

Boat test

BlueMotion 550

This new 18-footer is designed to fill a gap in the market for a powerful yet easily tamed boat with lots of fun and minimal hassle, **Rupert Holmes** put her to the test

The BlueMotion 550 boat is radically different to any recent new offering for many years – an 18ft performance craft with a lightly ballasted centreboard and symmetrical spinnaker. However, the 550 has not come from nowhere – it's an adaptation of Keith Callaghan's successful Hazardous Zero-9 Merlin Rocket, a development class that has been honed to near perfection over many decades of innovation and experimentation. The 550 is certainly a boat that looks 'right' and has considerable appeal, both in design and aesthetic terms.

Concept

★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

The aim of the 550 is to provide fast dinghy-like performance for a crew of three to four, without a dinghy's tendency to fall over when the breeze is up. 'I drew the 550 as a boat that would be comfortable and fast with good handling so it would be joy to sail,' says Callaghan, 'I can't think of anything that mimics it.'

The prototype was first shown in public at the RYA Dinghy Show in March, where it

attracted a considerable amount of attention from a variety of sailors. These included experienced and discerning sailors looking for a boat with plenty of performance but minimal hassle, and dinghy sailors looking for a larger boat. Training centres have also expressed interest, thanks to the abundance of cockpit space and the stability of a heavier ballasted centreboard than the performance versions – up to 120kg can be fitted for this purpose.

The hull has marked chines that help stability and the generous 2.2m beam also contributes to sail-carrying ability, but is not so large as to distort the hull shape – the 550 is beautifully balanced. Simon Hipkin and Keith have been experimenting with the amount of ballast added to the lower section of the centreboard, reducing it to just 55kg for our test. The boat is self-righting from 90 degrees and the stability was immediately apparent even before setting sail – with two people standing on the same side of the boat she heeled little more than 10 degrees even with the keel raised.

The hull of the prototype was built of strip cedar/epoxy laminate by Simon Hipkin, with a plywood/epoxy deck plus detailing in sycamore and other hard woods. The result is stunning – an extremely stiff and lightweight structure that looks fantastic and can be expected to retain its strength for several decades. Production boats are available in the same construction, which the builders have dubbed the 'Elite Marque' model. The standard version, however, is polyester foam sandwich, built by Rob White in Brightonlingsea. So far all orders for this version have specified the same wooden decks as the prototype boat we tested, which looks stunning, although an all-glass version will follow.

Deck and rig

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The deck layout is simple, but effective, with cunningham, vang and outhaul led to each side of the boat and the mainsheet on a bridle and the symmetrical spinnaker set from a chute. Production boats will see minor refinements to the alignment of cleats, but overall the layout on the prototype worked well.

The cockpit sole is 100mm above the static waterline, so there is considerable reserve buoyancy under the floor and it's also possible to stow kit here when in day sailing mode. ▶



“Marked chines and generous beam contribute to stability, but it's not so wide as to distort the hull shape”



1 The height of the side deck relative to the cockpit floor makes for comfortable hiking 2 Upwind the 550 remained balanced when heeled, even when in need of a reef 3 A reef in the main would have helped upwind in the conditions 4 The wide cockpit has attracted interest from training centres 5 The 550 has a classic appeal with cedar and sycamore detailing 6 On hoisting the spinnaker, the 550 takes off downwind like a dinghy

PHOTOS: ALL TOM GRUITY



The height of the sole also means the side decks are at a perfect height relative to the cockpit floor for comfortable hiking.

An aluminium rig, as fitted to our test boat, is standard, with carbon available as an option. This offers a saving of 7-10kg, which means further weight can also be shaved

Under sail

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Our test took place from Brightlingsea on the east coast, on a blustery late spring day, with gusts hitting well over 20 knots. After short tacking out of the narrow entrance of the River Colne, we cracked the sheets for a long

ABOVE The boat proved easy to control downwind, even with the powerful gusts experienced during the test

“This was one of the fastest downwind sleigh rides I’ve enjoyed for a long time – big grins were the order of the day”

off the ballast in the centreboard. Mike McNamara developed the sails and joined us for the test. The fat-head mainsail has plenty of roach and is fitted with two reefs. There’s no furler for the jib, on the prototype but this will be offered as an option on the production boat.

fetch out into the Blackwater, with the boat effortlessly planing with an easy-going feel.

