The Cruising Dinghy

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The dinghy to a cruiser is like a car to a real person and can be almost as expensive. It should provide not only necessary transportation to and from shore, but also the means to venture some distance for taking the crew diving, snorkeling and exploring. One of the more important features of a good dinghy is to keep the occupants safe and dry in boisterous conditions. Below we explore what we and most cruisers consider the optimum dinghy type and as well as some of the features and equipment that can improve its performance.

For those that consider planing ability with a load, good range, a dry comfortable ride, and snorkeling/scuba diving capability to be important dinghy features, we think the best choice for most cruising boats less than about 45' is a RIB. Close to 80 percent of the cruising boats we have seen in the past ten years in the Caribbean and Pacific use a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) as their dinghy. The major negative to purchasing a quality RIB, including pontoon covers/chaps, is cost. RIBs also require more maintenance, especially of the pontoons, are easier to damage or puncture, and are harder to row than a hard dinghy. All that is manageable, so if the conveniences mentioned above are of importance, we think that the one-time cost and other issues are worth it.

Not all RIBs are created equal, but they all must be kept properly inflated for long life. Floppies die quickly. Which is best, Hypalon (Neoprene/CSM since 2010) or PVC, is a difficult question with many variables, see http://inflatableboatworks.com/?p=1796 For use in the tropics Hypalon RIBs seem to last longer, but I have also seen a 20 year old quality PVC RIB. In any case it is best to buy from one of the quality big RIB manufacturers like Apex, Avon, AB, Carib, or Zodiac. For boats with 2-3 crew we think that a 10.5' RIB is the perfect size; big enough for crew and dive gear, yet not too heavy to be lifted aboard when necessary. The better designs will plane efficiently with a modern 15 HP outboard with 4 persons aboard or two with dive gear. A properly designed fiberglass bottom with a good V at the bow and flatter stern section greatly enhances planing capability. 17" tubes, a 'floor pushed forward' design and uplifted bow gives more room inside and a smoother drier ride. We currently use a 10-year-old 10.5', 120 lb AB Lite RIB with fiberglass bottom and find it to be excellent

10.5' AB Lite dinghy riding underway on high catamaran davits- note high bow, chaps, wheels and polypropylene painter with snap hook.

Whether to buy an aluminum or fiberglass bottom RIB is a tough decision. Aluminum is better if you often need to drag the dinghy up on shore or over hard coral. However, it is unlikely you can repair a significant damage yourself. Some have paint adhesion problems inside, and if left bare, the floor is incredibly hot. Floor coverings like Dri-Deck keep water in the dinghy from getting cargo wet and our bare feet cool. There are many options for repairing the pontoons besides expensive dinghy glues including 3M 5200 and Loctite Professional Super Glue. Unlike aluminum, a fiberglass bottom can be custom compound molded to optimize the ride and planing ability. Check specifications carefully as some aluminum manufacturers' models are narrower than their same models of fiberglass. And finally, a test ride is always worthwhile to check for differences in planing and a dry ride.

Having two outboard motors of different sizes allows use of a motor that more closely matches its intended use. The other provides a backup. Because the 5 HP uses about 1/3 the fuel of the 15 HP, we use our 5 HP most of the time for short runs. The larger 15 HP is used for longer faster runs as mentioned above; still the 5 HP will plane our RIB with one person aboard. Being of the same make, they both use the same fuel tank and hose fitting. We carry lots of spares, especially rubber parts for the fuel systems, and the attachments to fresh water flush them if stored for more than a week. Line can be used to rig a simple lifting sling around the motor, and one 1.5" schedule 40 PVC pipe piece with one expanded end makes a good throttle handle for extension both motors. Cavitation fins on the 15 HP help getting on a plane with heavier loads. To prevent theft, we use custom stainless steel clamp tubes with round Abus locks.

5 Nissan & 15 HP Tohatsu outboards- note Abus SS locks, and fins, lifting strap and throttle extension on Tohatsu.

Wheels are important additions if you cruise in third world areas where there are big tides and few dock tie ups ashore. They are also very useful for moving the dingy around in a boat yard. Bigger pneumatic wheels are better in soft sand, as are strong attachments to the transom. Sunbrella® wheel covers will slow the sun's UV from destroying the rubber tires.

We have two anchors for the dinghy. One is a small 1.5 kg folding grapple anchor and the other a larger 10-pound rotating fluke. We use the grapple most of the time to hold us in hard bottoms, dead coral or while trailing the dinghy above while diving. The rotating fluke is needed for sand anchoring, especially

while diving in deep areas. We attach about 150' of 5/16" polypropylene 3-strand floating line and five feet of ¼" chain to the anchors. It is all stows in a small plastic bucket.

We see cruisers with all sorts of dinghy painters. We think about 20' of 3 strand ½" floating black polypropylene line is best, because there is little danger of getting it into a prop, and it doesn't absorb water. Black has better UV resistance than other colors and ½" plenty of strength to hold the dinghy even while being towed. A bronze or stainless-steel snap hook on the bitter end will eliminate ill tied cleat knots that might come undone during happy hour visits. Always tuck the bitter end of a knot in 3-strand poly line under one of the strands, so there is little chance of the knot slipping out.

It is important to be able to lift the dinghy out of the water every night for security, emergency departures in sudden storm conditions, and bottom fouling reasons. Better davit systems can lift the dinghy at least six feet above the water, complicating a thief's ability to make off with your dinghy and motor from his boat. Using chain, rather than wire, to lock the dinghy and motor to your boat and ashore further increases security. Monohulls often carry a RIB upside down on the foredeck when at sea. A multihull can carry a RIB aft between the hulls on strong davits. Hoisting a RIB at the hip on a halyard at night is risky because it complicates an emergency underway in sudden storm conditions.

So there you have it: some of my thoughts on what make the perfect dinghy. If cost is an issue, just remember that you can't take all those retirement benefits with you when you croak! We think that it is much better for us to buy the Mercedes RIB now, than for the tax man and kids to get the money later. I'm sure the kids would agree.

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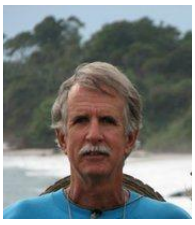

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