Welcome To Tomorrow

Three daring builders are changing the face of powerboating.

As I write this, the price of oil has just dipped below $60 a barrel, a precipitous decline from six months ago when it was double that. Whether the price stays there, drops, or goes back through the roof is a fool's question. Indeed, smart folk no longer try to fathom its gyrations. By the time that you're reading this, you could be paying more for Evian than Exxon.

You could, but the smart money is on a move in the opposite direction, at least in the long term. As Warren Buffet sagely pointed out (channeling Will Rogers' dictum on real estate), they aren't making any more oil. Drill-baby-drillers not withstanding, it's a finite resource that by definition will get scarcer and finally go away. Anyone who denies that no doubt also denies a connection between the burning of fossil fuels and the warming of the planet. Assuming he or she believes the planet *is* warming. But in both cases, the evidence argues otherwise.

All this explains why we've focused this, our annual engines issue, on alternative marine propulsion systems that aim to reduce their environmental impact. Inside we present three groundbreaking boats: the Sea Ray 260 Sundancer Hybrid, the Island Pilot DSe 12m, and the Mochi 23m Long Range. Each is a fledgling first step on the journey to a practical low- or non-pollution powerboat, and each represents a different strategy. Sea Ray, ever the mass producer, has basically taken an existing model and powered it with the Steyr Hybrid Drive, itself a first step in the quest for a practical hybrid marine propulsion system.

The DSe uses two Steyr diesels and adds an efficient catamaran-hull design and 6-kW solar array to recharge its large battery bank. Of the three, it is by far the most radical and therefore riskiest solution. The brains behind the DSe, Reuben Trane, is a mad scientist sort of guy, as evidenced by his iconoclastic but nevertheless successful Island Pilot. I like to think of Trane as powerboating's answer to Buckminster Fuller.

The Mochi falls somewhere in between. She also has a super-efficient (but monohull) running bottom and a battery-diesel hybrid system but no photovoltaic array. Her look is definitely long-range cruiser, eye-grabbing but by no means head-snapping like the DSe's.

Three boats, three different solutions, one goal: to drag the boating industry into the 21st century. As you'll note when you read about them, each has its flaws. That happens when you're out in front, exploring new territory. (The same can be said of Azimut's fuel-cell genset, a working prototype we covered last year.) But each is to be admired and applauded for going where no boatbuilder has gone before. More praiseworthy is the fact that each has brought a new level of excitement and interest to powerboating and proved that it is possible to be an environmentally responsible boater and not have a bunch of cloth hanging from a big stick.

Capt. Richard Thiel
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