

NEW BOAT TEST

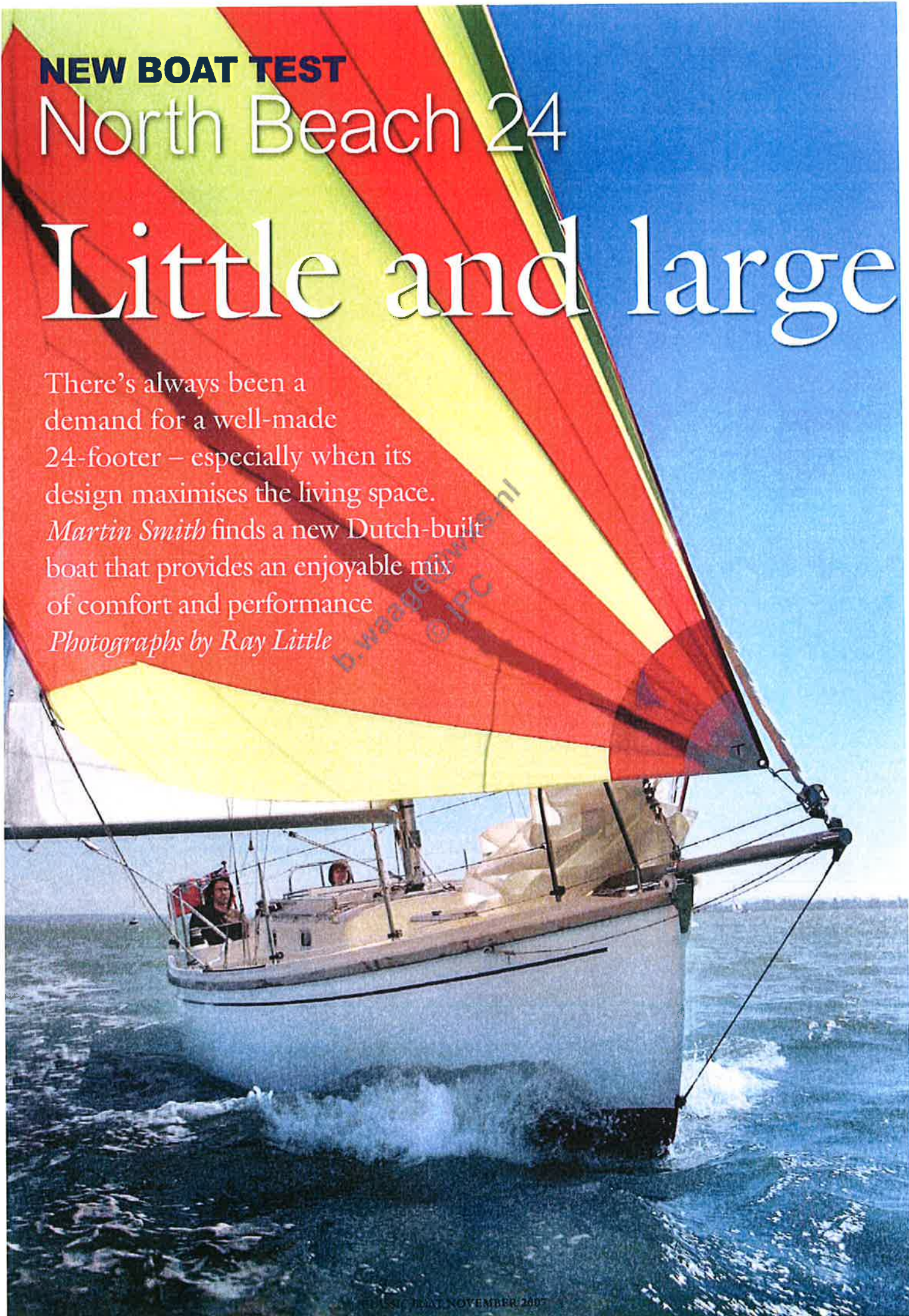
North Beach 24

Little and large

There's always been a demand for a well-made 24-footer – especially when its design maximises the living space.

