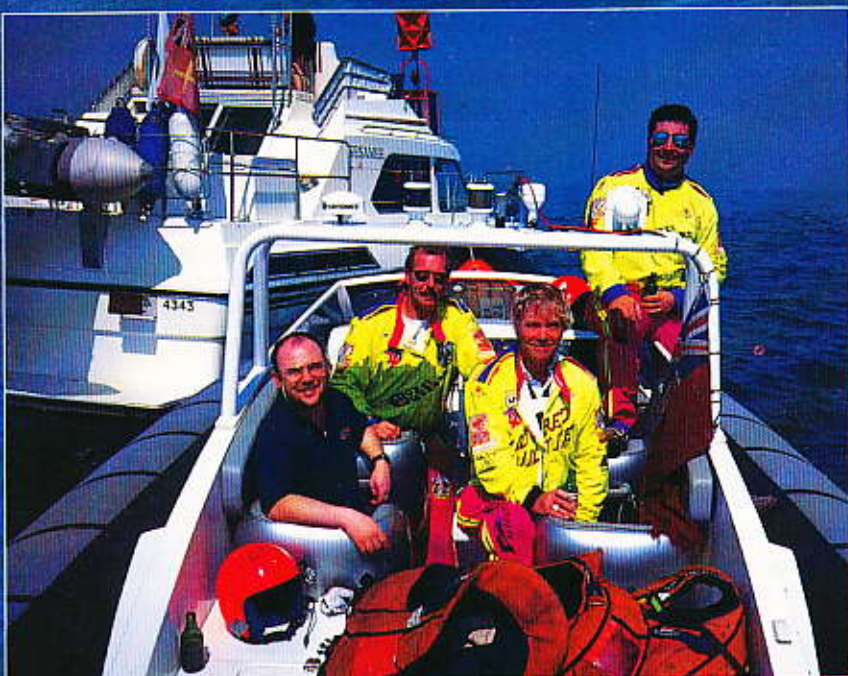
Somewhere in the middle of the fleet is the Tecno 40 RIB, manufactured under licence by Novamarine.

A boat report would not eat too many words in

describing the vessel's functional four-seat cockpit, and its cuddy cabin devoid of all features save for two berths. Only the extremely businesslike twin Seatek 700hp diesel installation dominating the back end, and the promise of the Trimax surface-drives projecting prominently behind the transomless stern, would seem to justify this overgrown weekender's US\$470,000 price tag (we didn't bother to ask whether this sum is including or excluding VAT, being grateful enough that it wasn't expressed with even more noughts, in Lire).

Clearly, the only way to reach a proper judgement, not clouded by such a mundane issue as money, was to get a ride on the beast. That Motor Boats Monthly managed to do so was the culmination of





Background photograph: Vulture Ventures crossing the Channel at her top speed of 72 knots. **Left:** getting it all together at Poole Quay. **Above:** happy chappies in Cherbourg just an hour after leaving Poole. **From left to right,** Hollamby, Pascoe, Sewell and Dredge. **Below:** sampling life on the Tecno 40's foredeck après event at a gentle 30 knots or thereabouts.

a series of happy coincidences, plus an accident perhaps best not described as happy, at least for the boat in question.

Buzzi's personal plaything is a Tecno 40, and having no doubt heard of the beautiful cruising to be found around the highlands and islands, he had arranged for his boat to tour them this year, victory in the Round Scotland RIB race being the easy result. Meanwhile, in Torbay, UK race team Vulture Ventures had an aerobatic indulgence in their Class II Championship-winning Buzzi Buzzard, which looked spectacular in the photographs (see MBM Aug 96 p18) but ended with a

re-entry which would have been fine only in Australia.

Thankfully, team owner and throttleman Charles Burnett III and driver/navigator Peter Dredge emerged unscathed from their fully-enclosed cockpit, but the 36ft RIB looked a little sick. So as a stop-gap while hasty repairs took place, Vulture Ventures hired Fabio's own Tecno 40.

Afterwards, the boat would need to be delivered back into the safe custody of its owner, at least to somewhere on the other side of the English Channel. And when Cetrek laid down the gauntlet for the setting of a new speed record from Poole to Cherbourg, with the Royal Yachting Association adding their stamp of approval, the timing could not have been more convenient for a team which takes any such challenge rather seriously. So it was that I wangled a one-way ticket to ride.

