

10 Tenders TESTED

The ubiquitous inflatable is a cumbersome beast to row, tow and stow. Ben Meakins investigates 10 alternatives to the typical tender



Picture the scene: the setting sun sinks to the horizon, bathing an idyllic, mirror-calm anchorage in a golden glow. Yacht crews are enjoying a quiet sundowner in the cockpit. They say silence is golden, but suddenly the magic spell is shattered by the angry drone of an inflatable tender driven by an outboard engine, its occupants shouting to hear each other over the noise.

Every yacht needs a tender. It's an essential 'ferryboat' for anyone who uses an anchor or ties up to a swinging mooring. You need a dinghy to lay a kedge if you've gone aground, and occasionally for inshore pilotage - sounding an anchorage or checking the position of a shifting sandbar, for example. The inflatable tender has many virtues - not least its low purchase cost, prodigious load-bearing capacity and excellent stability - but it's a nuisance to stow, very unrewarding to row and nigh-on impossible to scull. Perhaps that's why so many of us fire up the outboard every time we launch the dinghy. Our cruising →

Photo: Graham Snook ©77Photo



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forebears thought nothing of rowing a mile or two, but even the toughest of them would balk at the prospect of propelling a modern inflatable any distance against wind or tide, with those flimsy little alloy and plastic oars.

We assembled 10 alternatives to the ubiquitous inflatable dinghy. They included nesting dinghies, sailing dinghies, folding dinghies, and what's claimed to be the ultimate yacht tender – the American-made Portland Pudgy, a 'self-rescue lifeboat' with an impressive list of accessories and extras. They were made from materials as diverse as polyethylene and plywood, with lugsails and leeboards, oars and outboards. Some were easy to row, while others gave us blisters.

Nesting and folding dinghies perform just like rigid tenders, but can be hoisted aboard at night and stowed safely on passage. A tender with a sailing rig is great fun, especially for younger crewmembers who might get bored in an anchorage. The boats we tested ranged from 6ft to 10ft, and cost from £230 to £4,350. Load carrying ability ranged from two people at a pinch to four with room to spare.

THE TEST

A yacht tender has to be a jack of all trades and we used various tests to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each dinghy. Each tender was rowed singlehanded, and later with two passengers. We looked at the position, design and quality of oars, rowlocks, collars, thwarts and footbraces. We then bolted a Honda 2.3hp four-stroke outboard engine to each tender. With two people aboard, we checked for handling, stability and safety under power. We also carried out a speed check at full throttle for the length of the quay wall, motoring upstream and downstream to negate the effect of the tide and taking an average from the two readings on our hand-held GPS.

The test took place on a fine September day on the River Hamble. We tested the sailing dinghies for close-windedness, leeway and speed, as well as ease of rigging and handling. The light winds on the day meant it was difficult to read too much into the results, but as the wind puffed up we got some measure of each boat's abilities.

The test team included me, YM's assistant editor Chris Beeson and photographer Graham Snook, and my sister Bryony Meakins, who rows and sails for Durham University. Between us we've logged thousands of miles in a huge range of boats and sailed, rowed, paddled, and motored up muddy creeks and rocky fjords, tropical rivers and Pacific motus. We also tested a range of petrol and electric outboard engines suitable for yacht tenders and we will be reporting on how they performed in our February issue.



THE RESULTS

» SMARTWAVE 2400

£739



This tender is made from polyethylene, and is virtually indestructible and unsinkable. She's also a triumph of function over form. Very heavy, she has a locker under the main thwart and, unusually, two rowing positions. Under oars she tracked well, but it felt as though we were rowing an elephant uphill. The oars were good quality but could have done with an extra six inches on the handles. The captive stainless rowlocks were good and sturdy. The centre thwart was soft and comfortable and the aft thwart made a good foot brace, but the rowlocks were 15cm (6in) too far forward for easy rowing. The boat was dry when loaded and had loads of space and buoyancy. She performed well under power, tracking well and proving dry and comfortable. She managed 4.2 knots with our 2.3hp engine and two passengers, and had a secure mounting point for the engine. She will plane with a bigger engine. She felt safe and stable while clambering in and out.

VERDICT A good, indestructible tender for those who want a workhorse to leave on their mooring.

