

Change Of *Pace*

The **Sea Ray 260 Sundancer** challenges the “Need for Speed” mantra with an invitation to take it easy.

By **Dave Kelley**



As Ripley used to say, “Believe it or Not”: As the 2005 Sea Ray 260 Sundancer pulls away from the marina’s no-wake zone and heads for the open water of Lake Travis, just outside Austin, Texas, the helmsman

is asked about the engine that is sure to blast us all to near-light speed. “It’s just the base motor,” he says with a shrug. “A MerCruiser 350 Magnum MPI. You can get a bigger engine, but this gets the boat around just fine. Why hurry?”

Sea Ray 260 Sundancer



LOA 28'
Beam 8'6"
Weight 7,500 lbs.
Fuel 84 gal.
Base Price \$82,016
(w/300-hp MerCruiser 350 Magnum MPI Bravo II)
Price As Tested \$110,776
(w/300-hp MerCruiser 350 Magnum MPI Bravo III)
Hull Warranty 10-year structural

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TEST DATA

Performance data was gathered with a 300-hp MerCruiser 350 Magnum MPI Bravo III, two people on board, full gear, full tank of fuel and full tank of fresh water.

Top Speed 34.1 mph
0-30 mph 25.5 seconds
Decibels @ Idle 64 dB-A
Decibels @ 4000 rpm 86 dB-A
Decibels @ WOT (4500 rpm) 88 dB-A

STANDARD FEATURES

Electrically actuated engine room hatch; wet bar w/Corian countertop, sink, stainless-steel faucet, beverage holders, stainless-steel handrail; cherry wood Formica cabinets; SmartCraft Diagnostics including custom instrumentation w/low-blare blue night lighting, Four-In-One Gauge (fuel level, oil pressure, trim, water temperature), speedometer, System Tachometer (water temperature/depth, engine alarms/hourmeter, fuel consumption/usage, trim level, troll control, voltage, digital speed).

OPTIONS

Air conditioner/heater; head system w/direct overboard discharge (VacuFlush); 10.4-inch flip-down LCD TV w/removable DVD player, dockside inlet and antenna; Sport Spoiler; premium cockpit sound system w/upgraded component speakers, amplifiers, subwoofer, and transom stereo remote; cocktail table w/designated storage.

“Why hurry?” That’s the sort of question, especially around boats, that’s usually answered with looks of stunned sorrow, as though listeners can’t believe anyone would actually say such a thing out loud. To ask such a question is to be utterly out of touch with the zeitgeist of the era, where speed doesn’t kill, mate, it thrills. For most, it’s unimaginable that anyone would be satisfied with going less than as fast as humanly pos-



sible at any given moment. Some people, though, take seriously the Zen teaching that it’s the journey that matters, not the destination. People like Jerry Galbraith, the owner of this particular 260 Sundancer.

Galbraith isn’t along on this particular outing, but his presence is everywhere on the boat, including the engine compartment, right alongside that 300-hp MerCruiser 350 Magnum MPI. To be fair, it wasn’t that long ago that a 300-hp engine was considered pretty beefy, but not now, not on a boat this size. In fact, this is the smallest, least-powerful gasoline engine offered on the 260. (There’s a 268-hp Volvo KAD 300 EDC/DP diesel available.) If you’re willing to pay for it, there’s plenty more power available from the factory, all the way up to the 375-hp MerCruiser 496 Magnum with a Bravo III drive.

According to James Johnson of Austin’s Sail & Ski Center (www.sailandski.com), who’s acting as captain in Galbraith’s stead (the owner, wisely, has

asked that Johnson do most of the piloting, and that even highly skilled, highly experienced marine journalists keep their helm time to a minimum), Galbraith has sown most of his wilder marine oats, and is now content to cruise easily from port to port instead of blasting across the lake at full-throttle. “Most people want something a little faster,” Johnson admits, such as the 320-hp, 6.2L MerCruiser MX MPI.

