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Mercury's Turbine Outboard



SPOOLIN' UP: Merc bolts on a turbine for the U.S. Navy.

Mercury Racing is famous for breaking the rules. The company won't cheat on the racecourse at Rouen, but it will ignore conventional design wisdom. The most recent proof of this is Mercury's new experimental outboard motor. Pistons, connecting rods and crankshaft have all been replaced by a Rolls Royce Allison 250-series gas turbine. It's bolted onto a Mercury Racing 2.5 EFI Offshore center section and laid on top of a Torque Master gearcase. The experimental engine was built in an alliance with Marine Turbine Technologies (MTT). For those who are unfamiliar with the company, MTT is renowned for its turbine expertise.

We recently tested the prototype turbine outboard (320 hp) on a 26-foot aluminum landing craft built by Munson Boat Works. Start-up is exactly like a helicopter. Spin

the turbine with an aircraft starter motor, add fuel and fire, and then wait while it spools up. True to the nature of turbine power, sound levels are high, registering 105 decibels (dB) at idle and 114 dB at wide open throttle. Under way, and at 95 percent power, fuel flow measured a modest 24 gph, which is considerably better than a conventional gasoline outboard. According to MTT's founder, Ted McIntyre, top speed on this particular turbine-powered craft is 40 mph; that's with four crew members and an old-style M151A1 Jeep (not a Hummer) as payload.

This experimental outboard motor was developed in response to a pending requirement of the U.S. Navy that will forbid gasoline onboard its ships. While the Navy is considering diesel direct-injected outboard motors in a variety of makes and models, the MTT/Mercury turbine should be tantalizing. It weighs only 200 pounds—about as much as a 50-hp outboard—and it's narrow enough to pass through the hatch in a submarine's sail. Finally, the turbine outboard has multi-fuel capability (diesel, kerosene and JP4 jet fuel). If the engine does go into production, the cost is estimated at \$40,000. Contact: Mercury Racing, Dept. MB, P.O. Box 1939, Fond du Lac, WI 54935. (920) 929-5000. www.mercurymarine.com. —T.B.

Fool-Proof Docking

Bayliner's new modular production system for motoryachts features a fully vented engine room that isolates noise and fumes so they can't invade the living quarters. We recently inspected the system on the company's new 3488 Command Bridge Motor-yacht and saw how the engine room's liner is molded to the hull, creating a seal that is more watertight and soundproof than conventional installations.

Even more impressive was the new boat's

Integrated Control System (ICS), replete with bow and stern thrusters. ICS allows the helmsman to crab the boat from side to side, or to pivot a full 360 degrees without touching the throttles or shifters. Docking maneuvers that were stressful in the past will now be more akin to parallel-parking a car (and we're assuming you've got that down cold). Bayliner's ICS option costs \$10,995 on the new 3488. For more information, contact: Bayliner, Dept. MB, P.O. Box 9029, Everett, WA 98206. (360) 435-5571. www.bayliner.com. —T.B.



Paper or Plastic?

Next time you buy an outboard motor or sterndrive, you may feel like you're in the checkout line at the supermarket. Only instead of a paper or plastic bag, you'll be offered a choice between a plastic, aluminum or stainless steel propeller.

For the record, plastic propellers are nothing new. I've been using them since 1965 as inexpensive spares. But due to the constant evolution of the species, they now are worth considering as a primary propeller. In fact, contemporary plastic props, also known as composite propellers, perform so well that **Volvo Penta** offers them as options on its sterndrives.

What makes composites so attractive? Unlike aluminum or stainless steel propellers, composites do not corrode, and they don't promote corrosion in the boat or drive leg. Composites are also incredibly impact-resistant. That said, they are not indestructible.

Piranha manufactures good modular composite props. Each prop consists of a hub, a front and aft cap, plus three (or four) identical blades. The blades dovetail into the hub, where they are secured by the end caps. Replacement blades cost about \$10 apiece. Want to test-run a different pitch for sharper acceleration or better fuel economy? Buy a handful of blades and make the swap over the transom. It's that easy.

Another benefit of composite props is low cost. They're priced lower than aluminum props and considerably less than stainless steel wheels. But composite props pay the biggest dividends in durability and maintenance. On the downside, composites lose a mile or two an hour at the top end. If top speed is an issue, stainless is the wise choice.

For more information contact: Piranha Propellers, Dept. MB, 3681 Sacramento St. Suite D, San Luis Obispo, CA 93401. (800) 235-7767. www.piranhapropellers.com. —T.B.