



This article is provided courtesy of *BlueWater Boats & Sportsfishing* magazine. It originally appeared in Issue 111, 2015.

BlueWater
Boats and Sportsfishing
www.bluewatermag.com.au

Sophisticated VERSATILITY

MODA EXPRESS 8M BRIDGE DECK



Combining advanced metalworking skills with an innovative design and the versatility of plate-aluminium, Moda Marine's custom-built mini-gameboat offers serious bluewater potential in an 8-metre trailerable hull, as Warren Steptoe discovers on a test run off southern Queensland.

Many dedicated bluewater anglers live in places where local roads, ramps or shorelines are somewhat unfriendly towards fibreglass (GRP) boats. For this reason a plate-aluminium boat can be an extremely attractive choice.

For those with precise views on how they want their boat to be set up, plate-aluminium construction is an excellent choice. Of all the boat-building mediums, when it comes to a custom build, there's no argument that plate aluminium provides a mighty compelling blend of customisable versatility and cost-effectiveness.

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Above: Moda has crammed an amazing number of features into what is really only a small gameboat. There's even space for a second bunk beneath the raised helm station – if needed.

Below: Featuring a centre helm layout, the dash is also a pretty impressive set-up for an eight-metre boat.

OUTSTANDING HULL SHAPE

On the downside, few plate-aluminium hulls ride anywhere near as softly or as dryly across rough water as a well-designed fibreglass boat. However, that doesn't necessarily mean all GRP hulls are so superior, or for that matter all plate aluminium ones are inferior. Put simply, the complex hull bottom (and topsides) shapes necessary to create a soft and dry riding offshore hull shape are easier and cheaper to achieve by laminating and moulding a hull from GRP than by fabricating it from a sheet material. While it's easy enough to form into simple hull shapes, it becomes more difficult, complicated, and in turn expensive, to create complex shapes from such material.

When all these factors are weighed up, a plate-aluminium boat remains a popular choice for many bluewater anglers, with its upsides certainly outweighing the negatives.

Special K is a perfect example of why so many people choose plate-aluminium construction. It was built by Moda Marine, a custom boat works located at Clontarf in Brisbane's northern bayside suburbs where Shane Darlington worked to translate the owner's ideas into heavy metal. This is anything but a tinnie.

Although the owner asked not to be named, he is a super-keen bluewater angler who, after weighing up all options, decided on plate-aluminium. Aged in his late 30s, his diverse fishing interests range from heavy-tackle marlin fishing in north Queensland to poking around the southern regions of the State pursuing highly specialised fly fishing.

SOLID CONSTRUCTION

The hull bottom, transom and belowdecks, as well as the keel and stringer system, are 6mm-thick 5083 structural aluminium. The hull sides and decks, with the exception of the bridge deck, are 4mm-thick 5083 structural aluminium. In order to keep the centre of gravity as low as possible, the cabin, console and bridge-deck are 3mm material. It all adds up to a dry hull weight of 2100kg (2.1 tonnes), and that's before attaching an engine or filling up any fluids!

Moda Marine rate their eight-metre Express bridge-deck hull for between 300 and 400hp, with a maximum engine weight of 600kg. To tow, they specify a 3.5 to 4-tonne trailer, meaning a small truck or big 4WD such as a V8 LandCruiser. However, no doubt some owners would elect not to trailer it, instead opting for a marina berth or mooring at their residence.

I suspect a few *BlueWater* readers may have looked at the photo spread and not immediately realised that the eight-metre Moda was an aluminium boat at all. In the flesh it looks even better. Moda's hipped sheer line and widely flared bows achieve everything the Carolina concept was invented for.

At the transom the deadrise angle is still 21 degrees, and would once have been termed a 'deep vee'. With such a wide bow flare allowing a notably fine forefoot – for any hull, let alone an aluminium one – in effect it could still be termed as such. While the difficulties of forming complex shapes from sheet aluminium are set in proverbial stone, this boat's exaggerated flare means the bows can be much finer than would otherwise be possible.

SUPERIOR WORKMANSHIP

Speaking from 30 years' experience working sheet metal myself, I can tell you there's some pretty sophisticated engineering in those flared bows, not to mention some highly skilled tradesmanship! The way this boat is finished is a real delight.

I'd like to think I've got a discerning eye and *Special K* didn't let me down. The boatbuilders can be very proud of what they have achieved. The metalwork is faultless, the paintwork impeccable and the upholstery and trim work spot on. Shane was naturally tight-lipped about how the bow flare was achieved, but whichever way you look at her, *Special K* is a tribute to the metal shipwright's art.

Above: As *Special K's* owner often fishes solo, he's set-up his boat for single-handed fishing.

Below: Moda upholster and carpet the cabin sides, dramatically reducing noise from the aluminium hull. The attention to detail makes this boat stand out as much as any of its many other excellent features.



"The boatbuilders can be very proud of what they have achieved."



Special K's cockpit is everything a bluewater gameboat's workspace should be, with tackle storage, rigging bench and a pair of fishboxes belowdecks. The deck is Seadeck, a composite material offering exceptional comfort and non-skid performance.

EASY SINGLE-HANDED LAUNCHING

Before heading out onto northern Moreton Bay for the *BlueWater* photo shoot, *Special K's* owner detached the tie-down straps and set up the six-metre Reelax outriggers. He then backed the rig down the ramp in Scarborough Boat Harbour solo, insisting he would be fine as he often fishes alone.

It was then that I first noticed the Boatcatch lock and release system fitted to *Special K's* trailer. From the helm our solo angler simply leant over, pulled a length of black cord – fixed to a heavy-duty device where most boats have a bow eye – and the boat released itself and eased off the trailer into the water. Later, when we returned, he drove her onto the trailer and gently nudged her forward until the Boatcatch system locked trailer and boat together with a loud click.