The bigger motor might be worth the money in the eyes of some, but after spending time on board the 260 Sundancer — and, yes, time at the helm under Johnson’s watchful eye — one is hard-pressed to argue against the economy of the 350 Mag Bravo III. With a full tank of fuel (84 gallons, about 470 pounds), a full tank of fresh water (28 gallons, about 232 pounds), two relatively large men, and completely laden with gear, the 260 Sundancer peaks at 34.1 mph as measured by radar (according to Sea Ray, the 260 Sundancer tops out at approximately 45 mph with a Mercruiser 496 Bravo III). The acceleration isn’t exactly drag strip worthy either, taking 25.5 seconds to lumber from 0 to 30 mph.

But let’s be fair — if you’re looking for ultra-high performance, you’re probably not looking at a 260 Sundancer to begin with. This boat falls squarely in the leisure class, big enough for a couple to spend a long weekend or even a full week on board comfortably. It’s also sporty enough to pull a wakeboarder or an inflatable rider, and roomy enough on deck to allow the flinging of lines and lures if the urge strikes. None of these are pursuits that demand tear-inducing top speeds or neck-snapping acceleration. Quite the contrary. The activities at which the 260 Sundancer excels are those that are best enjoyed at a relatively subdued pace. So why not save a few bucks on the front end as well as at the fuel dock and go with the

smaller engine that can handle pretty much every chore you’ll ask of it?

The Mercruiser 350 Mag handles every chore asked of it on this day, including a half-dozen acceleration tests and repeated top speed runs. Where the engine shines brightest, though, is while cruising, bopping along at about 3800 rpm, right at 30 mph, burning 13.9 gallons of fuel per hour according to the on-board computer. At this pace, the 260 feels as though it might run forever, comfortably working through the mild, late-afternoon chop.

One thing to note about this particular boat is its tendency to list ever so slightly to starboard while cruising if the captain doesn’t have the trim set just right. With neutral trim, at cruising speed, this Sundancer leans a little bit to the right. Trimmed up, though, to about one fourth or one half, the Sundancer straightens out almost completely.

Trimmed correctly, a leisurely pace feels about right for those on board.

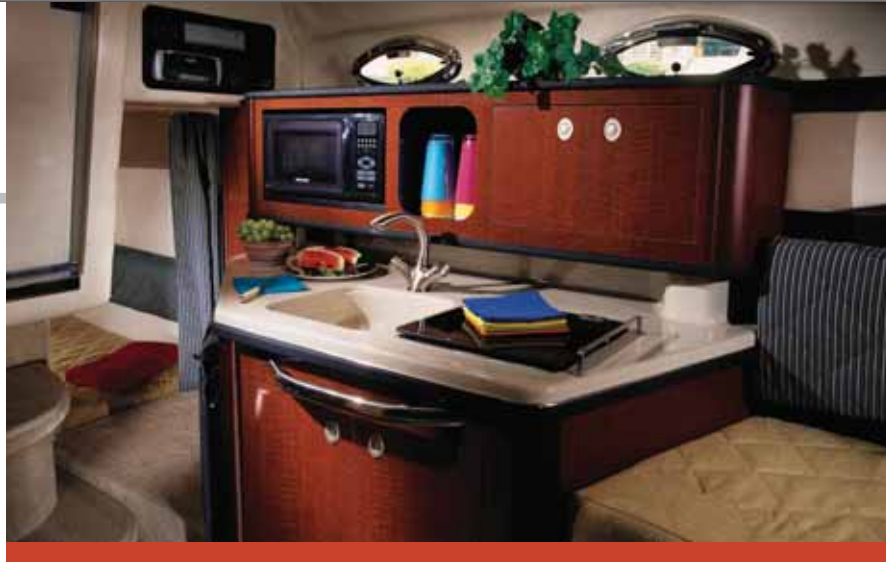
This is a heavy boat for its size, weighing in at 7,500 pounds, dry and empty, some 1,200 pounds heavier than the ’04 version. Fill the tanks and the expansive storage compartments, and you can easily pass the 9,000-pound mark, plenty hefty to subdue even fairly large seas. You can definitely feel the weight in the helm, and the 260 Sundancer will never be honestly described as “nimble,” but it turns gracefully at high speeds and can just nearly circle within its own length at idle, making for confident docking. The Bravo III’s ability to back the Sundancer in a near-straight line with



very little steering input adds to that confidence around the docks.

