



Sea Ray 340 Sundancer

SPLIT DECISION

Stern drive or V-drive? Hmmm... BY KEVIN FALVEY

With the throttle levers mashed into the helm and the drives trimmed high, I'm humming along at better than 46 mph as Bad

Company thumps from the Polk Audio sound system. For me, this is just another day on the job. But what a job! Look at this boat: It's 37'6" long, sleeps six, displaces seven tons loaded, and is 12' wide. What rocks me more than the subwoofers' kick is that this boat is an express cruiser, not a go-fast or high-powered runabout. I'm tearing up the water aboard Sea Ray's new 340 Sundancer powered with a pair of 375-hp MerCruiser Bravo Three stern drives. V-drives typically power express cruisers, although Chaparral's 350 Signature (\$229,654 powered like our test boat) and Formula's 37PC (\$293,590 powered like our test boat) are two other switch hitters. A stern drive express cruiser: Is this a marriage made in heaven or hell? Let's see.

DRIVE THIS. Where the river paralleled the Alcoa Highway, I got a thumbs-up from travelers who noted I was making better time than they were. Plus, they couldn't lean their vehicles over into a series of linked S-turns and leave a furrow of glistening asphalt in their wake. With stern drive power, the 340 Sundancer is not only fast—it's fun. The trimmable drives provide greater control during maneuvers, a flatter shaft angle, and minimized drag for maximized speed. And it's quick out of the hole. You'll need to warn your crew before pushing the levers forward.

Water conditions during my test were flat calm, so I can only surmise how this boat will perform when the bay or lake is percolating with wakes. The 340 Sundancer's new hull-form features a deep-V that terminates in 21 degrees of deadrise at the transom. The hull's entry is also sharp and steeply raked. These features are indicative of a boat that enters waves more smoothly and re-enters the water after cresting a wave more softly than boats

with fuller entries and flatter aft sections. So I wouldn't be too concerned about whether the boat slammed in rough water. Instead, I'd focus on the degree to which the boat pitched—moved up and down longitudinally—and what effect trimming the drives and applying the trim tabs had on that pitching motion. Any boat's tendency to pitch can be exacerbated by higher speeds. In the conditions tested, I had a blast, though at full throttle and trimmed out fully, the boat wobbled almost imperceptibly on its "keel." But no sensible owner is going to be redlining the tachs in the rough stuff.

Instead, if the wind is kicking up, that owner would want to stay on plane at a speed that would provide control and stability without slamming and pounding. I kept the 340 Sundancer planing at just 13 mph, the drives



READY TO ROCK WITH A SOUND SYSTEM THAT WOULD MAKE METALLICA JEALOUS. TOP END: 46.1 MPH.

and tabs at full negative and the engines turning 2300 rpm. Of the boats I've tested that could stay on step at 15 mph or slower, the 340 Sundancer earned the highest mark in terms of comfort.

I had expected to see trim gauges, but the test boat lacked them. They prove helpful when operating stern drives. Also, the windshield wipers leave a 6" swath of glass uncleared throughout their sweep. Now that completely clear, curved glass windshields are the norm, someone needs to invent a wiper that can keep them clear of spray and rain.

SEE THIS. The 340 Sundancer is one of the

BOATING

Certified Test Results

Sea Ray 340

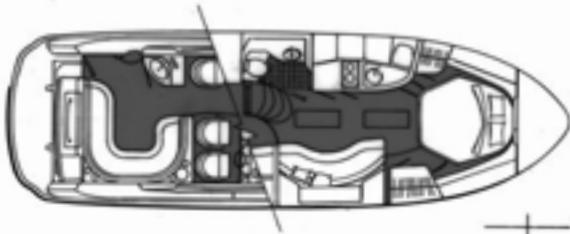


THE HIGHS Wide-open arrangement both topside and belowdecks is refreshing. Love the fiddle rail, the skylight, and the classy island berth. Fuel fills port and starboard.

