



## FREEDOM ESCAPE 5.3 REVIEW

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Super affordable pricing is driving the market success of this mid-sized cuddy boat designed to meet family and fishing demands.



Rising manufacturing costs have put some pretty strong pressure on trailer boat prices of late, however Freedom Boats continues to do a 'Hyundai' on the market by keeping prices low.

Recently we caught up with the Noosa companies' most popular seller, the Freedom Escape that current retails from a low \$24,500. This is a remarkably good price for a fibreglass boat in the 5.3m size range. In fact, it beats the pants off many of the equivalent tinnies fitted to the same degree.

Freedom doesn't skimp on the goodies either, giving you items like a rear lounge, nav lights and electric bilge pump in the standard package. No wonder the Escape is one of the most popular fibreglass boats on the market today.

And most interesting in this story is the way the Escape has been able to tap the entry-level buyer. Typically they're the first-time buyer not wanting to pay more than \$20,000,

Freedom's Sydney dealer, Alan Blake, says many of these folk are prepared to stretch their budgets when they see the Escape package. "They are blown away by what they're going to get in this boat, and so they soon change their mind on what they want to pay" says a jubilant Alan Blake.

Certainly it would be tempting to go the extra few grand when you get a bigger, more comfortable boat that gives you a proper cabin and plenty of standard features.

The appeal to family cruising is pretty obvious in the deluxe padded cockpit and wide stern landing deck. Since we last tested the boat in late 1996 the stern has changed into an attractive fastback with recessed landing steps. The Americans call this a Portofino transom, but whatever the name it's great for easy boarding, or for the kids swimming off the stern.

While Portofino sterns aren't exactly the go for serious fishing it's a feature you probably can live with given the boat's price. After all, the lower price means more money to pay for extras like a two-way radio, sounder, bimini, rocket-launcher and so on.

The test boat was again supplied by Blakes Marine of Sydney who had supplied our first test boat. Three years on the base price had not changed much, but the test rig did cost more because it was fitted with an Evinrude Ficht 115hp and more accessories.

Normally Alan fits the much less expensive 85hp Yamaha CV (non oil-injection) model engine to keep the price down to \$24,500. However, this was an owner boat packaged up with the bigger and much more expensive Ficht motor. It had extras like a radio, stereo, sounder, live-bait plumbing and bowrail to push the price out.



Even with all these goodies the boat stays pretty competitive at \$29,990 as you see it here. Not bad at all when you think most 5.3m fibreglass boats are struggling to meet this price at a base level.

## DESIGN

The big change since the last test is the new stern incorporating the wide landing platform as part of the hull. Previously the steps were a separate moulding that was attached to the stern. This stern looks a lot more attractive and really enhances the look of the boat from all angles.

Underneath is a pod stern that looks somewhat complex in design, but helps to let the stern slide more easily during high-speed turns. In practice the boat does turn quite easily so I guess they've their aim.

The hull is 5.3m overall, however it stretches longer when you add the optional fibreglass bowsprit. Beam is 2.2m, which makes this quite a roomy boat for its length.

Underbody design is still the same moderate Vee hull with deadrise varying slight from the bow shoulders to an 18-degree transom. The moderate deadrise, coupled with the soft, rounded keel edge and wide chine flats all contribute to quick onto the plane performance.

There's more than a small hint of a ski-boat about the Escape, which isn't a bad thing when you're taking about efficient performance.

There is a fair bit of topside flare in the bow area to help the hull deflect spray. Plenty of reserve buoyancy in the wide, flared bow should also help the hull rise quickly when it punches into a wave.

The low, flat sheerline and cabin is a little retro these days, but overall style of the boat is still attractive and really helped along by the fastback transom.

Freedom has also been clever enough to add more bolder colour bands to the topsides with a fashionable 'flick' down at the stern. This is a really smart touch.

The bottom features a reasonable sharp entry and low chine line, matched by two sharp lifting strakes. The chine lip is wide and features a slight down deflection to help lift and at-rest stability.

Deck areas look quite aerodynamic with flush-fitting anchor and forehatch on the low cabintop. Here you get low handrails, or the optional split bow rail as shown.

For highway trailing the Freedom Escape offers a car-friendly dry weight of 1040kg. That is within the legal tow range of popular cars like the Toyota Camry (V-6) and Magna Mitsubishi. Both these cars have a tow limit of 1200kg, so you might have to watch your total load with fuel and personal gear.

Going for the smaller size motor will help to reduce overall weight and allow you to match the boat to medium sized cars like the Mazda 626. Remember the trailing rules have changed since we last looked at this boat. Under the new National Regs many of the medium sized cars like the Mazda 626 can't tow as much as they could before.



## PERFORMANCE

While this test was conducted in fairly calm waters it again showed the sporty performance of the Escape.

The boat was even more willing to jump onto the plane with the bigger sized 115hp motor. We literally snapped out of the hole like a sports boat and were planning in no time at all. With the Ficht behind we accelerated very easily and had no trouble reaching a cruising speed of 28 knots doing an easy 4000rpm.

Top speed of 39 knots (5500 rpm) was some three knots quicker than what we'd previously achieved with a 90hp Yamaha motor.

Handling with the non-feedback mechanical steering was quite light and made driving easy. I found I could also throw the boat into some very tight, full powered turns. We cut back over some broken water with ease and hardly felt the small waves.

We know from previous runs in open water that the Escape isn't the softest rider in its class, yet still a boat that handles well enough to give the crew a reasonable ride in typical coastal conditions.

The wide chine flats and moderate Vee certainly make the Escape above average in the stability stakes. We had no trouble standing both crew to one side when the boat was at-rest.

