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“There’s no way production line boats can approach the functionality of a boat like *Kekoā*.”
– Peter O’Brien.



a bigger, better KEKŌĀ

The new *Kekoā* is a custom-built 56ft gameboat from the respected Townsville boatworks of Peter O’Brien. It’s been meticulously crafted for both heavy-tackle marlin fishing off Cairns and long-range cruising as a luxury sportfishing mothership. As Warren Steptoe found, she’s a beautifully designed rig for both extremes.

AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHY: WARREN STEPTOE

The top spot on my list of worst-ever boat rides is comfortably held by a fishing tournament run off Eagle Hawk Neck on Tasmania’s east coast. On the day, an Antarctic front came through and delivered gusts above 50 knots as the fleet literally smashed their way home. Although on reminiscence, that trip did start out pleasantly enough.

A journey from Townsville south to Cape Bowling Green on the GBR rates second on the list.

Around Townsville, 15 knots of wind is a great day, but more often than not it’s 20 knots plus.



Above: From the bridge helm, Capt Luke Fallon has great visibility over all quarters as well as down over the action in the cockpit.

Right: How's this for a functional console full of navigation, communications and fish-finding electronics? And this is the tower station! Note the simple clear flap in front of the console. This provides protection from wind and spray, but allows easy viewing around the plastic when acute vision is required – such as when spotting birds, fish or reef.

Winds like that blowing across the strong tidal flow in Bowling Green Bay, a shallow section of the Great Barrier Reef lagoon, make up a recipe for rough seas of formidable proportions.

O'Brien boats are proudly built in Townsville and this kind of weather is day-to-day stuff for them. To illustrate this point, as a camera platform for our test of the O'Brien 56, Peter O'Brien seconded a local 33ft gameboat he built 25 years ago. For this old gamer to still be fishing regularly after a quarter century of rough treatment says more about O'Brien builds than a boat test lasting a few hours could ever hope to.

Many production boats built to a price, rather than to a standard capable of confronting north Queensland seas every day of their fishing life, have 'cracked' under lesser conditions.

This explains why, after running their first *Kekoa* (an O'Brien 47) as the core of the successful charter business *Kekoa Sport and Game Fishing*, Capt Luke Fallon and his business partner came back to Peter O'Brien for more of the same – only bigger and better.

I must mention at this point that Fallon is married to sometime *BlueWater* staffer and Black Marlin Fishing Blog owner Kelly Dalling. One of famed skipper Jim Dalling's daughters, Kelly is a young lady who literally grew up in a marina full of gamefishing boats and is today involved in *Kekoa Sport and Game Fishing*.

It's tough to imagine a think tank better qualified to put together a working charter boat: a skipper respected throughout the industry, his colleagues, and Peter and the craftspeople at O'Brien Boats.

The final product is the second iteration of the *Kekoa* concept, an O'Brien 56.

PRACTICAL LUXURY

Given my perception of O'Briens as tough, hardworking gameboats, an initial inspection of *Kekoa* version II in Townsville's marina brought a succession of pleasant surprises. For starters, this was the biggest O'Brien I'd been aboard by a good margin. After fishing from several smaller examples over the years, I had to set aside preconceived notions of serviceability versus home comfort before I could properly get to grips with exactly where this boat's coming from.

But once I got my head around *Kekoa's* beautiful presentation, I came to admire the way practical serviceability has been maintained right alongside a high degree of comfort. The collective experience of operating a viable charter business that went into the boat's specifications is evident.

If you've done your time as crew, you'll really appreciate the new *Kekoa's* well-balanced combination of fishing common sense, comfortable client accommodation, easy-to-maintain finishes and easy-to-service machinery.

It gave me new respect for O'Brien as a boatbuilding company, but when I mentioned *Kekoa's* fine finish to Peter O'Brien he reacted in characteristically casual fashion. "We've never built production boats," he said. "People ring us up asking for a price list and are

surprised when I tell them we don't do that. "We talk to our customers to work up a set of specifications and then quote on them."

MULTI-PURPOSE DESIGN

O'Brien also explained his choice of base in Townsville. "Sometimes I'm asked why anyone would come to Townsville to get us to build a boat," he said. "The answer is that it's companies like us you come to when you want to get a boat built, rather than just buy a boat. "There's no way production line boats can approach the functionality of a boat like *Kekoa* in terms of how well it suits its particular application."