At which point, it is time for a confession. I had yet to get aboard a boat as fast as this. After all, what does an Editor employ a Racing Editor for, if it is not to undertake on the magazine's behalf any stunt which might result in the random redistribution of essential organs?

Despite the Tecno 40's pleasure boat tag, and its relatively conservative pace of something over 70 knots, you will understand my personal concern to do what the guys up-front asked of me, and otherwise make like a well-tethered lump of cargo. As the former role consisted of very little, the latter assumed a major priority in my thinking.

The day dawned bright, thanks to a favourable forecast (thank you, thank you) and the colour of Vulture Ventures' truck (a less than subtle shade of fluorescent yellow). At the wheel of the latter was team manager Mark Pascoe, who would be swapping that role for throttles on the boat, partnering Dredge, who would manage his usual simultaneous chores of navigating and trying to steer his own course. I was under no illusion that Pascoe would go any slower than Burnett; as co-driver on the Skater 28 Cultured Vulture, Mark had clocked 137.32mph on Windermere

earlier in the year.

Events unfolded slowly on Poole Quay. Our arrival by road more or less coincided with the gradual assembly of the competing fleet by sea, with RIBs of various shapes, powers and hues being in the great majority. The briefing at Poole Pottery revealed that 10 of the 15 entries were likely to start, at set intervals of two minutes, with our boat last away. At least as many safety boats would be ranged across the straight-line course, from Branksome Chine to Cherbourg outer harbour's western entrance.

The only query concerned visibility, which was reported by the advanced guard in mid-Channel as being just three-quarters of a mile. Cetrek's Geoff Warde warned that the start would be delayed until at least a mile was available.

While many of the competitors queued in the general direction of the toilets to contemplate this news, we chose instead to head for Salterns Marina, where the lean shape of what was temporarily dubbed Vulture Ventures was waiting for her rapid delivery trip.

Peter's passage-planning was a pretty straightforward affair, with a copy of the chart securely taped to the cabin door and the one waypoint required entered in the AP GPS navigator. That too was strapped ready for the ride, cable ties





preventing it jumping off its bracket on the dash. I tried to make myself useful by offering to look after the spare GPS, a handheld AP, of which more later.

Meanwhile Mark was busy trying to shed excess gear, to save weight and the need to carry inessential stuff back on the ferry. But no chances were to be taken with safety.

When the sun is already warm at nine o'clock in the morning, some would find it hard to contemplate donning overalls or a coat, gloves, a full-length lifejacket with body and crutch straps and a helmet. Strangely enough, I needed no encouragement and also readily accepted the mini-flare pack, personal EPIRB and knife. The helmet itself gave a small hint of what was to come, the spare end of the chin strap being duck-taped down to prevent it hammering away in a 70-knot breeze.

The departure was rather more straightforward than I had expected. Race-oriented engineering tends to ensure that everything starts happening as soon as you turn the key, but the Seateks were coupled to conventional forward-neutral-reverse gearboxes, which allowed the Tecno 40 to turn in her own length. In fact, the engines themselves were about as conventional as these diesels get, being pre-production versions of a new freshwater-cooled model and already boasting 80 hours on the clock, by which time many race engines would have been rebuilt several times over,

Above: the calm before the storm across the Channel. Getting the kit ready on Vulture Ventures at Salterns Marina.

Below: next fastest boat, and winner of the record for the rigid-hull category, was the Velocity 32 Fullers Logistics/Chereau which, following a crossing in 62min 26sec, joined in a sunny wind-down just inside Cherbourg's outer harbour breakwater.



or consigned to the recycle bin.

Working on the boat was easy while we were leaving the marina, and at the slow speeds demanded by the Poole Harbour limit, the deck spaces around the cuddy and cockpit being uncluttered and stability being all you might expect of a 5.5-tonner with tubes. But soon it was time to squeeze through the gap between front and back rows of Buzzi-designed bolsters, snug and anchored in rock-solid manner, and wedge into the port rear slot. The flick of a switch can electrohydraulically raise a squab to allow you to sit, but standing seemed a fine idea to me.

