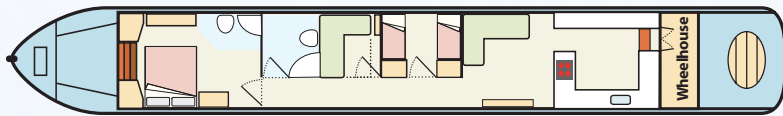


FAST FACTS



Bow 6ft : Bedroom 12ft : 5ft : 5ft : Cabin 8ft : Saloon 13ft : Galley 9ft : 5ft : Aft cockpit 7ft

BOAT: 70ft wide-beam

BUILDER: Bluewater Boats Ltd

CONTACT: 01926 811699,

www.bluewaterboats.co.uk

BEST BITS

- Vetus Pro Docker system for simplicity of handling
- Complex electrical systems with simple controls
- Good use of interior and exterior LED lighting



THE LAP OF LUXURY

We've reviewed some opulent craft in our time but this wide-beam from Bluewater Boats could be the most extravagant yet. Mark Langley takes a close look...

La Bella B was one of the stars of the Crick Boat Show this year. As well as being possibly the most expensive boat on display, it also had the most impressive specification, which included a number of firsts for UK inland boats. Built from the baseplate up by Bluewater Boats in Warwickshire, *La Bella B* has been constructed for a couple and their four children as a cruising holiday home, rather than a residential craft. At 70ft in length, with a 12ft 6in beam, it is nearing the cruising limit of a wide-boat on Britain's inland waterways. It may also come as a surprise that the new owners have fairly limited boating experience; however, the design and construction of the boat make it as easy to handle as possible, as we will discover...

EXTERIOR

The substantial steel shell is of 10/6/5/6mm plate; the thicker-than-normal cabin top supports the wider cabin roof, without the springiness that thinner steel sometimes has. The hull also has a chine in the underwater hull, which avoids the "wide-narrowboat" boxiness that can give poor handling. The whole shell has also been grit blasted and given two-part epoxy blacking below the gunwale, which has a seven-year guarantee; probably making the fitted sacrificial anodes almost redundant. The superstructure is also painted in a two-pack system, with the final coat in buffable urethane from Awlgrip, allowing scratches to be polished out.

The exterior of the boat has a swept up bow, with a raised guard reminiscent of a Dutch barge, but without the sheer stem of a traditional Dutch boat, which is potentially easier to handle in locks. Around the side of the hull, substantial wooden topped steel rubbing strakes give lots of protection against grazing lock sides, without having to run around with fenders (though fender eyes are fitted into the gunwale). As the strakes project substantially from the hull, they could

Double berth guest cabin in day mode.



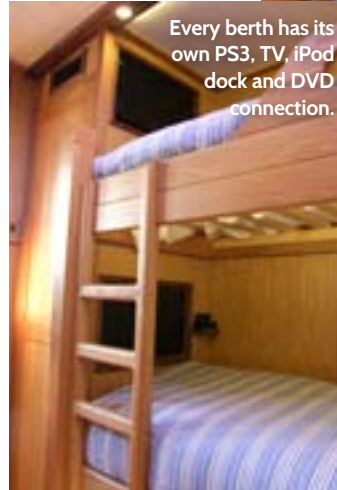
Making very little wash underway.



Four berth bunk cabin.



Aft cockpit with barbeque shelf.



Every berth has its own PS3, TV, iPod dock and DVD connection.

A wooden mast carries the horn and an all-round anchor light, as well as a pair of very bright LED work lights, one facing forward, another aft. There is another pair of work lights on the forward edge of the cabin roof, and another pair just in front of the wheelhouse; certainly this will make finding a late-evening mooring easy and will light up Blisworth Tunnel like daylight. Although the boat carries LED port, starboard and stern navigation lights, oddly it doesn't have a steaming (masthead) light which is needed for tidal river use. All external power supplies to lights are through proper gland connectors, which are often ignored by builders.

catch in locks, especially when going downhill, so Bluewater has fitted sloped guards to prevent this happening.

