

BY CHRIS WOODWARD

SEA FOX 288 COMMANDER

Half Cruiser, Half Fishing Fanatic



PERFORMANCE

POWER Twin Yamaha F300s
 LOAD 90 gal. fuel, three crew
 TOP SPEED 61 mph @ 5,900 rpm
 TIME TO 30 MPH 6 sec.
 BEST MPG 2.4 @ 32 mph (3,200 rpm)

HULL

LOA 28 ft.
 BEAM 9 ft. 8 in.
 DEADRISE 20 deg.
 WEIGHT 5,000 lb. (dry)
 DRAFT 1 ft. 6 in. (hull)
 FUEL 200 gal.
 MAX POWER 600 hp

MSRP \$147,900 (as tested)

SEA FOX BOATS
 Moncks Corner, South Carolina
 843-761-6090
seafoxboats.com

Balderson had lined up trolling, casting and bottomfishing rods along the standard hardtop's rocket launcher, which comes with a pair of angled holders. He planted rods in the holders aft of the helm station and in the holders along the back of the transom bulkhead. He filled the 60-gallon pressurized transom livewell and throttled the boat easily onto plane.

We rounded the jetties outside of Charleston Harbor and motored south, looking for diving pelicans that would signal schooling pogies. A moderate swell and confused 2- to 4-foot seas remained as remnants of the previous night's storm.

Balderson kept the twin Yamaha F300s in the 2,700 to 3,000 rpm range, which gave us enough speed to make good time against the quartering head sea. Every once in a while, the ocean presented a sudden peak that threw the Sea Fox into a steep trough. The boat landed solidly with no vibration or rattle.

High-siding the 288 with the standard trim tabs, Balderson also kept us remarkably dry.

EASY BAIT PREP

We expected to see bait off the Morris Island lighthouse, but had to run about 2 miles from shore before we found pogies. Balderson pulled his cast net from a five-gallon bucket beneath a

The tackle station aft of the helm seating unit features a drop-down, fiddled shelf, perfect for rigging leaders. A 65-quart Yeti cooler slides out from beneath the module.

forward in-sole hatch and stepped atop the anchor locker.

The 288 also comes with a filler piece that makes the entire bow area an expansive foredeck, but a sure-footed captain can easily stand at the forepeak.

In one fell swoop, Balderson tossed the net over a menhaden mother lode. He walked the net astern and dropped the baits into the well. He lowered a perforated plexiglass divider into the wide oval opening to help further stabilize the water column and keep the baits from sloshing as the boat rocked.

About 15 miles offshore, we slowed near a buoy signaling artificial reef material at a site called the Charleston 60. We marked bait and fish on one of the two Garmin GPSMAP 7610XSV 10-inch sounder screens (one 7610 comes standard on the 288). I noted that the 288's tall center console offers ample room for displays up to 16 inches.

Balderson says the Charleston 60 attracts cobia, amberjacks, grouper and kingfish, but it also holds plenty of structure-hugging barracuda. As we slow-trolled around the site, the 'cudas slashed our mono leader.

Balderson quickly turned to the



tackle station behind the helm seating unit and opened its top hatch. As he lowered the door, it became a fiddled rigging shelf supported by wires. He reached in and found wire leader material, which he haywired to new hooks.

With rod holders just above that rigging shelf, anglers can easily prepare tackle. Just below the shelf, Sea Fox fitted a slide-out 65-quart Yeti cooler,

Sea Fox's Ryan Balderson used the inboard-opening side door to tail and later release three hefty king mackerel.



The August morning dawned pink and quiet, a surprising change from the violent tempest I'd witnessed the night before. Ryan Balderson and Jeff McNiven loaded a pile of fishing tackle and safety gear aboard the Sea Fox 288 Commander as it bobbed dockside at Bristol Marina in Charleston.

Balderson, Sea Fox vice president of product development and a tournament fisherman, and McNiven, a Sea Fox dealer from Australia, checked the fish boxes and bilge for any standing water the nighttime deluge might have left.

I boarded through the 288's new port side-entry door and walked to the bow to stow my camera gear inside the coffin box beneath the forward lounge. We tossed the lines and motored into a glass-calm Ashley River.

