

TOPAZ OMEGA



PHOTO: JEREMY EVANS

The Topaz Omega is the longest, widest, roomiest polyethylene dinghy to available to date. But does it perform? **Jeremy Evans** took one of the first production Omegas out on the water.

The rotomoulded polyethylene dinghy has come of age. Topper's Topaz, Taz and Magno are good boats, but the Topaz Omega seems like their most impressive to date. It's bigger than any other boat being built in roto-moulded plastic, with Topper investing £400,000 in moulding machinery – and the capacity to go even larger.

How Topper's tri-lam (triple-layer) plastic – an

inner and outer skin with plastic foam filling for lightweight rigidity – compares to its rivals is impossible to judge without recourse to a chainsaw and the endless test of time, but the plastic certainly looks good enough to cause glassfibre boatbuilders a dose of nervous strain if they're in the same sector of the market.

Like all the Topper range (except the original Topper and the Byte), the Omega has been

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knowledgeable and skilled builder with excellent resources courtesy of Topper, and also has the ability to make boats that go.

Design

Fresh out of its mould and newly fitted ready to sail, the Omega was trailed to Mudeford Quay near Christchurch. The style of the Omega is clear. It's big, roomy and comfortable enough for all kinds of family sailing, which means it should be equally useful for sailing schools and holiday operators. It's got its claws out for the classic Wayfarer/Wanderer market, while also taking a swipe at modern designs like the Laser Stratos. The curious thing about 'family' dinghies is that many people who buy them imagine they will always sail a boat packed with friends and children. But it doesn't work out like that. There are occasions when everyone wants to pile on board, but sometimes it's just dad who wants to go sailing – with a friend, child or even alone. That means a family boat must be easy to handle from trailer to water, particularly for older sailors who are attracted by the space and stability of the concept.

The Omega has a sizeable rig and getting the mast up looks like it could be a struggle. But it's simple to attach the mast foot to the main aluminium beam, so one person pushing it up from behind and another pulling it up with the forestay should have no unpleasant dramas getting the mast up or down. This main beam is one of the clever things about the Omega – also used on the smaller Magno – copied from the forward beam of a racing cat like the Spitfire, which is also built by Rob White. Jib sheet leads

Above The kite is launched out of its bag from the bow, with an easy-up, easy-down system.

Below Sheet in and the boat reacts. It feels responsive, fun and very reasonable on speed.

designed by Ian Howlett and Rob White, who also manages the production. Rob has exceptional dinghy experience. His dad Reg won an Olympic gold medal in the Tornado class, and is still busy developing new cats and other designs with Yves Loday. Rob studied boatbuilding at Lowestoft College, was a championship-winning cat racer and has had a hand in building a large chunk of popular dinghy and cat classes. He's a



and the roller control are mounted on the boom which puts rigidity and weight exactly where the designer wants it in the hull, while removing clutter from the cockpit.

Other neat items include a GNAV (upside-down head-friendly kicking strap), using the bolt rope system developed by Rob White so the mainsail can be hoisted from one side. With 15sq m of upwind sail area the rig is set to generate power, which makes a user-friendly reefing system vital on this type of boat. A neat roll-and-zip system reduces the size of the mainsail by at least a third, while mounting the jib on a yacht-style luff spar means you can take in a few rolls on the water and carry on sailing with however much area feels right for the conditions. You cannot do this with a normal jib furler which would unroll from the top. Another simple solution we liked was the outboard bracket, which uses a second set of rudder pintles on one side of the transom with the option of an outboard storage locker inside the boat.

Launching and sailing

The Omega's hull weighs in at around 140kg, which works out lighter than a Wayfarer, but while we were following it on the water, someone commented, 'It looks a bit heavy.' Maybe that's because the Omega has a deep freeboard which makes it look a bigger boat than most 15-footers. As Rob explained, you need freeboard to provide the crew with a pleasantly dry ride and enough buoyancy to have a birthday party on board. In my view it looks pretty good, with a purposeful chined hull that's much more appealing than a smoothly sculptured plastic blob.

The rig looks more than big enough for the boat with great looking sails and plenty of power, not least from the kite that looks set to provide some turbo-power. One thing about plastic is that you don't tend to worry much about dragging it up a beach. It felt easy to drag up and, when the tide went out, equally easy to drag back down, so should face no problems with that kind of rough and ready family use!

I've always been in two minds about rotomoulded plastic; while it's cheap, durable and practical it doesn't quite have the 'feel' of lighter, more rigid glassfibre boats. Indeed some rotomoulded dinghies and cats feel a bit lumpy or flex so much they eat up power. The Omega was something of a revelation. It's actually a great boat to sail. An on-off, gusty Force 3 breeze combined with choppy water are not the sort of conditions designed to make any boat shine, but the Omega behaved nicely. You can step on board over the transom, which is easy. The cockpit area seems vast, with enough room to sit inside or on side benches (another reason for higher freeboard).