So what is *Kekoa's* 'particular application'? It's a pretty varied job description. The program includes the annual Cairns heavy-tackle season and the series of billfish tournaments near Townsville: Innisfail, Hinchinbrook and Townsville itself. Then it's south by the end of the year to a Gold Coast base in time for the yearly run of black marlin there, and to sit out the northern wet season. To start the fishing season off again, *Kekoa* becomes mothership to a pair of dories carried in cradles on the foredeck while fishing Cape York's famed west coast estuaries. There's an amazing array of inshore sportfish available there during the wet season run off, including of course the eternally popular barramundi.

The two 4.1m Cross Country dories are carried in tubular cradles set into reinforced sockets on the

foredeck. Without diverting too far from our main plan here, *Kekoa's* dories, in place to access the inshore fishing, are a matter of interest in themselves. Constructed using a composite 'sandwich' material that Cross Country call E-Lite, and powered by 30hp Evinrude E-TEC outboards, the 110kg dories come complete with casting decks and are easily lifted onboard by the 200kg-rated Davco davit and Muir power winch.

LIVE ABOARD

The boat has been shaped to cater to crew and a maximum of four guests living aboard. The layout downstairs is focused on the central hallway, with a double berth stateroom and crew quarters – with a double-decker bunk – sharing a bathroom to port. To starboard there's another stateroom with twin double-decker bunks, which shares a second bathroom with the bow stateroom. This has a double berth along one side of the bows plus a highset single berth along the other.

While pretty much a standard configuration for a boat this size, this is nonetheless a versatile arrangement, as onboard accommodation needs to be when particular guest and crew sleeping arrangements must be accommodated for.

Social accommodation in the saloon has the galley portside opposite a dinette big enough to accommodate at least six, with an L-shaped lounge with coffee table



to port and a settee stretching from the dinette to cabin door along the starboard side. The coffee table and dining table both feature matching inlaid billfish motifs.

Interestingly, the galley goes without a cooktop. Instead, appliances are all plugged in as needed.

Fitted carpet covers the aft lounge section of the saloon floor, accompanied by enough Burmese teak to maintain ambience without overstatement. Everything's easy to keep looking good with minimal elbow grease, and all the upholstery work was done locally by Beehive Vinyl Products.

In addition to the usual engine room entry door through the cabin bulkhead, *Kekoa's* engines are also accessible simply by removing both lounges and the

saloon floor. I note with approval that an engine will fit out through *Kekoa's* saloon doors! Why are boats usually built around their engine room, so that they need major surgery if they need an engine removed? It never made sense to me, but the engine access on this boat does.

Up top, the bridge is roomy enough for a fair-sized party if you're so inclined. Anyone who's worried about falling down a bridge ladder in rough seas will happily observe that on *Kekoa* it can be closed off with a hatch. Black Marlin Towers flew up to Townsville from their Gold Coast workshop to build *Kekoa's* aluminium tower in situ. The 'riggers are Rupps.

Capt Fallon uses Furuno's 3D NavNet system, with 15-inch monitors on the bridge and 12-inch repeaters in the tower.

Kekoa's cockpit is all fishing. A Reelax heavy-tackle chair sits

Above: There's plenty of space in the saloon for crew and clients to comfortably relax during live-aboard trips.

Below right: Opposite the galley there's a dining area and viewing lounge for watching daily videos.

Below: Lots of storage has been built in for extended trips.





“The props are set into half tunnels, increasing propeller efficiency while decreasing draft.”

centrepiece in the beautiful teak deck, done by O'Brien Boats themselves. Also, the cockpit drains downward through centrally located slots in the deck rather than the usual scuppers in the transom.

Twin livewells grace the transom covering board and the transom door opens underneath it, which doesn't leave crew vulnerable to an impromptu swim through an open door.

At the forward end of the cockpit, across the cabin bulkhead, there's refrigerated stowage each side plus an ice shaver feeding three brine boxes on the starboard side. The engine room entryway is incorporated into the steps up from the cockpit to the cabin doors.

Kelly laughed heartily when I asked about the obvious state of absolute cleanliness in the engine room. It was a new boat at the

time, but apparently Capt Luke's obsessiveness in this department will keep it this way in the long term too!

Within, two V10 MTU 2000 M92s producing 1015hp each at 2450rpm drive through Twin Disc MGX 5145A transmissions. Peter O'Brien designs his own skegs and rudders and has them cast by Rogers and Lough in Brisbane.

