

test

GAZELLE

# The Windy City Express

*Bred for the wild and windy waters of Wellington, NZ the Gazelle 26 has just what it takes to provide secure family cruising and sparkling high wind racing performance. Story by JAMES HILL.*

**W**ave riding in rough seas and up to 40 knots breeze across New Zealand's Cook Strait with the spinnaker up is not a common outing for 26-foot trailer sailers. While it might sound like nightmare material, this was the situation in which a Sydney yacht agent found himself two years ago as an enthusiastic New Zealand boat builder put his trailer sailer through its paces.

The agent was one of a six-man crew which raced the boat in the annual trans-Strait event which Kiwi trailer sailer enthusiasts actually find enjoyable, although at times the sailing becomes more like a nautical version of a demolition derby.

As it turned out, the boat not only got to the other side intact, but actually placed quite well into the bargain. The agent was impressed, although at times the crew had to stay packed aft in the boat like an All Blacks Rugby scrum to keep the bow out.

The agent was Robin Rae, a keen Sydney sailor who made his name racing NS 14 dinghies and is a recent convert to the ranks of TS sailors who like to race. The boat which Robin sampled in the middle of Cook Strait and decided instantly to become the Australian agent for, is the Gazelle 26.

While many might quickly write this boat off as "yet another Kiwi trailer sailer" in

fact the Gazelle is something different from the norm of New Zealand designs and in many ways a boat better suited to Australian tastes. The Gazelle, unlike most Kiwi production yachts, was bred in Wellington waters and so it reflects a somewhat different approach to the big dinghy style which comes out of Auckland.

Designed for the windier waters of Wellington Harbour and for short sorties into the rough ocean waters beyond, the Gazelle has a rounded 'yacht' style of hull with a high level of stability.

Robin says he was particularly drawn to the cruising capacity of the Gazelle 26 although it doesn't have standing





headroom. Although the natural cabin headroom is limited to about shoulder height, the boat is well set up for cruising with a comfortable four to five berth cabin layout, reasonable sized galley for a boat of this size, a very comfortable and secure cockpit and a lead-weighted lift keel which negates the need for human ballast.

The Gazelle features a nicely balanced fractional sloop rig on a locally made Wellington brand tapered alloy spar, which is not beyond the capacity of one adult to raise or lower without great effort. The rig features a simple set up of forestay, side shrouds set on swept-back spreaders, lower stays and no backstay.

By current standards the Gazelle 26 is not overly endowed with sail area for light winds with its standard working jib and mainsail, but it offers optional number one and two size genoas to lift performance in the lighter winds.

While the 'numbers' on the Gazelle add up to a yacht of fairly moderate proportions, neither particularly light in weight or heavily canvassed, the boat is quite a good all-round performer. In its first year in Australia the boat took out its division in the keenly contested South Australian Milang/Goolwa Annual Sailing Classic.

Although racing performances are always of interest to the trailer sailer market, the Gazelle 26 will not be heavily campaigned in racing events. Instead, the boat is being marketed as a good family cruising boat with racing potential being of secondary consideration. Robin Rae's company Gazelle Yacht Sales, set up to market the Gazelle 26 nationally, strongly pushes the family aspect of the boat.

Recently I had the opportunity to test sail the 7.7 metre Gazelle 26 on Pittwater in conditions which closely approximated the sort of average sailing conditions which many east coast TS sailors have to contend with. We had a fresh north-east sea breeze starting out at a good 18 knots which gradually eased to 12 to 14 knots. Coming back towards the ramp the breeze lightened right down to around the eight to ten mark, so we got a fair range of wind to test this newcomer.

The Gazelle certainly proved to be an easy boat to sail with a small crew, with a working jib and full size mainsail we had no trouble tacking up the bay without needing human ballast out on the weather rail. The boat was a bit hard pressed at first but with the cunningham down-haul applied on the mainsail and the traveller eased down a half or full metre off the centreline the boat fell into an easy groove, footing quickly.

It's always a pleasure to sail a boat in



*Typically Kiwi in its fractional rig, the Gazelle isn't so typical in hull shape with rounded sections and more fore overhang.*

which you feel you don't have to battle too hard to get performance. The Gazelle is certainly such a boat, with 420kg of its 1120kg displacement located in the foot of its lift keel you can sail from within the cockpit. The cockpit has comfortable raised coamings and seats recessed below deck level. There is seating for up to six adults. One of the best aspects of the cockpit is the way the cabin has been kept low so forward vision is not impaired.

While we contented ourselves by sailing from within the cockpit, the Gazelle features heavily cambered cabin sides which turn the side decks into a natural seat for rail-riding. In serious competition two or three crew would be stacked on the weather rail while the helmsman would sit as far forward in the cockpit as possible to keep the weight out of the stern.