LOA 2.4m (7ft 10in) **Beam** 1.3m (4ft 3in) **Weight** 45kg (99lb) **Options** Dolly wheels, upholstered seats, lifting eyes **Contact** Marine Revolution **Tel** 01382 455 774 **Website** www.marinerrevolution.com

» MICROBOAT 900

£595

The Microboat has a 'tunnel hull', which means she'll plane with a 4hp engine. She's a stable dinghy, and as she's made of glassfibre she's a little lighter than the Smartwave, although less robust. Under oars, she tracked well. The oars were good quality and a good length, but her plastic rowlocks bent when we heaved on the oars, and may well distort over time, allowing the oars to jump out. With two passengers she was a little heavy to row. She has rubber fendering on the gunwales and is beautifully made. With our 2.3hp engine she managed a very respectable 4.6 knots. A smaller version (2.3m LOA) is also available, and both should tow well.

VERDICT A good-quality tender that tracks well underway. She's best suited to motoring, but her good oars will get you home if the engine fails.

LOA 2.7m (8ft 9in) **Beam** 1.2m (4ft 1in) **Weight** 43kg (94lb)
Contact MB Boats **Tel** 01983 532727 **Website** www.mbboats.co.uk



» WALKER BAY 8

£1,520



The Walker Bay sailing tender has a removable, inflatable collar, which detracts from her looks somewhat, but provides much-needed stability. Under oars, she rowed well. Her oars split into two sections for easy stowage. They look a bit flimsy, but proved up to the job, if a little on the short side. The plastic rowlocks were superior to most, and stood up well to their task. The aft thwart made a good footbrace and she was buoyant and stable, even when loaded with three people. However, when we hit some chop, water shot up the centreboard case despite the blanking plate, leaving the rower with some embarrassing wet patches. She was among the fastest dinghies under sail. Her daggerboard is undersized and she made quite a bit of leeway in the lulls, but as soon as there was enough wind to get her foils working she shot to windward. The position of her mainsheet ratchet block, in the middle of the centre thwart, prevented the helmsman from sliding across during a tack - but you could take the sheet straight from the boom to solve this. She was quick and easy to rig, with some clever features such as a tiller extension that telescopes to stow inside the tiller. She could do with some battens to improve sail shape. Under power, our 2.3hp engine drove her along at 4.4 knots with two passengers, and was securely mounted. Her hull form - long keel and no rocker - suggests that she might have a mind of her own under tow.

VERDICT Not the prettiest boat we tested, but she sails well in light airs, rows well and would stow neatly if your foredeck is big enough.

LOA 2.5m (8ft 3in) **Beam** 1.3m (4ft 4in) **Weight** 32kg (71lb)
Options Inflatable tube, sailing rig, 10ft version also available
Contact EP Barrus **Tel** 01869 363636 **Website** www.walkerbay.co.uk

» PORTLAND PUDGY £2,242

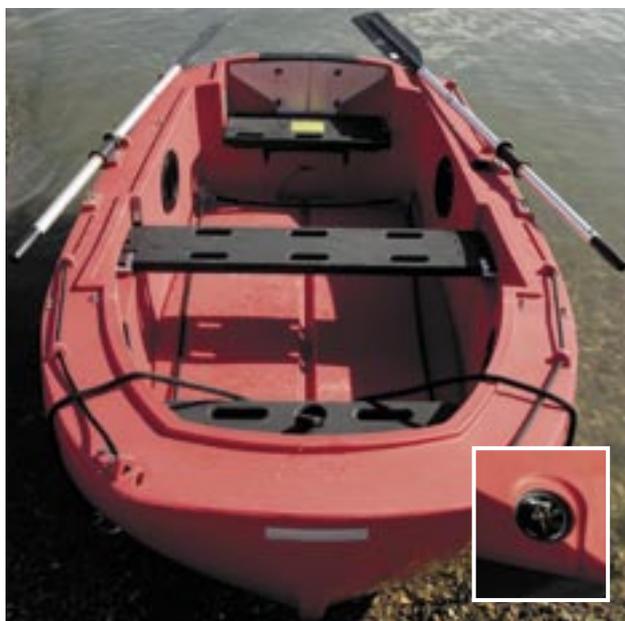
This American-designed 'ultimate yacht tender' recently made landfall in Europe. Our test boat arrived from Holland, loaded to the gunwales with accessories. She rows, sails, motors and can be converted into a 'lifeboat'. The Pudgy rowed beautifully, tracked well, and the rowing position was comfortable, with a good foot brace. The centre thwart flips fore and aft, so you can adjust it for your leg length. The oars seemed strong and were a good length, with substantial collars, and the sturdy, captive rowlocks lock into the gunwales in two places.