Martin Smith finds a new Dutch-built boat that provides an enjoyable mix of comfort and performance

Photographs by Ray Little



SAILING

"With 1½ tons of lead in her keel, she's good in fresh winds and up"



In a world where mooring costs are increasing year-on-year, it seems odd that the length of the average boat is getting greater still. It may be a sign of today's decadent times, but back in the 1970s there seemed to be no end of cruising boats, or family sailers, held down around the 25ft (7.6m) mark. In fact, this reviewer began sailing 20 years ago in an ageing bilge-keeled Kingfisher 20, bumping around Chichester Harbour.

Now all of the sales literature being spewed from the media machines seems to be plugging performance-based boats of 35ft (10.7m) plus, with 50-footers (15m or so) becoming increasingly common.

The successes of the various national and international racing circuits have a lot to do with it and, while trying to avoid the obvious equation with virility, length does equal speed. But with technology in many other areas of our lives today pushing towards lightness, compactness and ease of

use, you'd think that putting those attributes into making a modern, useable small boat would excite the more bold manufacturers. Well, that's what Dutch company North Beach thought when its owner, Jan Derks came up with the idea for the North Beach 24.

By all accounts, Jan is a big lad, and his brief to designer Frans Cobelens required that the boat be comfortable for Jan himself to move about on, the premise being that if the boss was comfortable in such a small boat, most other people would be, too. And it's come off very well, as we found out on an early spring day this year.

Sat on her pontoon mooring in Hamble, this as-yet-unnamed North Beach 24, owned by North Beach sales agents Andy Cunningham and Carl Wilcock, looks a practical and attractive craft; certainly not diminutive. Her shapely transom, discreet coachroof – truncated just forward of the mast – and cutter rig show a nod to the

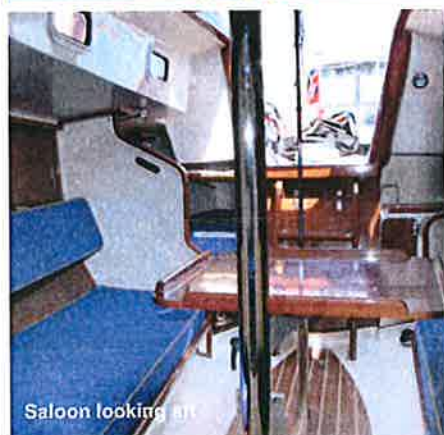
older school of boat design, while beneath the water she has a shallow-draught, long lead keel, encased in stainless steel and augmented by a hinge-down centre-plate.

Her underwater hull profile, too, is definitely not of the all-out modern school, having some decent, though not deep, vee sections. She's ostensibly a creek crawler, designed with the Dutch inland waterways in mind – hence her shallow draught. Even so, some owners of the 40 or so North Beaches produced to date attest that at sea she can hold her own in heavier weather.

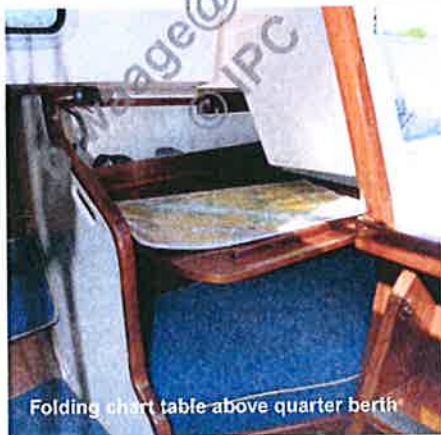
Keith Gems, owner of *Jan van Gent*, sail number 10, has put more than 3,000 miles on the log of his North Beach 24 since 2002, cruising to and from his base in Christchurch, Hampshire. Keith has taken *Jan Van Gent* on trips to Ireland, Southern Brittany, the Isles of Scilly and the Channel Islands – not to mention her delivery trip from Holland – and has seen more weather than most; he says of the boat, "with a ton



