

SPIRIT OF



FIRST IMPRESSION: Hustler debuts its 49-foot Widebody Esprit de Soleil, a diesel-powered rocket that proves to be an extraordinary addition to the New York builder's stable of high-quality musclecraft. by Brett Bayne

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FOTOGRAHER.COM

THE "SUN"

Hustler Powerboats has created a minor industry out of capturing unadulterated excess within the confines of its heralded line of offshore powerboats, a strategy best exemplified by models such as the 388 Slingshot, 40-foot Sport, the 50-foot Power Yacht and this newest behemoth: the 49-foot Widebody Esprit de Soleil.

Powered by four 440 Yanmar diesels with Trimax surface drives, the 49-footer is a 23,000-pound luxury cruiser that comes from a rich offshore racing heritage defined by meticulous rigging and installation standards.

HOT BOAT snared the first model out of the mold, an extraordinary addition to the Hustler stable that mixes flourishes of Eurostyling with Americanized touches throughout, as well as one of the most lavish layouts and executions available to today's performance powerboater. The builder's aggressive new regime continues to demonstrate the ability to build high-quality musclecraft, and its creative efforts are further sharpened behind this outstanding design.

Hustler

has crafted the 49-foot Esprit de Soleil to be dependable, particularly with respect to maintenance; cruisability and reliability were the watchwords. The company envisioned a boat its owner could take from Miami to Key West or to the Bahamas on a single load of gas (the boat holds up to 439 gallons of diesel fuel). This concept was in perfect

harmony with the comments of one HOT BOAT test driver in Miami, who wrote (in part): "It felt like we could go from Miami to the Keys, and once we got there, we'd be all set—the generator's running the air conditioning."

The boat began life as a joint project with a European company, with the legendary Fabio Buzzi on board to design the bottom (a descendent of his world-famous racing hull). The boat boasts almost seven feet of headroom below, with sleeping accommodations for four people. The Esprit de Soleil was conceived to

spend much of its time cruising at around 60 mph, but with the capability of approaching 80 mph at full throttle, with a price tag under \$1 million. The mammoth rig, which sports a beam of ten feet, is clearly positioned to compete with comparable boats by Magnum and Sunseeker and comes with a huge array of standard features and luxury options (including a flat, widescreen TV, DVD player, XM Satellite radio, Surround Sound and full galley with ice maker in the cockpit). In addition to all the entertainment goodies, the boat sports the aforementioned generator and air conditioning, as well as other creature comforts. The boat, featuring 22 degrees of deadrise, will accommodate six to eight passengers quite easily. Behind the huge, flat sunbathing lounge area is a giant storage area to deposit your gear. The boat is massive in size, but it's also extraordinarily comfortable. Fit and finish throughout was excellent—all the more impressive, seeing as it's the first boat out of the mold. Rigging was good to outstanding.

At the helm: Four sets of gauges, one for each engine, adorn the very large dash, but you'll likely find yourself mostly interested in viewing the tachometers. The dash also features a master ignition-switch panel on the port side, along with independent toggle switches to fire each ▶

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individual engine. What's especially interesting about this boat is its two-speed transmission. The transmission is primarily for moving the gears into overdrive; suggested "upshifting" will occur at about 2,000 rpm. (Similarly, it's important to downshift after coming off plane and settling back to idle.)

There are four throttles and four shifters, all within easy grasp. There is no trim system available in this setup; trim tabs exist, but the drives are in a fixed position. In rough-water conditions (or if you simply need any trim to put the boat back down into the water), the tabs can accomplish the task.

In theory, the four-engine concept was a bit daunting, but by the end of our test, we had mas-

tered the power within the craft. Put the transmission drives into commission at idle speed, and you'll feel them shift; there's a momentary delay between actually shifting and the transmission engaging. While not an unpleasant sensation, it does take some getting used to—especially at these slower speeds. With the

four engines and the huge size of the boat, the driver can put it into gear and get a reasonable speed at idle.

Space was at a premium at our Miami test, and some boats had to be "side tied" alongside each other at the marina. Try to visualize this nearly 50-foot boat tied alongside four others and then pushing off and idling out into a no-wake zone, being careful not to do any damage. But to our delight, the maneuverability capabilities in

the Esprit de Soleil were outstanding. Going forward while running one motor in reverse and one in forward, while the two center motors were in neutral, made this part of the ride very comfortable indeed. When we put all of the engines in the forward motion, it maintained a steady speed but still had a flat wake. Any fears we had that there would be excessive rpm while making a big wake at idle speed immediately evaporated.

Coming up to cruising speed from idle, we began to roll into the throttle and noticed that as the bow started to rise slightly, we could feel the thrust of the torque of the four diesel engines. The boat comes on plane quickly and efficiently. At 2,000 rpm, we shifted the transmissions with one toggle switch, which arms all four transmissions. Once in overdrive, the rpm drops, and the boat's speed carries on. (We've heard that if you run these engines into the 3,000-rpm range and then shift the gear into overdrive, you better hang on; you'll be pressed flat against the back of your seat, and we weren't particularly anxious to prove the axiom correct.) The overdrive system was effortless to use.

With the boat up on plane, you can roll on the throttle—it's nothing like V8 motors, where you're expecting the rpm to be behind. On our ride, top rpm was 3,450, and top speed was 73.9 mph. We found that we could cruise

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continuously and indefinitely at 70 mph, as long as there was fuel aboard. At top rpm, we agreed that the top speed of 73.9 was very impressive. Back off the rpm somewhat, and you'll reach your cruising range. Here you'll find your best ride and your ideal spot for fuel economy.

Despite weighing in at 23,000 pounds, the boat feels considerably lighter. It's interesting to note that the surface drives lend a unique feel to the steering. In the early phases of our test, it didn't track perfectly straight: We felt like we were chasing the steering wheel to keep it in a straight line. But as we became more familiar with the boat's personality, the feel came to us with a little seat time, and the tracking challenges diminished. ("I didn't realize that it didn't need that much input into the wheel," our driver confessed). As we made our left and right turns, the boat was very dry. We noted a vibration zone during acceleration—a harmonic growl that may derive from the cavitation of the prop's blades after the turns. However, due to the four "push points" and the torque, we did not seem to lose a lot of speed in the turns; it simply rolls over and you get a little more wetted area. Admittedly, our crew has limited experience with this particular setup, but as the technology continues to advance, and hot boats continue to grow, we're sure to see more of them, and we expect our familiarity with the drive system to develop as well.

This Hustler is roomy, cruisable and fast—a remarkably impressive showcase machine that's a lot of boat for the money and a lot of impressive power. While Hustler is upbeat about market acceptance, company reps are realistic about introducing a \$785,000 luxury cruiser like this during a shaky economy and a volatile global climate (to say the least). Still, the Esprit de Soleil remains a boat to be optimistic about—after all, its name means "spirit of the sun," and Hustler is betting that customers will want to follow this Sun. ■

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