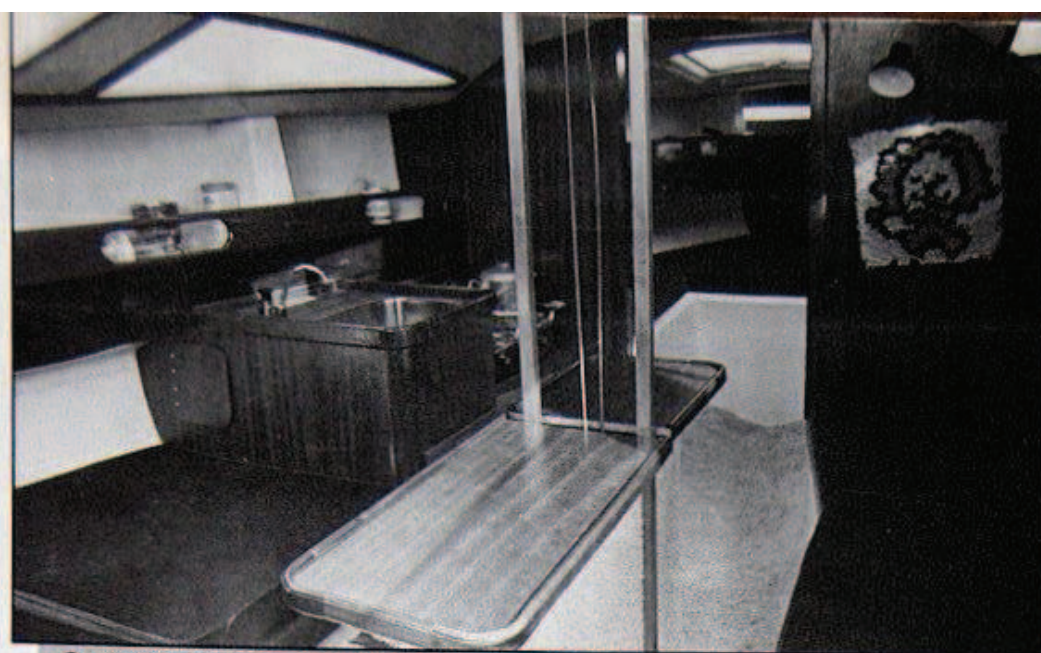
During our test the Gazelle proved to be quite fast upwind, especially when we fell

into company with other yachts.

The Gazelle's good windward performance can be attributed to its effective ballast ratio (approx 37%) and the fact that the lift keel is longer in cord length thereby not only getting the ballast lower but also giving the keel more lift in the water.

The vertical lift keel is designed to be permanently locked down while sailing and features an unusually shaped centrecase which doubles as the saloon table. The casing sides go up to under the saloon table which simply folds back when the centreboard is being fully raised. The keel is locked tight in the fully down position, or when partially raised, but is quite loose in the case as it is raised further. The reason for this is that the fibreglass casing is purposely flared towards the top to make it easier to mould and also to discourage over-zealous sailors from raising the centreboard when





**Cockpit is large by anyone's standards and features angled coamings for sitting outboard.**

they are racing more than the legally prescribed 20% of total keel area. If you do raise the board more than this it becomes sloppy and the water sloshing around in the case would be detrimental to performance.

If the keel has to be partially or fully raised, a hydraulic system with electric winch activated within the cockpit or down in the cabin takes care of the hard work of raising 420 kg. The keel itself is a cast steel aerofoil section with lead pieces inside.

The rudder is a similar aerofoil section to the keel and lifts vertically in its alloy framed rudder stock. Some sailors I know prefer the folding or 'kickup type' rudder system but there is no doubt that the vertical lift type is more efficient in that it allows the blade to be partially raised while sailing without the balance of the boat being thrown out and the helm heavy.

Overall attention to the hydrodynamics of the Gazelle extends to the outboard set up which consists of a well in the aft end of the cockpit floor with shockcord loaded flaps. The outboard is raised and lowered on a stainless steel sliding bracket and when the motor is right up the flaps close off the hole.

The hull features wide and powerful stern sections and a rounded and relatively deep hull section with a deep bow forefoot. It's the sort of hull which performs at its best downwind.

The security of the crew is well emphasised in this design not only in the roomy and deep cockpit provided but also the fitting of pushpit, pulpit and liferails as standard. As well as the rails, one can keep a secure footing on deck from a perforated alloy toe rail running around the gunwale edge.

Another good security feature is the large open bow well, which houses the anchor and warp line. This also gives the forward hand a secure position when

moving to handle a headsail or set a spinnaker.