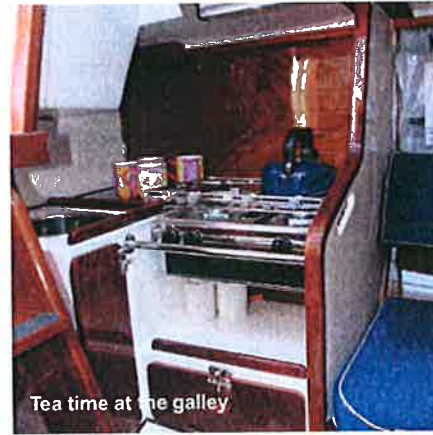
DOWN BELOW
The saloon table can swivel and be raised up the post to beneath the coach roof. Step-through access to the forepeak (with vee berth and heads) has sliding doors



Saloon looking aft



Folding chart table above quarter berth



Tea time at the galley

and a half of lead in her keel, she's good in fresh winds and up." Being constructed in Poland, with finishing off in Holland, allows a good helping of trans-European cost-saving – yet with a CE Category B rating from Lloyds, she is certified for use in the open sea up to and including Beaufort Force 8, so there's plenty of quality too.

The day we set forth for our test sail was heaven-sent to show off the boat's shallow-water capabilities. Andy was keen to utilise the biggest tide of the year so far to get up to some of the least accessible parts of the River Hamble's upper reaches.

Contrary to the forecast, winds were pushing Force 2 to 3, with an uncharacteristically hot April sun, and a more pleasant day for being out in boats could not have been found, but first there was the job of getting as good an assessment of the boat's construction as possible. Soon I found myself comfortably installed deep inside

the port-side cockpit locker, checking out the side engine inspection access hatch, and realising that this in itself was noteworthy for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it's surprising to find a locker large enough to accommodate a reviewer on such a small boat. Secondly, my skin had not been scraped or scratched during my contortions, due to all mouldings being smoothly finished in a flow-coat of resin, which gives the entire boat a real feeling of quality. And, thirdly, the access to the gearbox and cutlass bearing were more than adequate, provided that the contents of the cockpit locker can be easily removed.

Having extricated myself, satisfied, from the bowels of the boat we motored off the berth. There seemed a decided lack of efficiency as the Yanmar 1GM10 engine attempted to shove the boat, and the weed that had accumulated since her last scrub in February, against a flooding tide. But as

water pressure knocked off the clumps of vegetation, our speed through the water increased and she became far sprightlier.

Andy busied himself preparing sail, as I settled down, spine wedged comfortably against a well-shaped coaming, to get to grips with a helm I was loath to relinquish all day. From the cockpit it is difficult to perceive that this is just a 24ft (7.3m) boat. There is as much working space as in many boats of greater dimensions, and even with three adults in-situ later in the day, it did not feel tight. It's a testament to her designer that this feeling of being on a bigger boat is carried on throughout a day aboard the North Beach 24.

The elements of careful design are most clearly seen below decks. Going down the sturdy set of mahogany steps, a bright and comfortable-looking saloon-cum-galley-cum-navigation area greets one, and all these aspects work surprisingly well together, though not all at once. The chart table slides out from a hidey-hole above

"this feeling of being on a bigger boat carried on"



DECK

The square-fronted coachroof draws on traditional lines and leaves good deck area

THE COCKPIT

Left and below can be turned into a picnic area with storage for a hamper



the quarter berth on the starboard side and is big enough to take a folio-sized chart, while the corresponding space to port, up against the aft end of the coachroof, is taken up by the galley area.

Though there is more headroom than on many boats of this size, it's a welcome relief while standing in either of these two areas to be able to get fully upright with head and shoulders protruding above decks through the large hatch.

