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OCTOBER 2001

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It used to be round and fat and you couldn't throw it very well.

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Riding the new WaveRunner FX140.

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## A Real Jet Boat

BY CLIFF GROMER



PHOTO BY MARK SUGOL

■ New York rush-hour traffic is toiling north on the West Side Highway, threatening to solidify into arthritic gridlock at any moment. But we're in the fast lane breezing along at a rather cool 120 mph. The fast lane in this case isn't alongside the river, but *in* the river. The familiar New York waterfront flashes by at gigaspeed. It's more than fast—it's surreal, like watching a video in fast

### BOATING

forward. What's really mind-boggling is that we're not strapped into some race boat, but a one-of-a-kind pleasure boat with full carpeting, 500-watt, 10-speaker Clarion stereo, and comfy seats.

To the molasses-paced bumper taggers on the highway, we must look like a bullet being fired up the Hudson. We certainly feel like we're riding one. Rear-seat passengers don't receive much benefit from the windshield, and my wife's hair looks like it's being blow-dried by the exhaust blast of a 747. Good thing she took pains to wash and set it before we came aboard.

There are jet boats and there are jet boats. Traditional types use a jet pump drive powered by a conventional reciprocating gasoline engine. Our boat, a production 50-ft. Nortech catamaran hull, uses conventional props—17.5 x 32-in.-pitch

five-blade Mercury stainless steel race units driven by Mercury No. 6 Speedmaster race drives. But instead of being powered by a piston engine that goes *Boing! Boing!* you'll find two Lycoming P53-13 gas turbine engines that go *Hmmm!* Veterans of Huey UH-1H helicopter service, these engines are dynoed at 1600 hp each. Unlike a pure jet engine that uses the thrust of expanding exhaust gas for forward motion, a gas turbine relies on the jet principle of expanding gas directed against the blades on a wheel to produce shaft horsepower.



PHOTO BY CLIFF GROMER

This Lycoming engine is marined by MTT and sells for 130 grand.



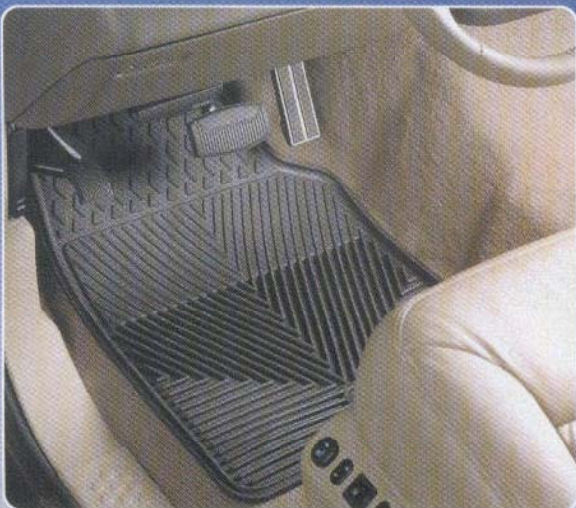
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**Gaffrig marine gauges are calibrated for aircraft engine input.**

The engines are surprisingly quiet at speed and my wife, son and I are able to carry on a conversation at something less than a shout with boat project chief Denny Hejja and engine/boat rigger specialist Ted McIntyre, who occupy the front seats. Hejja, who owns Marine Performance Specialties in Cape Coral, Fla., conceived this craft for its owner, Joe Montano, a race boat enthusiast from Connecticut. McIntyre, who runs Marine Turbine Technologies in Franklin, La., is a turbine guru who has designed and built a number of high-profile turbine projects, including a motorcycle (with a guaranteed top speed of 250-plus mph) for funnyman Jay Leno.

Casting off from the dock, the engines spool up with a whine that's pure music. "I can shoot 6-ft. flames out the exhaust," Hejja chuckles. Like this boat doesn't get enough attention as it is. At docking speeds, each engine produces only 11 hp. This way, the props can be stopped with the engines still spinning via a disc

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## Outdoors

brake on the engines' output shafts. This allows the transmissions to be shifted into Forward or Reverse without killing the engines—there is no clutch. The transmissions, by the way, are SCS units designed to stand up to the rigors of multiengine tractor pulling. Each dry-sump transmission uses a 1.24:1 gear ratio to spin the props at 6700 rpm. The jet whine builds in pitch as we maneuver out of the Liberty State Park marina. McIntyre advances the throttles and we're nailed back in our seats. The whine crescendos and I brace myself for a "Back To The Future" *Wham!*—the year 1954, and a Twin Towerless Manhattan skyline.

"One-twenty," sings out Hejja. There's still 34 miles an hour left in this baby in case some punk in a Cigarette is foolish enough to think he can pass us. Traffic on the Hudson is light. There's a mild chop, but this cat runs smooth—on the bubble, as they say. We're half supported by the blast of rushing air that's compressed in the tunnel between the hulls.

"What's really cool," says Hejja, "is that all those other hot boats in the marina are gulping race gas at over 6 bucks a gallon. We fill up with plain, vanilla diesel for under a buck a gallon." Despite its pedestrian taste at the pump, fuel economy is not a turbine's long suit. The fuel tanks hold 600 gal., but at wide-open throttle those Lycomings are sucking down 260 gal. per hour. Throttle back to a leisurely 120 mph and the engines are content to sip a miserly 160 gal. per hour.

The ride is over much too quickly. Our trip from the marina to the George Washington Bridge and back was consummated with the seeming speed of a service and return at Wimbledon. If Hejja and McIntyre have made one point it's this: Even the most jaded power junkie has to come away from this ride with a grin from ear to ear. **FM**



PHOTO BY CLIFF GRABER