What did worry me a bit was a touch of chine walking when we were travelling at the higher speed. This was corrected later by having the motor lowered two notches on the transom. I've encountered this problem before in the Escape and I suspect it's because the boat yard are aligning the motor cavitation plate too high. The fact that the pod cuts higher than the keel makes it hard to figure out just where to align the motor.

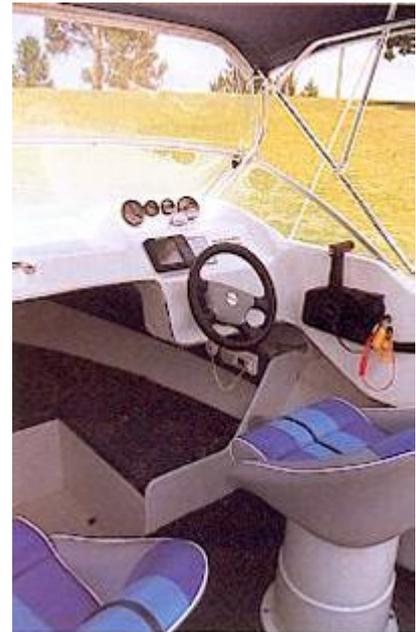
Beyond that problem the handled and balance was quite good through the speed range. The helm position is also pretty comfortable thanks to the well-padded pedestal seats. You get really good support from the body-hugging bucket seats.

The sports steering wheel falls nicely to hand and my only criticism here was the lack of proper footrests. Also I wish they'd kept the recessed throttle lever we had on the earlier test. If nothing else it makes the helm station look neater and cleaner.

## FISHABILITY

There's no getting away from the fact the Escape is geared to cruising needs. The low windscreen and lack of cockpit length shows this is a high priority. However, once you lift the lounge seat bases out you start to get a fishing cockpit. The two halves of the lounge seat lift up to reveal two good size 'kill boxes.' The remaining backrest give you pretty comfortable leg pads for fishing out the back.

While the fastback transom keeps you further away from the water it's not going to stop you fishing out of the back. As standard you get two rod holders across the rear deck, and two more (optional) holders up the side decks.





Those narrow side decks aren't the best for fitting rod holders, or for sitting out a fishing session, however they give enough height for body-support. Internal freeboard is at least 72cm, which is enough for most guys to brace themselves against the sides.

The stern deck now features moulded bait wells, one of which can be plumbed up as a live-bait tank.

Factory options include the raised cutting board; live-bait tank plumbing, rocket-launcher and fish kill tank.

A bowsprit is another option that allows you to carry the anchor on deck between fishing spots.

### DECK LAYOUT

The low foredeck features a bowroller with capture pin, stainless steel bollard and a self-draining anchor locker. A wide forehatch gives plenty of room to work the anchor from the cabin, though access through the cabin could be easier.

The cabin is very comfortably appointed to suit the recreational boater. You get two full-length sleeping bunks, plus attractive fabric upholstery on the seat and backrest cushions. There's room for up to four adults to sit below, though not in the test boat because they'd mounted the two-way radio into the backrest!

At least their radio is going to stay nice and dry, but I'd prefer to have it mounted a bit closer to the helm.

The cabin also features a carpeted instrument cover and tinted cabin ports. Cabin lights are an optional extra along with a chemical toilet (\$250) for the footwell.

The open backed cabin gives you easy access to the cockpit, while a vinyl curtain adds privacy when using the loo, or sleeping overnight.

A modern dash design incorporates a raised instrument binnacle above a compass and flush-mounted Lowrance X-48 sounder. You also get the latest waterproof touch-pad panel for the electrics.

A sports wheel is a standard feature along with fore/aft adjustment on the helm seat.

The bucket seats sit atop fibreglass tube stowage boxes that are made in the Freedom factory. These give you some handy stowage for personal gear. You've also got stowage in the deep side pockets that have padded facias.

Back aft there is the rear lounge and battery stowage behind. You also get stainless-steel handrails that doubles as stern cleats when required.

The Portofino transom features two ski hooks as well as double steps for easy access over the stern deck. The motor well is incorporated into this transom moulding.



## POWER

The 115hp Evinrude Ficht was a smooth performer, but the high price of this motor is a little off-putting at present.

Given the low-cost appeal of this boat I think most buyers will be matching it with a standard two-stroke motor. The 85hp Yamaha CV would give you adequate, but not overly exciting performance, while the 90hp size would be a good all round choice. However, if you're looking at carrying heavier payloads on a regular basis it would be an idea to go to the 115hp.

Certainly the extra power comes in handy when you covering long distances inshore, or punching back against rough water and strong headwinds.

I would expect fuel-consumption to be pretty reasonable in this boat, given the way the Escape planes so easily.

The in-floor 80-litre fuel tank is not overly large for a boat this size, but it should be more than adequate on average day trips.

## VERDICT

Freedom has cleverly attacked the mid-sized cuddy cabin boat market with this low cost boat package. In practice it doesn't have quite the same finesse of finish as the expensive brands, yet buyers don't mind when they're getting so much more boat for the money.

The Escape offers a boat over five metres in length with full-length bunks and comfortable cockpit seating for up to five adults. It is still at a size that's can be towed by cars, and take a few friends fishing. With a bit of thought you could make it a quite reasonable fishing platform for estuary and reef fishing.

The recent addition of the big Freedom 6.2m Elite has certainly helped to give this brand more credibility in the marketplace. With more models on the water Freedom is starting to be better known and accepted by the public. This can help resale value in the long run.

Freedom Boats: [www.freedomboats.com.au](http://www.freedomboats.com.au)