ON DECK

The foredeck is quite short but manages to pack in the hydraulic anchor windlass (for the large Halls Pattern Stockless anchor permanently suspended, barge-style, from the starboard bow) and a large under deck locker, suitable for several bikes. The cabin sides lean in, giving enough tumblehome that passing bridges on canals like the Grand Union should be less of a problem than vertical sides. The gunwales are wide, flat and covered in teak (naturally slip-resistant), with the raised stainless steel handrail on the cabin top giving confidence when moving about the boat. There are folding steps on the cabin sides, as well as the forward bulkhead, to enable easy access to

the roof. The centre bollards are sensibly mounted on the cabin roof edges, rather than being on the gunwales to trip up the unwary.

Half of the roof is covered in teak decking, with the aft section in paint. To the port side of the roof is a large steel box, which will be fitted with cushions to act as a seating area. This box will be used to contain the family fishing gear, so that rods, poles and nets can be stored ready-to-use, without having to be dismantled. There are also waterproof speakers on here, to which the sound system can be directed, if required. The neat dome self-tracking satellite dish is also on the roof, as is a mounting point (and waterproof power supply) for a very large stainless steel, 230V bug-zapper. The bright blue light should attract insects away from the aft cockpit, and then dispense with them, without the need for insecticides.

AFT COCKPIT & WHEELHOUSE

The full-width aft cockpit looks like it comes straight from the flybridge of an offshore cruiser. A wraparound seating area, with deep water-resistant upholstery (by Whalin Upholstery), will easily seat eight people for alfresco dining, while a neat pull-up stainless shelf hangs over the stern to allow the safe use of a barbeque, with any hot embers or fat falling overboard. Secure lockers underneath the seating provide a huge amount of storage, while also allowing access to the emergency steering and other fittings. Unusually, a 2kW electric infrared heater (remote-controlled) warms the cockpit at night, while two bright halogen spotlights keep it lit – and the bugs should be drawn away and zapped further forward!

The aft cockpit can only be entered from the wheelhouse, which itself has folding sides, along with three stable-type doors,



Twin ovens – part of integrated appliances in the galley.



Large wardrobe.

with the forward windscreen lowering hydraulically. The roof is fabric, with two curved stainless steel supporting bars – much lighter and easier to handle than solid roof sections.

Along the back of the wheelhouse is a bench seat, while the helm is to port, with a large instrument panel including depth sounder, VHF radio, electronic compass and engine controls. Lockers and large shallow trays give storage for charts and guides, while the large flat surfaces provide lots of space for drinks and cameras. Interestingly, all the external main locks on the boat have been given the same high security barrels to match the owners' house locks, so that the house key also fits the boat.

GALLEY & SALOON

Stepping down into the cabin is a revelation. The light interior looks like it has come straight from a design magazine. Ahead of you the bulkhead is covered in dark smoked glass, while in front of this, a huge cream leather corner settee, made to measure with storage underneath, makes a striking visual impact. The white painted ceiling is set off by thick, vertical, solid oak T&G panels on the cabin side, with oak veneered ply on the hull side. The light interior is helped by the large double-glazed ash windows and a huge glazed dog-box over the saloon.

Opposite the sofa is a large entertainment unit; at the push of a switch a 50in TV rises out of the sideboard – the biggest TV I have ever seen on a boat! Underneath, one of the two Sky boxes links to the self-tracking satellite dome, while the Bose surround sound system should ensure cinema quality experience for the duller of TV programmes. A Sonos wireless sound system allows full control of the various hi-fi systems to be controlled from anywhere – even outside the boat.

The galley is set back against the aft bulkhead and is designed to mirror the appliances, if not the space, that the owners enjoy at home. This boat is a gas-free one, so set into the granite work surface is an eye-wateringly expensive Gaggenau induction hob, with matching Gaggenau double oven, integrated fridge-freezer and integrated dishwasher. The main galley to port is in walnut, with the larger full-height door to appliances to starboard in a cream gloss finish, where a wine chiller is also fitted. No handles are fitted, all the doors are on push-to-open latches. A more mundane Bosch washer-dryer is also built-in to the crisply fitted galley.

To keep the interior neat, a roller-shutter in the back corner of the galley hides away the kettle and coffee machine, as well as cups, jars and so forth. Under the floor in both the galley and the saloon is a large locker, easily capable of storing away vacuum cleaners, and other paraphernalia; though, as a cruising boat, more storage is fitted than many residential craft of the same length.