REFRIGERATION INNOVATION

An Onan/Cummins gen set supplies 240V power away from marinas. Another innovation on the boat is the operation of *Kekoa's* onboard refrigeration and air-conditioning. A common belt drive attached to the port engine connects a series of compressors via individual clutches to a 240V motor and a power take-off. Thus the fridges and air con can be run on shore power (while

in a marina), from the Onan's 240V supply or off the port engine while it's running.

Considering the amount of time *Kekoa* will spend away from 'civilisation', this is a particularly appropriate arrangement. Apparently, the first generation of the system was installed on the original *Kekoa* and it worked so well that a second generation was commissioned for the new version. O'Brien and Fallon were both highly enthusiastic about the system and were generous in their praise of Paul Jindra from Jindra Energy Conversions in Melbourne for designing and installing it all.

O'Brien, Capt Fallon and Kelly make no secret about how many lessons learned on the original 47ft *Kekoa* were applied to this boat. For starters, the CAD drawings of the 56ft model were simply derived from the same design as



O'Brien's 47, with scaling up as and where necessary. “We didn't want to reinvent the wheel because the 47 worked so well and we definitely wanted to maintain the same centre of gravity,” says O'Brien.

From *BlueWater's* images of *Kekoa* on the water, readers can judge for themselves just how well the boat's superstructure-to-cockpit ratio is balanced. What you can't see though is that the props are set into half tunnels in the hull bottom, increasing propeller efficiency while decreasing draft.

In fishing terms, I'd rate the cockpit as about the perfect size, with room enough for heavy-tackle fishing's hardware, but not so big that you'll find yourself in the middle of nowhere on light-tackle.

DESIGN MASTERY

Ron Clubb at Clubb Marine Drafting was the consulting naval architect, but O'Brien offers due credit to his mate Barry Martin at Assegai Marine for what he called 'informal consultation' during the construction process. I gather they don't mind phoning each other to chew things over whenever either of them sees fit.

O'Brien accounted for no less than 20,000 man hours to build and commission *Kekoa*. Working to the principal of maximising structural integrity while minimising overall weight, the hull and superstructure was all hand-laid using appropriately varied layers of bi-axial mat bonded with vinylester resin.

Townsville turned on an average 20kt day for *BlueWater's* test session. You may note that *Kekoa* is shifting a fair bit of water from her bows in our photo spread, which was actually caused by our faithful camera boat not being able to keep up whenever Capt Fallon got going at his usual cruising speed. He called 25 knots at 1800 rpm 'a slow cruise', by the way.

At that speed, the MTUs were burning 115L each for a total of 230L/hr. Capt Fallon told me that while trolling baits, *Kekoa's* fuel consumption was a miserly 10L/hr in total. A precise top speed run was impossible on the day, but there's no doubt it's getting on for 35 knots.

Capt Fallon told me they saw a whisker under 38 knots during early sea trials, but added that they've 'put quite a few things aboard since then'.

HIGHLIGHTS

Excellent appointment and high standard of finish achieved without compromising practicality as a working charter boat. Simple yet workable system for fishing dories. Engines can be removed without major surgery.



SPEC CHECK



O'BRIEN 56FT CUSTOM SPORTFISHER

PRICE AS TESTED

Boatbuilder Peter O'Brien: “We talk to our customers to work up a set of specifications and then quote on them.”

OPTIONS FITTED

Black Marlin tower, Furuno 3D NavNet electronics plus dual-frequency sonar, two custom-built 4.1m fibreglass dories, 350kg davit, Rupp outriggers, custom seawater and air-cooled freezers, Lumitec LED floodlights, Aqualuma transom lights, fully air-conditioned, TowCam mounted cockpit camera and tow camera, washer/dryer, wireless internet... and much more.

GENERAL

Material: GRP composite laminates
Length: 17.74m
Beam: 5.56m
Deadrise: 17 degrees (at transom)
Hull weight: Approximately 27 tons

CAPACITIES

Berths: Surveyed for 10, intended for four fishing plus three crew
Fuel: 4000L
Fresh water: 1000L
Water maker: 200L/hr (S & K)
Holding tank: 180L

ENGINE

Make / model: MTU 2000 M92 (X 2)
Type: Common rail V10 marine diesel
Rated hp: 1015 (810kW)
Displacement: 22.3L
Weight: 2360kg each
Gearbox ratio: 1.96:1
Propellers: 32 x 38 x 5 BL VEEMSportfish

SUPPLIED BY

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BlueWater magazine would like to thank Lou Haines for kindly making his O'Brien 33 Burgundy Lady available to us as a camera boat.