

Tidelines

The water is always greener ...

Electric boats are not new but their popularity could easily soar, writes **David Lockwood**.

A CARPET of jellyfish drifts nonchalantly through the limpid midwinter water in Middle Harbour, floating like hot-air balloons through the ether. Fish swim lazily around the rocks that, through my polarised sunglasses, contrast with the white-sand patches as we trace the oyster-encrusted foreshores. And three comarons dry their wings in the morning sun, unmoved as we ghost past their perch atop a long-dead log. Yet the greatest endorsement for electric boating comes from the cute little penguin we observe chasing sprats in Castle Cove. Our feathered friend, who is rather portly, is unperturbed by our silent boat, allowing for a close encounter and some treasured snaps.

The first I knew of the stealthy Duffy 16 electric boat was when Steven Mullie from Eco Boats Australia ambushed our 42-footer swinging on a mooring in Sugarloaf Bay. An electric boat buff of Dutch extraction, Mullie

will tell you Australia is 20 years behind Europe when it comes to electric boating. In Holland you can't get a licence to operate a commercial boat unless it has an electric motor these days. Some 20 per cent of all boats sold there are powered the silent way.

Yet this electric boating experience is special for other reasons. In a flurry of foam and fuel, I have been blasting around Sydney Harbour aboard six high-powered cruisers for three consecutive days following the Sydney International Boat Show. The contrasts couldn't be greater. The biggest boat I drove, with twin 1500hp engines for 30-knot cruise speed, used 530 litres of diesel an hour. Our electric boat, with a top speed of 5-6 knots, costs less than \$1 to recharge.

"Speed is not the goal. It's not about getting from A to B. The journey itself is the purpose," Mullie explains before that becomes apparent from our impending two-hour cruise around upper Middle Harbour with my crewmate Katherine and our toddler Summer, who subsequently falls asleep to the sound of water caressing the hull.

The Duffy 16 takes you back to the core reason for boating, that is, to relax, commune with nature and gab about at a leisurely pace. The boat pictured is one of eight models from 14-24 foot built by the eponymous California yard started by Marshall "Duffy" Duffield in the early 1970s. Some



California dreaming ... relax in the Duffy 16 electric launch, which is about the journey, not the time it takes; (left) the interior. Photo: David Lockwood

6000 of the fetching launches (and pontoon boats) have been sold around the world.

Among Duffy's biggest fans are well-heeled Americans with waterfront homes who use the launches as commuter craft, cocktail cruisers in which to chill at sunset and as a means of showing their care about the environment. In Newport Harbour, there are more than 1000 of them gadding about the go-slow waterways. Harbourside eateries offer valet parking, with a bellboy who docks your Duffy and connects it to shore power while you recharge in the restaurant.

With zero emissions, few moving parts, virtually no noise, terrific ease of operation and incredible manoeuvrability, boats like the Duffy 16 are the boating future in Mullie's eyes. He has formed the Electric Boat Association (www.electricboats.org.au) and says the time is right for some electric-boating infrastructure on Sydney Harbour - pontoons where you can plug and play ashore. Rebates, subsidies and/or free docking could apply in the inner city as has been mooted for hybrid cars.

Back to Sugarloaf Bay. The quaint Duffy 16 is tied astern, looking something like a surfer, if not a captain's launch. It has optional heritage-green hull sides, clear side curtains for weather protection and a cue fill around its canvas top. Once you experience the 16-foot Duffy you will develop an appreciation for electric boating.

Mullie has the Duffy 16 demonstrator available for hire from Northbridge Marina from \$180 for 2½ hours. You can take up to eight people - it's the cheapest hire boat on the harbour - and no licence is required.

The boat has a built-in icebox, a sound system, and lots of comfy lounging in what is a very social setting. The fibreglass hull draws about 0.6 metres, while a half-length keel protects the patented Power Rudder system with four-blade propeller should you hit a sandbank. The combination rudder and prop is steerable. Turn the wheel and you alter the directional thrust of the engine. In a full-lock turn to port, the boat turns on its length, allowing you to slot into the tightest berth. In reverse, there is some prop walking evident but the boat is nothing if not nimble.

As for recharging, the rule of thumb is one hour of operation equals one hour hooked up to mains power. You can add solar panels to extend the cruising range. A "fuel" gauge on the dash shows battery life and the needle

dips as you apply the power. At 3-4 knots you can cruise for eight hours. At 5-6 knots top speed you get about four hours running from the six no-maintenance 6V batteries (linked in series for 36V). The batteries have a three-year warranty.

If the boat is kept in the water, antifouling of the hull is virtually the extent of annual maintenance. The electric motors rarely need servicing and come with a lifetime warranty. The Duffy 16 starts at about \$48,000 and the hull, canopy and fittings have a five-year warranty.

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SEEKING a sun-drenched balthole that isn't rocked by boat wash, Sydney's savvy pleasure boaters have been heading for Middle Harbour. Without the summer wakeboarding set, it's been delightful just hanging out at anchor among the smiling crowd. The mood is buoyant, with raft-ups of like-minded crews lunching on deck and sleeping over in Sugarloaf and Bantry bays. Head further upstream and renovated Roseville Bridge Marina now boasts accommodating visitor's berths. Do a big breakfast or long lunch ashore at Echoes cafe. Midwinter, if you can call it that, Middle Harbour really is a boating mecca.

Besides the little penguins, there have been some huge bottle-nosed dolphins swimming in the harbour. These aren't your average Flippers but two metres plus, presumably male models. Of course, there are strict rules of engagement for skippers around dolphins: you have to slow down when you're within 150 metres of them, and not approach from behind or walk ahead to a bushy pod. Laughingly, you aren't permitted to go within 50m of dolphins. Try telling that to our underwater friends who like nothing better than a good frolic on the bow wave while rounding Middle Head.

Despite the well-publicised global financial crisis, organisers of this month's Hamilton Island Race Week are forecasting the fleet could top the 200 mark when sailing gets under way on August 22. "We would have been happy with a fleet of 150, especially in the wake of some tough financial times. But no, after last year's hugely successful 25th anniversary Race Week, the sailors have decided to come back once more. I guess it's because we deliver the complete package - outstanding racing around deserted islands in a tropical

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environment, spectacular scenery, a wide-ranging social agenda, and you're here at the venue the moment you step off the jet," said Hamilton Island's chief executive and world champion yachtsman, Glenn Bourke.

One of the fun factors that will again be part of Race Week this year is the Prix d'Elegance, which will be judged as the fleet departs the harbour at Hamilton Island for racing on August 28. It is open to all yachts that are competing, and there will be two categories: The Best Presented Yacht and Crew, with the yacht in first-class trim and the crew in matching crew uniforms, and the Best Fun-Themed Yacht and Crew, where the sailors dress up their yachts and let their imaginations run wild. All part of the revelry at Race Week.

In a bid to improve water safety and awareness, NSW Maritime and Coastalwatch have launched a new online alert system for NSW coastal waters. The Maritime Alert service is delivered free of charge to subscribers throughout the one-year trial, and provides near-shore forecasts, marine forecasts, official sunrise and sunset times, tide heights and tides, and a link to the time lags for tides along the coast.

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It's official: visitors to this year's Sydney International Boat Show were up on last year, with 1000 more people attending.

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