Sheet in and the boat reacts. It feels responsive, fun and very reasonable on speed. We're not talking exceptional – this not a race boat to compare with super-rigid, super-light flyers, but it certainly feels stiff and precise. It's enjoyable to sail upwind and easy to get where you want to go, though we suspect most people would like more grunt than the 1:3-mainsheet can provide. Tacking is quick and efficient, and the boat still appears to come round nicely with the jib furled and put away. In fact you can easily sail the Omega singlehanded.

The kite is launched off the bow out of its chute,



Above The large amount of freeboard should keep bums dry when sitting on the gunwale and keep newcomers to the sport feeling safe.

Left It's big, roomy and comfortable enough for all kinds of family sailing.

with an easy-up, easy-down system. Once flying, it looks a big sail and in Force 4 could definitely give the Omega a full-on fun ride. This is not super-dodgy sailing. The Omega responds to gusts and needs to be sailed competently. It will go over if you get things wrong, which is where a couple more clever design elements come into play. First, it has an optional triangular foam float that can be attached to the head-of the sail. Up there it looks just like a yellow panel at the top of the sail, but when it's down on the water there's enough flotation with the sealed mast to ensure you can walk on the rig – or more likely fall heavily into the sail – without the Omega going right over.

Getting a big dinghy up can be a struggle. During our test capsizing there was no great wind to make things difficult, but it was still highly impressive that Henry White could flip the Omega upright unaided, with probably no more than 60kg ▶

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of ballast at his disposal. Rob explained this is down to clever positioning of buoyancy in the deck and hull, and it's all self-draining with transom flaps and self-bailers ensuring a dry cockpit at all times.

Overall

Topper should do nicely with this one. The Omega is a superb boat with loads of room, good performance, nice looks, excellent systems and fittings at a very good price. It's a boat which pretty much all ages could enjoy – one up, two up, three up, four up or more up. Try before you buy, but if you're in the market for this kind of boat I would strongly recommend a test sail. ■

Below The Topaz Omega is a boat which pretty much all ages could enjoy.



photo: J. HARRIS/CRUISE

ANSWER BACK

from Rob White

Many thanks to Jeremy Evans for the thorough boat test. He recognised that the Topaz Omega is 'a superb boat with loads of room, good performance, nice looks, excellent systems and fittings at a very good price' and 'a great boat to sail'. This sums up our design brief very succinctly.

We wanted to use Topper's 20-plus years of knowledge in thermoplastics to create the largest moulded trilam sandwich construction boat to date, but at the same time make it a delight to sail. Right from the very first sailing trials it was obvious that this boat had something special about it. Since then various industry experts have come to the same conclusion that the Topaz Omega is a superb boat to sail.

It will also be a good boat to own, with a good value-price, high durability and virtually no maintenance, together with a great carrying capacity and comfort factor. Indeed, the comfort and space emanating from the high freeboard is a special factor that customers need to experience for themselves.

Production of the Topaz Omega is now at full capacity, with orders from club racers, cruising families, sailing clubs and holiday companies.

The Topaz Omega joins her smaller sister, the Topaz Magno, to make a 15-strong Topaz range. We recommend that you check out the Topaz models and take the advice of Yachts and Yachting, book a test sail on the groundbreaking Topaz Omega.

TOPAZ OMEGA SPECIFICATION

DESIGNERS:	Rob White & Ian Howlett
LENGTH:	4.7m
BEAM:	1.88m
HULL WEIGHT:	140kg
SAIL AREA:	MAIN: 11.5sq m
	JIB: 3.5sq m
	ASYMMETRIC SPINNAKER: 12.75sq m

PRICE:	Omega Club (ex spinnaker) £4,495
	Omega Sport (inc spinnaker) £4,995

THE OPPOSITION... Where does the Omega fit in? Here are three alternatives...



RS VISION

The next biggest rotomoulded dinghy currently available, which is a tad smaller overall than the Omega.



WAYFARER

Classic Ian Proctor benchmark design dating from 1959, currently available in several versions for racing, cruising and schools.



LASER STRATOS

High stability dinghy that can be sailed with gennaker, trapeze and keel options.

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LOA: 4.55m

BEAM: 1.75m

HULL WEIGHT: c.125kg

UPWIND SAIL: 13.5sq m

SPINNAKER: 12sq m

GUIDE PRICE: from £3,995

LOA: 4.82m

BEAM: 1.86m

HULL WEIGHT: 160kg

UPWIND SAIL: 15.9sq m

SPINNAKER: 13.5sq m

GUIDE PRICE: from £6,820

LOA: 4.94m

BEAM: 2m

HULL WEIGHT: 290kg

UPWIND SAIL: 14.53sq m

GENNAKER: 12.54sq m

GUIDE PRICE: from £7,395