THE LOWS Needs trim gauges when stern drives are chosen. Add a step to the boarding ladder, please. Windshield wipers fall short of complete coverage.

rpm	SPEED			EFFICIENCY				OPERATION	
	knots	mph	gph	naut. mpg	stat. mpg	n. mi. range	s. mi. range	run angle	sound level
1000	5.2	6.0	4.1	1.3	1.5	258	296	0	69
1500	7.8	9.0	6.4	1.2	1.4	247	285	1	71
2000	9.5	10.9	11.4	0.8	1.0	168	194	3	74
2500	12.3	14.1	17.4	0.7	0.8	143	164	5	78
3000	21.3	24.5	23.6	0.9	1.0	183	210	4	78
3500	26.3	30.3	25.9	1.0	1.2	206	237	3	81
4000	31.7	36.5	33.5	0.9	1.1	192	221	3	81
4500	37.5	43.1	46.9	0.8	0.9	162	186	2	82
4840	40.1	46.1	59.1	0.7	0.8	137	158	2	85

Advertised fuel capacity 225 gallons. Range based on 90 percent of that figure. Performance measured with two persons aboard, three-quarters fuel, full water. Sound levels taken at helm, in dB-A.



LOA	37'6"
Beam	12'0"
Draft	3'1"
Displacement (lbs., approx.)	14,600
Transom deadrise	21°
Bridge clearance	10'2"
Minimum cockpit depth	2'2"
Max. cabin headroom	6'7"
Fuel capacity (gal.)	225
Water capacity (gal.)	45
Price (w/standard power)	\$176,000
Price (w/test power)	\$187,500

to 630 bhp total.

TEST BOAT POWER Twin 375-hp MerCruiser 496 MAG HO Bravo Three V-8 gasoline stern drives with 496 cid, 4.25" bore x 4.38" stroke, swinging 22" pitch ss propsets through 2:1 reductions.

STANDARD EQUIPMENT (major items) Electric windshield vent; Bimini top; front, side, aft curtains; aft sunshade; windlass; snap-in carpet; cockpit shower; icemaker; 12V outlet; radar arch; AM/FM stereo w/6-disc changer, 8 speakers, remote; flat-screen TV/DVD; microwave; refrigerator/freezer; 2-burner recessed cooktop; head w/vacuum-flush commode; Smart-Craft engine-monitoring system; VHF radio; Tridata instrument; 12,000-Btu a/c/heat; battery charger; 2 galvanic isolators; dual 30a shorepower w/50' cords and adapters; 6-gal. water heater; 1½" ss propshafts (V-drives); Nibrals props (V-drives); ss props (stern drives); trim tabs.

STANDARD POWER Twin 320-hp MerCruiser 6.2 MPI V-8 gasoline V-drive inboards.

OPTIONAL POWER Twin MerCruiser gasoline stern drives to 750 hp total; twin MerCruiser gasoline V-drive inboards to 740 hp total; twin Volvo Penta diesel stern drives to 564 bhp total; twin Yanmar diesel V-drive inboards

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new breed from Sea Ray, set apart by sexier lines, colored hulls, and the aforementioned hullform. This model features a reverse sheer, a high forward-curving radar arch (Sea Ray calls it a Sport Spoiler), and engine air intakes that are not only integral but, with their elliptical shape

punctuated by vertical baffles, provide a punchy visual accent. *Oohs* and *aahs* from passersby are guaranteed. Also integral is the large extended swim platform that stretches the boat visually, making it look racier. It also features a three-step ladder, but I prefer four.

The 340 Sundancer's cockpit arrangement is remarkable. Rather than a split bench at the helm, there's a pair of sliding fiberglass-shelled bucket seats with flip-up bolsters. To port is a similar companion seat beneath which is a neat sliding stowage unit.

