

## SOFT TOP YACHT



# FOR TROPIC KNIGHTS

Designed in New Zealand and built in Australia, the Tropic 520 trailer sailer offers something different: open cabintop and very strong GRP construction. PAUL HOPKINS sailed her on NSW's Tuggerah Lakes.

NEW ZEALAND HAS A POPULAR TRAILER SAILER called the Monarch 17. It was designed by Alan Wright, Kiwiland's leading designer of cruising yachts and is looked upon as a pretty good seaboat. About 140 Monarchs have been built in New Zealand — so it must have something.

Tasman Yachts (NZ) build the Monarch 17 in New Zealand. Tropic Trailer Yachts Pty Ltd, 161 Railway Crescent, Lisarow, 2251, build it in Australia — and call it the Tropic 520. At writing, about 20 Tropic 520s have been sold to Brisbane and Gosford sailors.

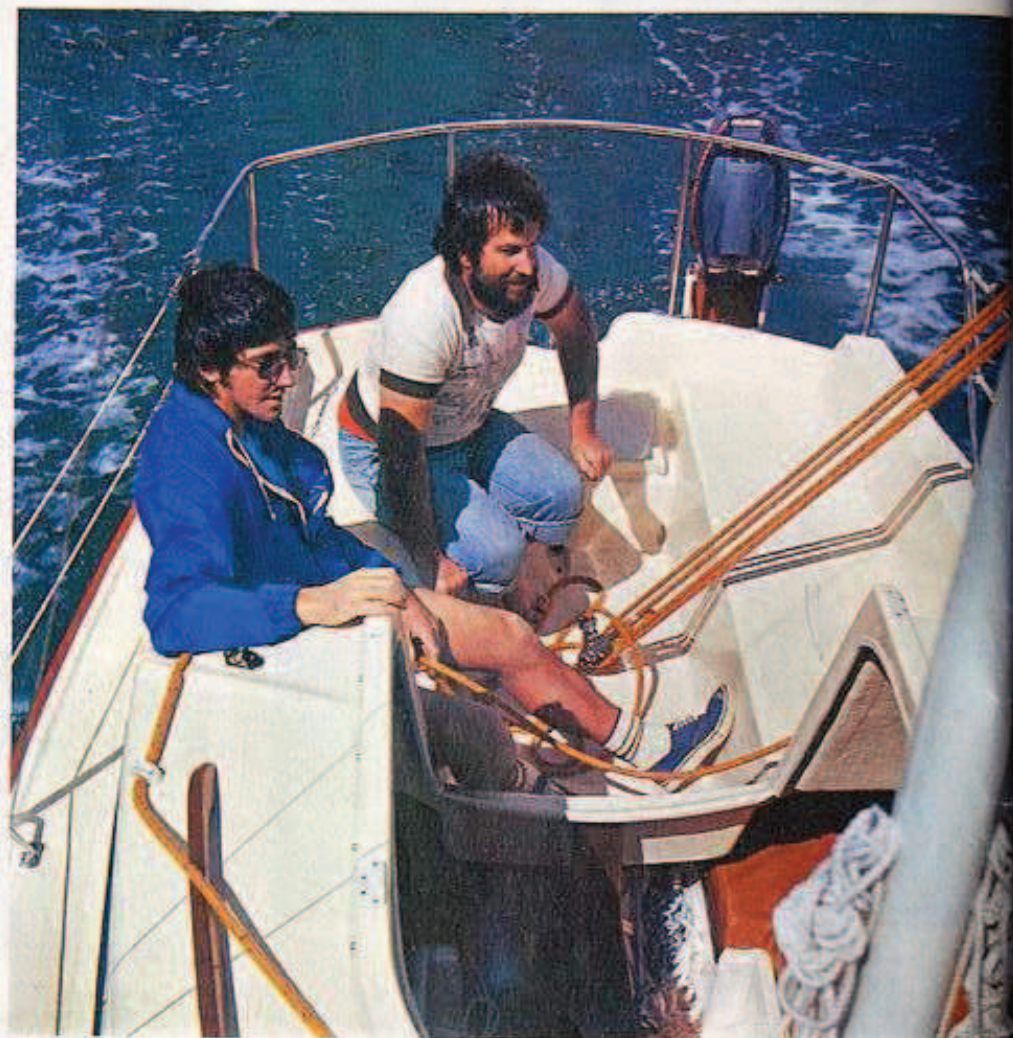
Phil Kershler is the man behind Tropic Yachts. Gwlyn Jones was the man behind Tasman Yachts (NZ) until he sold out and moved to Australia. Now Phil and Gwlyn work together on the three Tropics — Tropic 520, Tropic 15 and Tropic 20. The Tropic 15 is new while the Tropic 20 is known in New Zealand as the Tasman 20. This issue we'll get to know the 520.

We saw our first Tropic 520 at the 1977 Sydney Boat Show and were impressed by its heavy construction. There are two reasons for its ruggedness: Phil Kershler and Gwlyn Jones. Both are long-time GRP moulders and don't believe in lightweight GRP hulls.