Stoutly constructed of 100% marine-grade stainless steel, the Boatcatch features a positive locking pin set-up instead of the hook and loop seen on nearly every boat trailer. It was my first encounter with a Boatcatch and to call it impressive would be an understatement. It comes in two sizes – for boats up to and over six metres – and is easily found via a Google search.

IMPRESSIVE SPEED

Yet again the weather gods blessed us with a flat, calm day, negating the need to test the eight-metre hull's rough-water handling.

With a 300hp, V6 Suzuki 4-stroke outboard on the transom it was easy to be impressed by the engine's acceleration and conservative fuel consumption, as displayed on a set of Garmin GMI20 LCD modules on the dash. This supported Moda's rating of this hull for motors between 300 and 400hp.

Being from a custom builder, the hull could easily be set up for twin motors if preferred, although the reliability and performance of today's 350 and the recently released 400hp outboard motors means the choice is one that should not be taken lightly.

CUSTOMISING DESIGN

Shane was so happy with how well this particular boat came together he is thinking of offering the configuration as a package deal. Plate-aluminium boatbuilders – or good ones like Moda anyway – usually start out with an established hull design and a set of standard configurations, which can then be customised according to the buyer's individual requirements.

Shane has drawings for starboard helm, centre helm (this boat) and walkaround interior configurations worked around hardtop and open versions, and has already built several variations on these themes over the 8m hull used as the basis of this boat.

Most customers are apparently happy to start with a set of drawings and then customise their boat to suit their needs. Shane has come up with a set of standard specifications to put together a package very similar to the boat seen here, which provides a good starting point for both Moda Marine and their customers to work from.

MINI GAMEBOAT

Special K frequently fishes beyond the edge of the continental shelf off southern Queensland, chasing blue marlin. As the owner typically fishes solo, many small details needed to be taken into account in order to facilitate that.

As the photos demonstrate, both the cockpit and bridge-deck work together to create a very fishing-



friendly workspace that is very much a miniaturised version of how much larger, inboard-powered gamefishing boats function.

It is exactly how a cockpit should be, with comfortable upholstered bolsters around the periphery. These come to just the right height to brace your legs against for hands-free support. Your toes also go in under the cockpit periphery exactly how they should.

A neat little four-rod rocket launcher in the centre of the cockpit, a pair of fishboxes underfoot, as well as a centrally-located livewell in the transom bulkhead complete a cockpit that confirms this boat's functionality as a mini-gameboat.

Above: Moda have set-up the transom and boarding deck for either single or twin-engine installations.

Above right: The high, heavily flared bow adds a great deal of cabin space inside, as well as raising freeboard substantially in an important part of the hull.

SPECIAL COCKPIT DECKING

The decking is a lightweight, high-tech material that is 100% non-slip, regardless of whether fishing barefoot or in deck shoes. It's also particularly comfortable when not wearing shoes, and doesn't heat up in the sun on hot days. *Special K's* deck is a product called Seadeck, which has to be fabricated for each individual application and applied by specially trained operators. I'm regularly encountering Seadeck on boats reviewed for *BlueWater* lately and it never fails to impress.

IMPROVED VISION

The bridge-deck configuration really comes into its own in boats this size. Raising the helm station provides better vision into and over the water, although a flyridge on a boat this size would usually raise its centre of gravity too much and make it top-heavy.

Down in the cabin, the raised helm-deck provides ample space for a second bunk – or a nice size main double bunk if forward cabin space is given over to other purposes. Despite the remarkable space efficiency a bridge-deck layout offers in a boat this size, and the additional cabin space provided by Moda's radically flared bows, an eight-metre hull only has so much room inside.

Special K crams an awful lot of good things into a compact package with full bluewater credentials. Whether it's close to the maximum practical size for a trailerboat or close to the minimum size that could be considered a dead set serious bluewater sportfishing boat becomes a moot point right about there. 🎣

SPEC CHECK



MODA EXPRESS SERIES 8-METRE BRIDGE DECK

HIGHLIGHTS

- All the advantages of a Carolina-style hull – in aluminium.
- Exceptional standard of finish.
- An individual boat from a custom builder that demonstrates exactly why it's worth custom building a boat.

PERFORMANCE

RPM	SPEED (km/h)	FUEL (L/h)
3000	28.9	16.8
3500	34.6	23.1
3800	40.0	29.2
4100	49.2	39.2
6000	70.0	95.7 (Wide-open throttle)

PRICE

Price as tested: \$198,000

Priced from: Packages for this hull start at \$160,000

OPTIONS FITTED

Custom fitout with Boatcatch system, Lenco trim tabs, Reelax Junior outriggers and mounts, Suzuki DF300A, 2 x Garmin GMI 20 display modules, Raymarine Evolution autopilot, Raymarine a128 navigation package, Raymarine P70 display module, Furuno FCV 587 fishfinder.

GENERAL

Material: 5083 structural aluminium

Hull Type: mono hull, Carolina-style

Length: 8 metres

LOA: 8.5 metres

Beam: 2.5 metres

Deadrise: 21 degrees (at transom)

Weight: 2100kg (dry hull only)

CAPACITIES

Maximum rated power: 400hp

Maximum engine weight: 600kg

People: 8

Fuel: 450 litres

Fresh water: optional

Holding tank: optional

ENGINE

Make/model: Suzuki DF300A

Type: DOHC EFI V6 4-stroke

Rated hp: 300

Displacement: 4028cc

Cylinders: 6

Weight: 275kg

Gearbox ratio: 2.08:1

TEST BOAT SUPPLIED BY

Moda Marine

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“As the owner typically fishes solo, many small details needed to be taken into account.”

“The cockpit and bridge deck work together to create a very fishing-friendly workspace.”