BUNK CABIN

Moving forward, there is a corridor to port; a low cabinet contains fly screens that can be placed into the opening windows, especially useful if the boat ventures to the continent. A fairly large cabin (about 8ft by 8ft) houses two sets of bunk beds, plus two wardrobes. A window also provides a means of escape if needed, while a roof hatch gives access to the cabin roof. Although this may sound fairly normal, when you look a little deeper, you can see the thinking that has gone into this boat.

This cabin is for the owners' four children: every berth has its own reading lights and storage. What makes this different is that every occupant has

their own 15in LCD TV, with wireless headphones and an individual PS3 games console and iPod dock... a single DVD player can also be switched to play the same movie on all four TVs, or combinations thereof. Like the other cabins on the boat, this is also cooled by one of three air-conditioning units running from the 230V supply.

GUEST CABIN & MAIN BATHROOM

Next there is a cabin for the maid, and also to provide room for a guest cabin, or for when one of the children needs more space of their own. An L-shaped day settee pulls out at night to a good-sized double berth, with a bedside cupboard, wardrobe and under-berth storage to give plenty of space. This is also cooled, from the same unit that chills the children's cabin. Like the rest of the boat, the lighting is all LED – not so much for energy efficiency, but because they run cooler and are less likely to burn out than halogen bulbs.

The main bathroom follows: a large fully enclosed shower sits next to a vanity sink on a granite worktop. Above this, a mirror is heated so that it doesn't mist up; even with an extractor fan most boat bathrooms are quite humid after showering. The mirror also has a couple of two-pin charging points, for shavers and electric toothbrushes. The Sanimarine macerator toilet pumps to a large holding tank and a cold-water bidet hose is thoughtfully next to the toilet – easier than plumbing in a combined bidet loo, and a hygienic solution, which may mean less paper waste for the toilet to deal with.

MASTER BEDROOM

The forward master bedroom feels very private. Although there are glazed doors to the foredeck, with a glass hatch above,



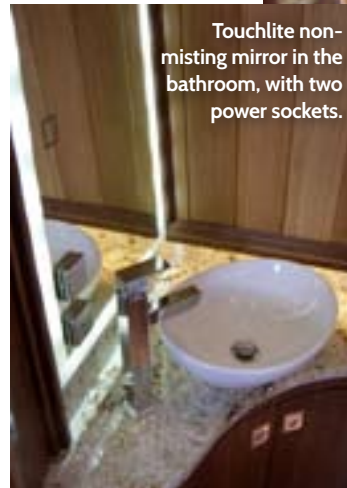
Breakfast bar gives casual dining space.



Ensuite bathroom.



Master cabin looking forward.



Touchlit non-misting mirror in the bathroom, with two power sockets.



A massive TV rises out of the sideboard entertainment unit.

normally this would not be a through-route. Portholes, rather than the larger windows, make this more intimate. Curves abound: either side of the curved (and lit) steps to the foredeck are full-height curved walnut wardrobes, with masses of storage inside, both hanging and shelves. A dressing table against the starboard cabin side faces the king-sized double bed, which has a memory foam mattress, and has LED lights under the lip of the bed, giving subtle lighting, matching those under the gunwale in the rest of the boat. Bedside cabinets either side give more space, while an iPod dock, controls for the air-conditioning and the Sonos sound system are also within easy reach.

In the corner, another curved bulkhead accesses the ensuite facility, which has all the features of the main bathroom, just in a slightly smaller space. As through the rest of the boat, the heating (here, a towel rail) is powered by a Kabola pressure-jet boiler, which should give a high degree of reliability without much maintenance. Discreet designer radiators are used throughout, with fan assisted matrix heaters in the galley and wheelhouse.

SOPHISTICATED ELECTRICS

To supply all these systems, the boat needs its own power station. For general cruising, a pair of 8000W Victron Quattro inverters can provide up to 16kW peak power, drawing from Rolls 6-volt heavy duty batteries, which can provide 460Ah at 24V. These batteries can provide their true capacity, rather than the more common cheaper

“leisure” batteries. They have their own top-up system, to avoid having to individually check each cell’s electrolyte level.

However, even these substantial batteries can only provide power for a limited length of time with high-consumption appliances like the induction hob in the galley. To overcome this, a 14kVA Vetus generator is installed in the cavernous engine room, with its own sound insulated cocoon. As this runs at 1500rpm (rather than the cheaper 3000rpm units) it is quieter and less-stressed. The generator is set to auto start if the power load exceeds 6kW for more than a few seconds, to avoid running the batteries low. The twin inverter chargers also take care of recharging the batteries when the engine is not being run, either with the generator output or the 16A shoreline input (which runs through a proper isolation transformer to prevent stray earth currents).