Upwind there’s little doubt the boat would have fared better during our test with the one deep reef tucked into the mainsail when sailing close-hauled, however, despite her wide beam, the helm remained perfectly balanced

even when well heeled and a reef would have reduced the fun factor on the fast two-sail reaches and when we had the spinnaker up.

Once out into open water, the westerly breeze was kicking up a short, steep chop against the incoming tide. Bearing away onto a broad reach the 550 accelerated rapidly before we chose a lull in which to bear away to hoist the spinnaker, before heading up again for speed. The boat took off like a dinghy, hitting speeds in the mid to upper teens in an exhilarating sleigh ride.

However, one aspect of her handling was not dinghy-like in these conditions. Even in the strongest puffs there was no hint that we might spin out – there was always bite left in the helm and there was never any sense that the boat would fail to answer to movements of the tiller. As we powered our way offshore any tendency to bury the bow was easy to overcome with small movements of the helm, which remained light with surprisingly low effort needed. ▣



Despite the boat's compact size this was one of the fastest sleigh rides I've enjoyed in a long time and big grins were the order of the day for the three of us on board. It's a testament to her design that the 550 felt in full control throughout, even in the strongest gusts and at speeds of close to 20 knots according to the GPS of our photo boat. I'm normally a fan of twin rudder boats, but with the 550 this is simply not necessary, even in boisterous conditions, and would only add weight and complexity.

Verdict

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The BlueMotion 550 achieves exactly what it sets out to do – it's a boat that will delight the most experienced of sailors, even without the benefit of the optional carbon rig, yet also offers thrills without spills for family sailing. The choice of ballast options will also help to tailor each boat to her intended use.

This is clearly a boat that will appeal both

ABOVE Handling felt secure, and never at risk of spinning out

to big boat sailors wanting to change to a boat with minimal hassle of ownership, as well as to dinghy sailors looking for something a little larger and more comfortable that can still be easily towed behind a medium size car. It's intended to develop one-design class rules that would give the potential for very exciting class racing. **□**

COMPARISONS



SB20

Top-level racing in an asymmetric lifting keel boat with plenty of fun factor, but lacks the modern classic style of the BM 550.

LOA	6.2m
Displacement	685kg
Draught (keel down)	1.5m
Mainsail	18sq m
Jib	9.3sq m
Spinnaker	46sq m



National 18

Large three person restricted dinghy class. Continues to attract healthy fleets for national championships, but doesn't benefit from the BM 550's ballast.

LOA	5.49m
Beam	2.36m
Displacement	200kg
Mainsail	15.32sq m
Jib	6sq m
Spinnaker	17.5sq m

ANSWER BACK

From: Andrew Ladds, BlueMotion Yachts

Firstly we would like to take this opportunity to thank Rupert and the team for such a positive report, which clearly highlights the boat's many strengths and accurately describes its place in the market.

The BlueMotion 550 can be easily launched from its purpose-built road trailer and recovered by its crew of two or three people, but without the usual strenuous effort associated with bigger day boats. Likewise, the crew can easily rig the mast, tension it and be ready for sailing within 30 minutes from arrival at the chosen venue.

Following the healthy demand for individual test sails recorded at the RYA Dinghy Show in March, BlueMotion Yachts will be staging these initial events during June, July and August at Chichester Harbour, Grafham Water and Brightlingsea, Essex. These sessions will enable potential owners to put the boat through its paces and enjoy the 550 experience.

Meanwhile, the BlueMotion team will be planning the production of the BlueMotion 600, a big brother to the 550, but with a modest and elegant cabin and a couple of bunks. www.foundryreach.co.uk/Yacht-Sales.asp