At the first opening of the throttle, I realised what the \$470,000 was all about. The turbos whistled, the hull lifted out of the water as if released from a long jail term, and we started to run as if on rails, reaching the start point off Branksome in not much more time

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than it takes to read this paragraph.

I quickly learned my first lesson: don't attempt to adjust your helmet strap whilst underway. I might be short, but the slipstream had still managed to enjoy a playful few seconds with my headgear until I ducked down and got matters under control again.

There was not much time to contemplate what was ahead, for no sooner had we clocked in than Vulture Ventures was flagged away, just a little ahead of our anticipated start time. Visibility had obviously lifted enough, although with a typical summer haze it was hard to work out quite how much would be seen.

Life onboard settled very quickly. Mark concentrated on keeping the engines running at more or less their 3200rpm maximum rating whilst selecting the optimum trim, and Peter concentrated on steering a course to prove the briefing meeting's jocular critics wrong about his navigational abilities. The jumpseat journos, Raceboat editor David Sewell and I, had little to do, other than take in a rapidly diminishing view of Old Harry and the odd glimpse of other competitors as we hauled them in one by one.

A post-event press release described sea conditions as almost flat calm, but the wavelets that were out were enough to provide regular pitching impacts. Thick rubber pads under our feet cleverly helped to cushion things, and the bolsters always felt totally secure, but within 10 minutes tiredness suggested I was favouring one leg over the other. I soon learnt to bring the second one into an equal role in the regular cycle of knee-flexing.

The briefing had warned of the need to watch ship wakes when out in the lanes, but in fact it was a Poole-bound ferry that caused us our only grief. One minute the world had a settled percussive pattern to it, the next it was lop-sided and a tad more skyward. The brain managed to register that a hard landing was shortly to follow, just before it actually did. It was the one time we fell away from maximum pace, Peter and Mark throwing the quickest glance backwards to check that the ship's complement

was still four before pressing on.

To give some idea about the force of that landing, the handheld GPS in my care had been temporarily wedged in the front of my lifejacket, prevented from further downward travel by the visible result of too many good dinners. Or so I thought. Once I got my world together, it was to find that I had dramatically given birth to a bouncing baby navigator, which was still happily working but now sitting between Mark's feet. It might as well have been a million miles away, for all the chance I had of recovering it, although I did manage to scoop it back aft to a place where it was less likely to interfere with proceedings.

And that's about all that can be said about the crossing, other than that Cherbourg appeared out of the haze pretty much at the moment and the place expected.

Once past the finish boat, Fairline 36 Turbo



Above: happy as Larry off a receding Old Harry. Left (top to bottom): the Tecno 40's helm already shorn of its AP GPS prior to loading on an Italian truck. A tidy 1400hp-worth of Seatek diesels. Dredge and Pascoe hand back a boat but gain the Cetrek Bowl.

Sesamee, and tucked inside the outer breakwater, and there was time a plenty to take off the gear, soak up the sun under a brilliant blue sky and reflect on a run of 62.8nm covered at a speed of 71.9 knots, to register a new RYA national record of 52min 23sec.

Dipping the high-tech flexible fuel tank with a low-tech wooden rod revealed that the Tecno 40 had burned around 66gal (300lt) of diesel for the run, no more than the mile per gallon you might expect a 40ft planing-hulled motor cruiser to get through while taking three of four times longer to complete the distance.

Would I do it again? I'd like to say yes, but the fixed grin is still in place and, under the circumstances, the lips cannot be trusted to form coherent words, for the moment at least.

Contact

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Vulture Ventures

Formed to run three raceboats, Charles Burnett's Vulture Ventures is managed by Mark Pascoe, backed by engineers Trevor Leigh, Danny Armon and Simon Hobden, and located at Hamble Point on the Hamble River.

Whilst the team's brief is to get the best out of their own boats, something which has already won them National and World Class II titles, as well as the world speed

record at that level, they have also undertaken work for a number of other race drivers. Now they have their sights set on doubling their 10,000ft² facilities, to offer a rigging and maintenance service for performance leisure craft.

For further details contact Vulture Ventures, Workshop 1, Firefly Road, Hamble Point Quay, School Lane, Hamble, Hampshire SO31 4NB. Tel: 01703 458123.