When loaded with passengers she floated high, with ample freeboard to spare. All the Pudgy's equipment stows inside the boat: the mast, boom, gaff and oars telescope down and fit into the hull via an inspection hatch in the transom, and the twin leeboards and kick-up rudder stow under the aft seat. We had very little wind for our sailing test, and the heavy Pudgy proved somewhat sluggish. In the gusts she picked up and would no doubt perform better in a stiffer breeze.

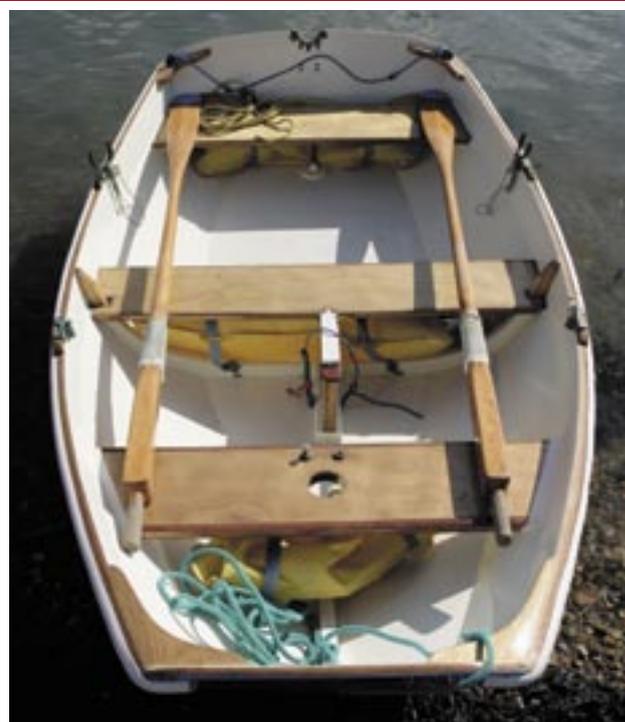
Under power she was safe, dry and easily manoeuvrable, but somewhat slower than the other tenders, hitting only 3.6 knots. A self-inflating emergency canopy turns her into a 'lifeboat' and you can store a grab bag in one of her many internal lockers.

VERDICT She was designed as a blue-water tender and has some ingenious touches. She needs a good breeze – or a bigger rig – to sail convincingly, but acquitted herself well in all other tasks and was pleasant to row. Weighing in at a hefty 58kg, you'd need a winch, sling and halyard to haul her aboard.

LOA 2.3m (7ft 6in) **Beam** 1.4m (4ft 7in) **Weight** 58kg (128lb) **Options** Bilge pump, davits harness, weaver davits (for boats with swim platforms), lifeboat canopy, electrical system, solar panel, sea anchor, boat cover **Contact** Portland Pudgy Europe **Tel** 0031 118 436611 **Website** www.portlandpudgy.eu



» NUTSHELL PRAM £430



This very popular American sailing tender has been around since the 1980s and most have been built from kits or plans as a home project. There are many variations. We tested a 2.3m (7ft 6in) dinghy, but plans for a 2.9m (9ft 6in) version are also available. She rowed well, with a good rowing position. With two passengers the freeboard was somewhat low, and she was best with one passenger and the rower sitting in the bow. Traditionalists will be pleased to see a sculling notch in the transom. She was among the best we tested under sail. Her lugsail rig was not particularly close-winded, but performed well in the light winds. She can be easily reefed should the wind get up. The version tested had a bigger daggerboard than the plans suggest, which improved her windward performance. She's really only suitable for one person under sail. Under power, she hit 4.1 knots with two crewmen aboard, but a third passenger might reduce her freeboard to an alarming degree! She tows like a dream, her high bow and long skeg ensuring that she tracks well. The materials will cost you about £430.

VERDICT A good tender, small enough to fit on the foredeck of most yachts over 28ft LOA. She sails well singlehanded, but the 9ft 6in version might be more practical for sailing two-up.