On the deck of the Gazelle there is a sliding main companionway hatch with mechanical arms built into the hatch lid so it can be raised to form a pop-top over the cabin entrance area. This pop-top is small in comparison to some other units but the idea is that it does not in any way affect the structural integrity of the cabintop.

For stowage of assorted deck gear items like topside buffers, boat hooks, sail ties and outboard fuel tank, there are two large self-draining lockers in the aft end of the cockpit. The deck is finished with an effective non-skid moulded into the gel coat and covering virtually all areas.

The sail controls are well laid on deck with all halyards and mainsail adjustments, such as mainsail cunningham and main reefing lines, all led aft over the cabintop to where they can be adjusted from the safety of the

cockpit. There is a pair of Barlow 18 sheet winches on the coaming and Cleveco snubbing winches on the cabintop for halyards and other lines.

The test boat was well set up for either racing or cruising in standard trim with a mast which seemed to get just the right amount of bend up for the mainsail without too much side layoff. The small section Swanson spar with tapered top was nicely matched by a 'jumbo' sized boom.

As standard, the Gazelle comes with dacron sails made by Lidgard, one of the biggest and most respected lofts in New Zealand.

There are several changes to the original design in the Australian boats. The whole boat has been lightened by doing away with a number of heavy fibreglass internals and using lighter carpet liners instead.

Another innovation is a glass window panel just above the centreboard case. This window replaces an opening where the centreboard once extended before it was redesigned. The window is covered most of the time when the main hatch is open but when the hatch is closed it allows much welcomed light into the cabin.

While the planing boards on the test boat had been attached as a separate moulding, there was no doubt that this extension not only made the boat potentially quicker but also a much better looking boat. The extension has now been made part of the mould so there will be no join line as there was in the test boat.

Since my first test I was able to get a second sampling of the Gazelle's performance in a Monday evening race.





In a division which included strong competition from Rosses, Sonatas and one-designs like Stars, the Kiwi boat did very well indeed to finish fifth over the line. At one stage we had the race sewn up but the fickle light conditions made tactics almost a lottery. Interestingly, in a season of these races the Gazelle has proved itself to be much better in light airs than Rae ever expected and he is now much happier about promoting the boat's racing potential.

At the time of writing eight boats had been sold in Australia. Like many imported boats the fall in the dollar in 1985/86 had pushed the price up, but despite this the Gazelle was holding on well at a reasonable sail-away price of \$25,985.

### Accommodation

Below, the Gazelle features a simple yet functional interior layout with long settee berths extending aft to form quarter berths either side of the main companionway. There is a feeling of roominess in the boat made obvious by the lack of a large centrecase structure intruding into the cabin.

The settee berths are comfortably arranged with proper backrests outboard and nice wide berth bases to allow comfortable seating or sleeping. There are handy stowage shelves behind the cushioned backrests and a carpeted cabin floor as well as carpeted hull and roof liner.

The port settee is cut short by a good size galley incorporating a proper size sink, two-burner stove and under shelf stowage and a cutlery drawer.

Under the companionway is a roll-door cocktail compartment as well as a slide-out timber table which links up with the saloon centrecase table.

A timber panelled bulkhead divides the main saloon area from the forepeak which houses a large double berth and WC offset to port. This bulkhead is reinforced by a stainless steel ring frame so it can take the loadings off the mast step on deck.

There is comfortable sleeping accommodation for five adults, not bad going for a boat of 26 feet.

### Summary

Overall the Gazelle 26 shapes up as a potentially good cruiser/racer. It has the feel of a maxi in terms of performance and roominess but is still small enough for quick afternoon sails and for a couple without extra crew.

The boat is strongly built with a hull of woven rovings, chopped strand mat and coremat. The deck has an Airex core and



**Strong wind running is Gazelle's forte. Australian version has transom planing boards as standard.**

adds considerably to the strength through its cambered shape.

As we found during our test, the boat is easily launched in quite shallow water. The trailer has an inverted Vee back section which 'captures the bow' when the boat is being retrieved.

The Gazelle 26 has the potential of becoming a good one-design class especially given the fact that it's already a 140-strong class in New Zealand. Rae hopes that within two years he will be able to organise interdominion championships.

### Specifications

Length.....	7.73m
LWL.....	6.77m
Beam.....	2.48m
Draft.....	38-144 cm
Dry weight.....	1120 kg
Ballast in fin.....	420 kg
Sail area: mainsail.....	14 m <sup>2</sup>
jib.....	10.2 m <sup>2</sup>

Importer/distributor: Gazelle Yacht Sales, Mona Vale NSW.