The 260’s looks add to dockside confidence, too. The radar arch is optional, but highly recommended, as it’s really what sets the Sundancer apart. Without the arch, the Sundancer’s nice enough, with just enough muscularity in the lines, but with the arch, it looks downright seawor-





thy and special. As an added bonus, the arch does a nifty job of supporting the canvas if the weather gets cold or wet.

No one will want to have the canvas up any more than necessary, but it's nice to know that even with the canvas in place, the 260 Sundancer has substantial walking-around room above decks. A 6-footer can stand and move about comfortably, without worrying about a skull-bonking from the radar arch. Thanks to the now-integrated swim platform, the entertaining area is about two feet longer than before, and it's two feet you really notice. Adding to the extra room is the redesigned engine hatch, which now encompasses the deck as well as the rear seat, so the whole thing lifts up at the flick of a helm switch. This not only makes it vastly easier to open the hatch (flipping a switch for an electric motor is a heck of a lot easier than manually hoisting a hatch of any size), but it allows for more storage beneath the seat and makes the engine compartment downright cavernous.

Most of us will spend most of our time — hopefully — with the engine compartment closed and happy passengers on the seats. Entertaining is a natural for the 260, with its redesigned wet bar that features a bit more storage beneath. It would be crowded to have more than, say, six people on board for a cocktail cruise (although you could certainly cram more on board if you felt the urge). After all, the 260 Sundancer carries only an 8-foot-6-inch beam. The benefit of the smaller beam,

of course, is that it makes the 260 legally trailerable, so you can take it to places other than your usual cruising grounds.

A gut feeling says that while the 260 can do yeoman's work as an entertainer, its real-world destiny is as a two-person overnighter or weekender. The cabin's the giveaway. Surprisingly spacious for a 28-foot boat, the cabin features enough headroom for a 6-footer to stand tall and comfortably at the galley. Again, the integrated swim platform gets some credit from Johnson for allowing the Sea Ray designers to add "6 inches to a foot" of additional length to the cabin. The illusion of even more room, as well as improved access to the midcabin berth, comes from the angling of the galley, creating a wider path to the berth without noticeably sacrificing any counter space. In fact, Johnson says that the counter space was increased on the '05 Sundancer.

Storage space was also increased, to the point where it's now possible to bring literally all the comforts of home on board the 260 and stash it completely out of sight. A couple of nifty options, such as the flip-down, flat-screen TV with separate DVD player, make a long weekend on board even more inviting.

Stay on board any longer than a weekend, though, and you'll either learn to enjoy taking a shower while sitting or end up using the shower facilities of the marinas you visit. The head just doesn't have the, well, headroom of the cabin. There's no way for a 6-footer to stand all the way up in the head with

any significant measure of comfort.

There's plenty of room, however, for that 6-footer to stretch out and catch 40 winks comfortably in the forward V-berth or the midcabin berth, so you can definitely get a good night's sleep after a long, leisurely day of cruising and enjoying the water.

Although smart money says the vast majority of 260 Sundancers will ply the



relatively calm waters of lakes and rivers, the added size and weight give it the ability to be a "real mariner," capable of at least limited offshore runs. You probably wouldn't want to cut across the Gulf of Mexico for a Key West-South Padre Island straight shot, but there's no reason you couldn't safely lose sight of land for at least a while. The hull can certainly stand the stress. But it would be prudent to opt for one of the beefier engine options if offshore runs are even a possibility. On lakes and rivers, though, where the 260 Sundancer fits so well, that base MerCruiser Mag 350 has won over some skeptics. No, the 260 isn't the fastest or quickest boat on the water with that motor, but it's well-suited for lazily wandering from here to there and back again. The Sundancer 260 gives relaxation a new meaning, and this is, without a doubt, a nice change of pace in this modern world. 