By opting for a companion bucket seat instead of the longer companion lounge common to many express cruisers, Sea Ray didn't have to use a shoehorn when positioning the wetbar. The module housing the sink, carryon cooler, and stowage is directly abaft the portside bucket seat, yet there's still about six feet between it and the boarding door. Enter the cockpit from the platform and you won't have to sidle past someone using the wetbar. And besides, if you're going to recline while underway aboard a midsize boat, you'll be more comfortable farther aft. So kick back in the U-lounge—be sure to use the table and filler cushions to create a sunpad for maximum comfort.

Two deck-fitting innovations grabbed my attention. One is the telescopic canvas support poles. Push the button and slide the tube until it locks into the next hole. Voilà! The wrinkles are gone from your connector curtains. What's more, fuel fill plates are installed port and starboard, eliminating the need to drag a greasy hose over your boat, regardless of which side you're tied to. It's also a tricky bit of plumbing, given the size of the boat and the amount of standard mechanical equipment installed.

Belowdecks, the 340 Sundancer features the best of the trendy and the traditional. The floor plan is open, yet the fiberglass faux-granite galley counter has a fiddle rail. There's a vent fan in the galley plus a large, stainless-steel opening port. A fixed portlight above adds natural light.

The head is large for this size boat, but it's spare. It won't win any decorator accolades, but this completely fiberglass module will be easy to keep clean. Throughout the interior, the air-conditioning vent grates are wood. There's a flat-screen TV in the salon that's viewable from anywhere in the forward cabin. And a flip-down, airline-style TV/DVD player graces the midcabin's headliner.

Sleeping accommodations are provided by the forward island berth, which is privatized by a curtain, and the midcabin, which doubles as a conversation pit during waking hours. The dinette also converts to a berth for an unexpected guest. Frankly, the layout is best suited for the cruising couple or those who entertain, rather than for six people spending the weekend together.

WHY V? If you have a shallow slip behind your house, then the 5" difference in draft between the V-drives and stern drives will make your powering decision that much easier. Ditto if you love exploring backwater creeks and coves. If top speed is your hot button, the stern drive wins by 10 mph. With stern drives, you'll also jump out of the hole, be able to maintain a flatter running angle, and enjoy a sportier feel at the helm.

Efficiency? Compare the boats at similar speeds rather than rpm to rpm. They use the same hull after all and everything else is pretty much equal, so boat speed is going to be the factor that determines your level of comfort on any given day, not rpm. You're going to run at higher cruising speeds on calm days and slower speeds on rough days. Plus, since the propping, gearing, and coefficients of drag of the two disparate drive systems are different, rpm is an irrelevant comparison in this case.

As an example, the stern drive-powered 340 Sundancer at 3500 rpm runs 30.3 mph; the V-drive at 4000 rpm runs 31.1 mph (0.8 mph means diddly unless you're racing). With stern drives, the engines burn 12.7 gph less. Even taking different loads, conditions, and drivers into account, the trimmable drives beat the shafts hands down.

Close-quarters maneuverability should also be considered. Although I didn't run both boats on the same day, my experience is that boats with rudders, like the V-drive-powered 340 Sundancer, are easier to twist into a tight slip. Of course, a bow thruster can be added to either boat.

Then there's price. With the Bravo Threes, the 340 Sundancer costs \$187,500 compared to \$176,000 for the same boat with V-drives—not a big difference if you're financing the deal instead of paying cash.

Finally, V-drives have a better record of reliability in salt water than stern drives. Big chunks of aluminum don't fare as well as bronze, stainless steel, or Nibral in an electrolyte, especially if the boat is plugged into shorepower at a marina instead of swinging on a mooring or docked at a private residence. Plugged in at the yacht club, your boat is subject to corrosion from flaws in the electrical systems of the other boats.

So what's the right choice? Stern drive or V-drive? The only person who knows the answer to that is you. †



EXTRA POINT

Note that Sea Ray didn't simply "plug in" stern drives. One easy-to-see bit of redesign is the difference in the aft bilge pump location. Aboard the stern drive boat, it's mounted all the way aft. On the V-drive boat, it's mounted forward, near the engine bulkhead, due to the difference in weight distribution between the powerplants.