Ergonomically the small galley works well, as it's easy to wedge hips or legs into the right-angle corner for support. For cooking there's a twin-burner gas hob and integral grill, while for washing up, there is a small, round, stainless sink. The internal construction is based on a separate GRP moulding, meaning that keeping everything clean should be easy, with no nasty bonded corners in which dirt can collect.

Moving forward to the saloon proper, the twin settee berths, 6ft 7in (2m) long on the starboard side, 6ft 3in (1.9m) to

port, are comfortable – and greater width can be gained while sleeping by hinging up the padded back rests over the outboard shelves behind. The two most noticeable features of the saloon are a floor-to-ceiling mast compression post and a centreplate-lifting mechanism. These two stainless-steel constructions break up the area substantially and would take a little getting used to in port, but they also act as good hand-holds while at sea.

It's interesting to note that the centreplate-lifting tackle is attached to the plate via a rigid rod, so there is at least a chance of forcing the plate down should it get stuck in the raised position. All the welding and fabrication of the steelwork appears to be of high standard, welds being cleaned and ground down before everything is finished in a high polish. The mast compression post doubles as the support for the dining table, which in turn can also be fitted in the cockpit.

“another neat piece of design that takes a little getting used to”

Right forward is a vee-berth cabin that incorporates a flushing loo beneath the vee fill-in piece. The bunk is 6ft (1.8m) at its longest, so is suitable for accommodating a single adult or a couple of kids. Though sleeping above the heads is an arrangement that will not suit every situation, it is a neat way of providing a large, comfortable loo area in such a small boat, and there's a big Perspex hatch overhead for the necessary, ah, ventilation.

From the saloon this area is accessed via a step-through cutout in the bulkhead, which can be closed off by sliding doors. It's another neat piece of design that takes a little getting used to at first, but once accepted, the space-saving advantages of avoiding floor-to-ceiling traditional doors become clear.

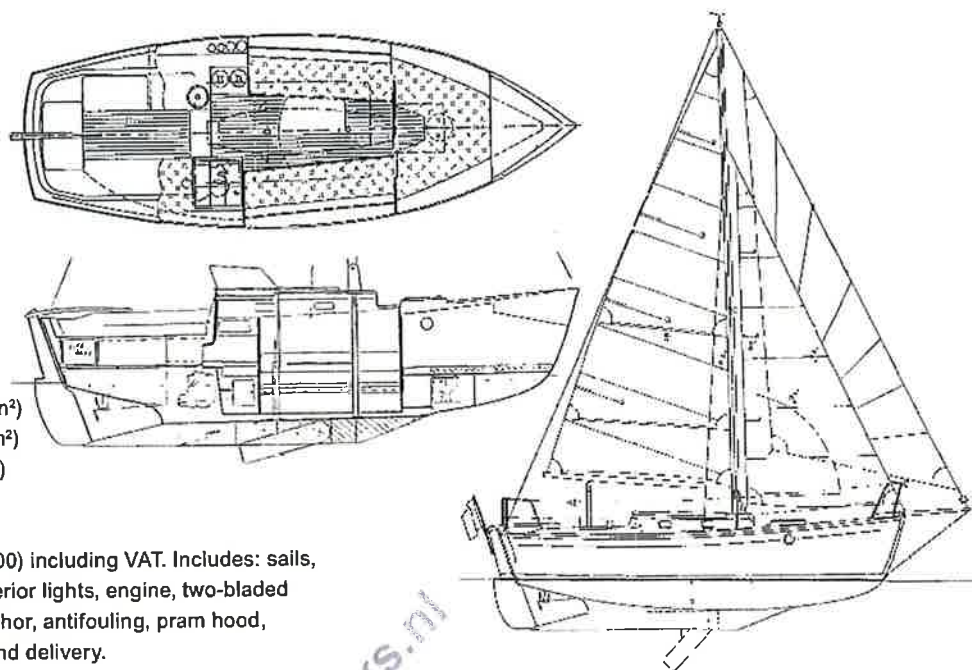
Back on deck Andy suggested that, as we had so much water around and we drew so little, the moorings at Ashlett Creek would make a delightful lunch venue, so