FORE AND AFT

At the bow, I glanced around at the ample plush seating aboard this new model, which incorporates the hull of the 286 Commander with a new

deck and that inboard-opening side door.

The forward lounge resembles a king-size padded beach chair with cupholders between the twin sides. Beneath the seats, the 75-gallon dry-storage coffin box measures 40 inches from the console forward, and easily accommodates gear bags and safety equipment.

U-shaped seating rims the forepeak. Passengers can sit facing astern, using full-size built-in cushions and curved backrests, or sit facing forward using backrests that fold out from the port and starboard bulkhead coaming. Beneath that seating lie 30 gallons of insulated storage.

While the 288 Commander's pointy end is all family fun and comfort, astern, it's all business — fishing business.

Sea Fox built the 288 Commander on the 286 hull, but designed a new deck with an inboard-opening side door for this recently introduced model.

COURTESY SEA FOX (2); CHRIS WOODWARD (OPPOSITE BOTTOM)

which can be deployed manually or by an electric actuator, so dead baits can be kept cool and within arm's reach.

The tackle station lies just a step forward of the livewell. Behind the livewell, a row of rod holders lets anglers bait up newly rigged rods with liveys they can quickly deploy.

FAIR FIGHT

Although we caught a few hefty 'cudas, we had dreams of even bigger toothy critters. "You want to run another 5 miles off to another spot?" Balderson asked.

"Of course!" I countered.

Balderson put an SD card into the Garmin and merged his tournament numbers with the unit's waypoints. He set a course on the plotter, and we jumped to plane.

This time, I took the starboard helm seat. The cup-shaped seat back and right armrest enveloped me, and the padded cushion bottom absorbed any shock from the ride. I stood, folded the bolster back to lean, and placed my feet on the top footrest for added height (which, at 5'1", I truly need.)

The 288 features a fairly steep console face, but Sea Fox thoughtfully placed a ledge above the steering wheel and binnacle that's perfect for a cell-phone or two. I would personalize that with some type of nonskid mesh. The console top features a small amount of space rimmed by a short, U-shaped windscreen, and there's an electronics box above the console, built into the standard hardtop.

At Balderson's secret hot spot, we



Top: Step out on one of the two swim platforms to fight a fish around the outboards. **Above:** The 60-gallon transom livewell is pressurized and comes with a divider.



deployed four more live baits, employing the angled holders on each side of the hardtop as well as two of the gunwale rod holders. Balderson lowered one bait on a manual downrigger.

Within minutes, a kingfish crashed one of the pogies, and McNiven hauled in a 15-pounder, which Balderson tailed and released. The next two king mackerel proved comparatively larger. I fought one in the mid-20s while McNiven took a fish in the mid-30s.

The 288's 360-degree coaming pads make fighting a fish comfortable from just about any quarter. However, because of my short stature, I found the gunwales a bit high. On the other hand, ample freeboard does add to the safety factor for families.

When fighting a fish near the outboards, you can step atop the port or starboard fold-down transom jump seats and move aft to one of two dual swim platforms. The portside door also facilitates bringing a fish aboard for release or to stow in one of the cockpit's two in-sole 35-gallon insulated fish boxes (with overboard discharge).

BY THE NUMBERS

As the day heated up, the seas built. I ran the 288 back to Charleston Harbor

to gauge how cleanly it handled a following sea. Using a slight bit of tab to even the load, I felt no bow steer, and the center-console ran effortlessly, smoothly and dryly at about 3,000 rpm.

Inside the river, I carved ever-sharper turns in both directions with the standard power-assist steering. The speed bled off only slightly as the boat arced with no slipping or excess banking.

We ran the boat with and against the tidal current, averaging a top speed of 61 mph at 5,900 rpm, achieving 1.18 mpg. The 288 sprinted off the line to reach 30 mph in just six seconds, exhibiting only slight to moderate bow rise without tabs.

On the calm inshore waters, we motored at 3,200 rpm for a most economical 2.4 mpg at 32 mph.

Combining a smooth ride with serious fishability, plus comfort and finishing touches like friction hinges, a pressurized livewell and hydraulic shocks on many hatches, this 288 offers the complete offshore cruising and angling package. 🐟



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