"People think they can build a GRP hull the same thickness they built the same hull in plywood," Phil said. "But you can't because plywood is much stronger for a given thickness. Glass must be stiff — a builder can't afford to have a flexible glass hull as it will eventually give trouble."

Phil was a contract moulder for six years before going into his Tropic Trailer Yachts business. He did the Nordic cruisers for years and has a total of 12 years in the trade. Like many successful fibreglass builders, he travelled to gain knowledge. He worked in Western Australia for a time and then returned to Sydney to work for Triton Boats.

Gwlyn Jones owned Tasman Yachts



(NZ) for six years and built 400 GRP boats in that time. He has cruised a Monarch 17 up the NZ east coast (North Island) with his family. He says he didn't have a moment's worry and had full confidence in the boat.

He came to Australia "to look the country over" but soon found himself working with Kershler and enjoying the beautiful Gosford-Tuggerah Lakes countryside, away from the rush of the city.

One thing he likes about this country is its opportunities.

"Unless you own your own business back home," he said, "there is no future. You just plod along getting nowhere on wages. In Australia, if you are prepared to work, you can buy your own home, a new car, even a Tropic 520! It's a great country for people who aren't afraid to work."



Supporting stanchion leg indicates thought which went into this heavy TS. Glass work is massive compared with some trailer sailers — Tropic 520 hull weighs 416.7 kg plus 181 kg ballast.





*A little too much rudder needed to jibe the Tropic 520 as she glides down the channel from the launching ramp at The Entrance.*

We test-sailed the Tropic 520 on Tuggerah Lakes, on NSW's central coast. The roads from the factory at Lisarow aren't the best, but Phil's Toyota Crown had no trouble tugging the yacht along on its trailer, with double tie-downs to make sure she stayed put. It's interesting to note that the local Motor Transport people said the Tropic 520 and its trailer can be towed by a Toyota Crown.

The Entrance Aquatic Club ramp, next to the waterside caravan park which fronts Tuggerah Lakes, was our launching site and we had to be careful of overhead wires. The lake has little rise and fall so the ramp is short and steep.

The Tropic 520 went in easily and later came out almost as easily, despite its rather deep cut away skeg. Stepping the mast was a two-man job and some difficulty was experienced with the forestay turnbuckle. For mine, I'd have old fashioned rope lacing. It's quick, safe, strong and easy to replace. Inexpensive too.

Another source of embarrassment was the method of attaching the mainsail to the mast — via nylon slides hanked to the sail. Unless you keep them lubricated with one of the anti-moisture sprays, the slides tend to stick. We've struck this on large yachts, too. In my opinion the mainsail should have a proper bolt rope which slides up the mast track.

(Over the past few years I have compared my own trailer sailer, an RL24, with trailer sailers I've tested. If I can do it easier on my boat, the boat on test gets a below par score on the Hopkins Norm.)

Once rigged and afloat, Phil and Gwlyn sailed the demo boat down the club's channel which is bordered on one

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## TROPIC KNIGHTS

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side by shallows and birds and on the northern side by one of the longest wharfs in NSW. The lake proper offers good sailing conditions to the distance islands to the north where shoal water takes over.

I had hoped to write this test as a cruise/test, but our old friend, Time, beat us again. All I can say about Tuggerah Lakes is that it's pretty shallow, the shores are shallow and weedy, the main lake is good for racing because the shores are low and it chops up pretty rough when it blows.

To get to the lake, turn off the expressway at The Entrance sign, bump your way slowly over narrow, badly-built bullock tracks covered with tar, swing left past The Entrance caravan park, and discover The Entrance Aquatic Club's ramp and wharf.

After launching, sail/motor parallel to the wharf (jetty!) until clear, then go where you please (provided it's 400 metres from shore). Watch the overhead wires when raising your mast; it may be better to launch, motor to a nearby bank, then raise the mast.

I wasn't very impressed by Tuggerah. It's not picturesque in the St Georges Basin/Myall Lakes mould, but the pelicans are friendly. And b-i-g! Perhaps the top end of the lake system is more picturesque. I didn't find out.

### HOW SHE SAILED

The lake is good for racing; I discovered that a "century" ago when I raced my Moth there against Mark Bethwaite and Peter Holmes. Let it be recorded here that I actually beat Holmes but Bethwaite won the race. Little Whizz-kid bleeders they were!

The Tropic 520 sails pretty well. The light to moderate NE breeze gave us a chance to try her to windward, reaching and running.

She tacked easily and had a whisker of weather helm which was almost cured by raising the centreboard slightly. She wasn't rigged for racing, sans boom vang, mainsheet traveller and other go-fasts. But she was rigged for pleasant family cruising.

Jones said the Monarch 17 has done well in NZ racing.

"Performance is slightly better than the TS16s in New Zealand club level racing. One of them finished sixth in the NZ open restricted TS championships; the restricted division doesn't carry kites. She was the second smallest in the fleet and did very well indeed. But I must admit she was sailed by a very good skipper..."