North Beach 24

LOA 28ft 6in (8.7m)
 LOD 24ft (7.3m)
 LWL 21ft 6in (6.6m)
 Beam 8ft 3in (2.5m)
 Draught plate up 2ft 9in (0.9m)
 plate down 5ft 3in (1.6m)
 Maximum displacement 3550kg
 Ballast 1300kg

Sail areas

Total area 358sqft (33.3m²)
 Main (2 reef points) 152sqft (14.2m²)
 Staysail (self tacking) 87sqft (8.1m²)
 Yankee (on furler) 118sqft (11.0m²)



Price (basic boat) £47,586 (€69,000) including VAT. Includes: sails, warps and fenders, nav lights, interior lights, engine, two-bladed prop. Excludes marine heads, anchor, antifouling, pram hood, mast raising kit, second battery and delivery.



What the owner says

Rob Ballantyne, owner of *Marguerita II*, had had his eye on the North Beach 24 since 2004, when he saw it on the internet. "I've always been an admirer of traditionally designed Dutch yachts, and when I saw the North Beach, it looked like what I was looking for to use on the East Coast. The trouble was that back then there wasn't a UK agent. When I heard that Andy Cunningham was selling the boat down in Hamble, I went down to have a look, and as soon as I sat on her I knew that she was what I wanted. I do some single-handed sailing and don't want to be restricted by a big boat, so I've looked at many of the small boats around at present. I liked the North Beach because, with its wide side decks and decent height lifelines, it feels like a much larger boat."

we set a new course and headed around the end of the refinery jetty. At the time I wasn't aware of the labyrinthine nature of the channel to Ashlett creek, but before long I found myself trusting to Andy's pilotage as we dodged around, tacking into a breeze while trying to spot the next in the string of stakes and rather odd buoys. With no need to worry about running backstays, and with the single sheet of the self-tacking headsail cleated off in its jammer, flipping from tack to tack was almost as relaxed as on any modern sloop. The comfort of knowing that the motorboat we were using as a photography platform might come and tug us off if we inadvertently grounded at the top of the highest tide for some time proved misplaced as, when coming to find us later, it went aground.

Ashlett proved every bit as comfortable and peaceful as predicted and more than justified the North Beach small-boat philosophy. Lunch on board, for Andy and

myself, was a drawn-out affair as the photography launch extricated itself from the mud banks and attempted to find the correct, and amply deep, channel, but eventually we were all reunited.

The sail back out proved no less intimidating, with banks of grass now showing above the dropping waters, but the North Beach coped ably in the narrow channel, before showing a fine turn of speed once the red and yellow cruising chute was raised. The sail that we tested was, in fact, borrowed from a Ranger 24, but a similar one is soon to be offered as an option.

Back in the marina, we stowed the retractable bowsprit, cutting the chargeable length by over a metre. Andy took us to see the newly delivered *Marguerita II*, sail number 42, and owned by Medway-based Robert Ballantyne. She was up on a cradle, so gave a good chance for some extended inspection. Andy was keen to

show us the kind of amendments that can be made to suit individual owners. Rob has opted for the more powerful twin cylinder Yanmar engine and has had a better-designed bow roller fitted. It was also interesting to see her with her mast down, which highlighted the ease with which dropping it can be carried out: the tops of the chainplates are aligned with the mast hinge, so all lateral rigging remains tensioned as the mast is dropped.

In all, the North Beach 24 proved to be an extremely enjoyable and surprisingly nimble craft and one that, through the use of careful design and the incorporation of up-to-date technologies, not to mention good common sense, gets close to crossing the bridge between big and small boats. If the heyday of small cruisers was the 1970s, then this ex-owner of a Kingfisher 20 was left feeling slightly irked that today's small-boat sailors are able to enjoy their time with such performance and comfort as offered by a North Beach 24.

"a fine turn of speed with the cruising chute"