ENGINE & ANCILLARIES

In the engine room, in addition to the generator to port, is the large Vetus D66 engine, which is based on a six-cylinder Deutz block. At 170hp, this is quite large for a boat this size; however, it enabled a larger hydraulic pump to be installed. Although the main propulsion is through a conventional gearbox, with shaft, water lubricated stern tube and four-bladed prop, substantial hydraulic power is needed for the 160kgf bow and stern thrusters.

The engine has a wet exhaust – the freshwater coolant circulating around the engine is cooled by water drawn from outside through a filter, which then discharges into the exhaust. A very large waterlock/silencer is fitted, and even after several hours of running, the engine room was quite cool, which wouldn’t have been the case if a dry exhaust was fitted. A 2kg automatic extinguisher protects the engine space, though this might not be big enough; preferably there should be a system with manual activation outside of the engine space, as there is no indicator that the system has fired without opening the deck hatch. A boat safety examiner might also scrutinise the glass sediment bowls on the twin fuel filter/agglomerators.

The engine room also has a large 100-litre (22-gallon) calorifier and the Kabola boiler, with a very large accumulator tank on the fresh water side. There is also access to the weed hatch (and via the aft deck) as well as the steering gear and the hydraulic oil reserve tank and cooler.

UNDERWAY

At the helm, as well as the usual engine instrument panel, there is a LCD screen for the engine controls. This engine has electronic systems, which feed even more data back to the helm. The throttle and gearbox controls are also electronic, rather than using push-pull cables. Another LCD



Party-sized aft cockpit.

screen links to two cameras at the bow, which give a wide of where the bow is, 60 odd feet ahead view, hidden by the cabin roof. This should help close-quartered manoeuvres as long as the helm doesn’t just look at the screens.

The steering itself is power-assisted, which means that the wheel is very light – usefully, the electronic display includes a rudder indicator, which helps compensate for the lack of feedback to know when the wheel is centred. The electronic engine controls also take a few minutes to get used to: there is a momentary delay when selecting gear, before the gearbox responds, so you can then push forward too much, and when gear is selected, you have too much throttle. However, there is always the opportunity to try the *other* steering system...

To the left of the wheel is a joystick, is which the control that allows you to move the boat anywhere, almost like playing a computer game. The joystick controls the Vetus Pro-Docker systems and this is the first boat to have it fitted in the UK. On the initial shakedown cruise, we were joined by Vetus UK’s staff to check that all was well, and it was quite amazing once you got used to it. The joystick controls not just the bow and stern thrusters, but also the engine gearbox, throttle and steering. By pushing the joystick in the direction you want to go, and twisting the stick to increase power, you can move the boat where you want, with ease. Push hard, the boat moves faster in that direction; correspondingly, applying gentle pressure just tweaks the boat into position. Turning the boat in a confined space? No problem. Mooring against a lock wall? Easy. Backing into a tight pontoon berth in a cross-wind? Piece of cake. For someone unused to handling large craft, this makes it very simple; experienced boaters would find it useful as well. And if it did go wrong, you can still handle the boat the “normal” way.



Comprehensive helm station, with demister system for windows, as well as electronic engine management system and bow CCTV camera.

The boat itself cut through the Thames very cleanly, with minimal wash, and handled very well both on joystick and normal wheel. The chined hull and decent swim lengths make the boat much smoother and give a good flow of water to the prop and rudder, while the engine remained very quiet at all times.

WW VERDICT

Bluewater Boats has produced yet another interesting craft that is packed full of innovation. While the final price was not disclosed, a bespoke 70ft wide-beam would start at around £160,000, while the Vegas Euro Cruisers range starts from £137,500. Obviously *La Bella B* had far more additions than most owners would ever specify, however, the end result is a unique craft that fits the owners requirements for their family as an alternative to buying a second home. It is superbly fitted with every conceivable appliance, while also handling very well, and the Vetus Pro Docking system is quite likely to become specified on high-end river craft in the future, as it makes manoeuvres so much simpler. The owners also had nothing but praise for the professionalism and dedication of the Bluewater team that put together this unusual craft.