It is hard to believe that the docile — docile she is — Tropic 520 would do a hot Aussie TS16 as TS16s can really burn up the course in certain conditions. That remains to be seen, but the racing potential is there.

Sailing/racing aside, how does this TS



*Huge companionway doesn't have a sliding hatch and opens the cabin to make the boat a type of day sailer. A soft top covers the hatch in wet weather. A GRP hardtop (with washboards) is available. Note board raising line outside companionway. Board weighs only 27.22 kg with 154.24 kg lead ballast for arid of the case.*

stack up against local boats as a family cruiser?

The Careel 18/GTS 17 would be her closest comparisons. Or would they? Perhaps the Princess TS. No, she's about the right size, yet different.

Although I hate to admit it, the Tropic 520 is unlike any trailer sailer I have sailed. It feels like a little yacht (Manta 19) yet sails like a dinghy (Princess). And its accommodation layout is stock standard with vee berths for arid and quarter berths. The quarter

berths, incidentally, give plenty of hip-turning room. A bonus indeed.

That huge open companionway worried me a bit but Jones assured me that hardly a drop of spray found its way into the cabin — even at sea in a bad slop (?).

"The soft top keeps the rain out," he said. "When it's sunny you take the top off and you have an open, airy cabin. A raised fibreglass hard top is available with washboards if the customer doesn't like the soft top. We can get marine insurance which covers this boat in its unlocked lock-up condition."

"There's a boom tent which is easy to fit with the soft top off," Phil Kershler offered. "It allows plenty of air circulation down below — just like

### FACT BOX

**Tropic 520** — strongly built GRP trailer sailer with camping roof. Designed by Alan Wright (NZ). Built in Australia by Tropic Trailer Yachts Pty Ltd, 161 Railway Crescent, Lisarow, 2251 (phone 043-621240). LOA 5.20 m. LWL 4.72 m. Beam 2.18 m. Headroom 1.37 m. Draft 300 mm/1.05 m. Ballast 181 kg. Displacement 589.7 kg. Sail area 15.75 m<sup>2</sup> (sloop). Accommodation — four adults.

**PRICE** — Stage 1 \$2740 (hull, deck, buoyancy tanks fitted, lead and centreplate fitted, mast supports, interior flowcoated, windows cut out, towing eye). Stage II \$3400 (as above plus supply only, mast bow, rudder plates, blade and tiller, handrails, toerails, s/s caps and chainplates, vinyl hatch cover, deck fittings and fastenings. Complete boat \$5200, ready to sail. Price, as tested October 1977 (trailer included) \$6747.



camping. Insect screens can be fitted too.

Although the cabin is fairly standard in layout, the mast supporting "bow" is unusual. It's an inverted "U" laminated from mahogany and white pine and encircles the cabin to notch into side supports. A large stainless steel bolt with plate secures the mast support to the above-deck mast step.

This unusual mast support opens up the cabin and combines with the huge companionway/hatch to give cabin occupants a feeling of being in the open air.

The centreboard case is well aft and doesn't interfere with the cook as he/she works amidships.

I haven't seen a more heavily built GRP trailer sailer. The Tropic 520 should last a lifetime. Finish is excellent, too. The hull is hand-laid with timber glassed in under all cleat positions.

The cockpit floor is balsa core sandwich, as is the foredeck. Both have a very solid feel with little give. (The cockpit floor has two balsa core strips 152 mm wide while the foredeck is made up of 304 mm wide strips of balsa core.)

Flotation is a big selling point. A total of 19 cubic feet of foam is enclosed for'ard and aft. This foam gives full flotation, fully laden.

Another safety factor is the complete safety line system from pulpit to pushpit. Right for'ard the open anchor well ensures that anchor and chain are on hand in emergencies. But there isn't a forecabin hatchway and not much room on the foredeck for a gaggle of kids.

Down below stowage is limited and there's no special place to store wet sails.

Non-skid is very good as is quality of finish. For example, the gunwales are secured at the quarters by stainless steel angles bolted right through the skins.

Rig is about seven-eighth; sails by Bouzaid (NZ). Fixed spreaders keep the mast standing straight with lowers in support. She doesn't carry a backstay.

#### SUMMARY

The Tropic 520 is one of the best built trailer sailers I have sailed. Few powerboats would be as heavily or as well built.

A great deal of thought has gone into

construction and for \$3400 (Stage II) this boat offers excellent value. The handyman can complete the Stage II hull for \$4700 (total) ready to sail. That's a saving of about \$500 over the complete boat stage of \$5200.

The test boat was costed out at \$6747 with trailer. That included bower rail (\$100), bunk cushions (\$227) adjustable outboard motor bracket (\$80), pushpit (\$144), stanchions, lifelines and pelican hooks (\$168), and trailer (\$828). Add about \$500 for a suitable outboard motor.

So far as the open, airy cabin goes, I don't know. It's a departure from the accepted companionway-with-hatch or pop-top and may cause some insurance headaches.

Sailing performance was good and handling was easy. Overall, a simple boat for simple pleasures. Value for money considering the quality glass work involved.