LOA 2.3m (7ft 6in) **Beam** 1.3m (4ft 4in) **Weight** 36kg (80lb) **Details:** Maynard Bray's book, *Building the Nutshell Pram*, available from Amazon.co.uk at £6.95, has a full set of plans and instructions for the home builder

» TINKER TRAMP

£2,820

This multi-purpose inflatable sailing-tender-cum-liferaft has been around for 30-odd years and even has an owners' club that organises regattas and cruises – surely a first for a tender! We tested a 1991 example, bought along by Tinker aficionado Maurice Meredith, and still in excellent condition. The manufacturer, Henshaw Inflatables, still produces the same model, unchanged apart from an inflatable bow that should make the boat dryer to windward. Like the Portland Pudgy, the Tramp can be turned into a two or three-man liferaft. She was easy to inflate, taking up much the same room as a standard inflatable. Under oars she suffered from the usual inflatable problems: she slipped sideways in any wind and did not track well. Nonetheless, the oars were a good length and the captive rowlocks, though plastic, seemed sturdy enough. She has a tall rig with a high boom, and put in a respectable showing under sail, although she needed more breeze to get going than the rigid dinghies. In the light stuff she did not point well, but she headed up to windward in the puffs. Her flat bottom made her bow veer off through the tack, but her large centreboard should limit leeway in any breeze. She proved fast under power, hitting 4.8 knots, her flat bottom giving her the edge over most of the other dinghies, and the 40cm-diameter tubes made her dry and stable. Loading her with passengers presented no problems, and all stayed dry. Her low bow and flat bottom might make her skittish to tow, but as she's easily deflated this shouldn't be a problem.

VERDICT Surprisingly sprightly under sail, but disappointing to row. Ability to sail her means she's streets ahead of a standard inflatable.

LOA 2.75m (9ft) **Beam** 1.37m (4ft 6in) **Weight** 26kg (58lb) **Dimensions deflated** 114 x 53 x 33cm (45 x 21 x 13in) **Options** Sailing rig, liferaft canopy

Contact Henshaw Inflatables **Tel** 01963 33237 **Website** www.tinker.co.uk



» NESTAWAY STEM

£1,150-£1,670



Nestaway's Stem dinghy was one of the smallest we tested. She works on the same principle as the pram dinghy, but is made from GRP and bolts together in minutes. She looks pretty and practical, and will fit into the back of an estate car. There's no sailing rig yet, but it's in the pipeline. She was a delight to row, tracked well and was fast, dry and stable. Good oars and rowlocks reward your efforts at the oars, although she would benefit from the addition of a footbrace. She can only take one passenger safely, and was dry, if a little unstable when loaded. Under engine she made 4.3 knots but was a little unstable with two passengers. At speed her freeboard was minimal, and she would have shipped some water in chop.

VERDICT Great fun to row, and a sailing rig should turn her into an exciting craft for one person. She's a bit small for ferrying more than two people, and was somewhat scary under full throttle, but why would you want to motor when she's such fun to row?

LOA 2.4m (7ft 10in) **Beam** 1.2m (4ft) **Dimensions nested** 1.2m x 1.2m (4ft x 4ft) **Weight** 35kg **Options** Buoyancy tanks, teak or mahogany trim, sailing rig, stainless fittings, keel band, rubber fendering **Contact** Nestaway Boats **Tel** 01202 423094 **Website** www.nestawayboats.com

» STOWAWAY K2

£3,465

The K2 was the biggest of the boats we tested, carrying two crew under sail with ease. She's similar in size and rig to a Mirror dinghy, although she's fairly heavy, weighing in at nearly 71kg including the sailing rig. She stows in three bags, and you'd probably end up lashing her folded hull to the guardrail stanchions on passage. She has internal buoyancy bags, which can be lashed to the outside of the boat as fendering.

Her square shape means she might not tow too well, but you shouldn't need to tow if you get the hang of putting her together quickly. With practice this should take no more than 20 minutes. She rowed nicely, with a well-placed thwart and footbrace. She has proper metal rowlocks and the supplied oars were adequate, but a little too short. She carried three people with ease and could have taken more without shipping any water.

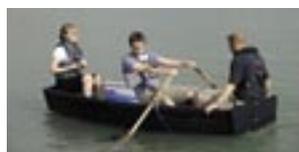
She had the biggest rig of all the boats we tested, and sailed well despite the light winds. Her jib-sheet leads were too far forward, but apart from that she was close-winded and a pleasure to sail. Under engine she was fast, hitting 4.6 knots, and could handle extra passengers and gear with ease. There was some movement of the panels while underway, but everything looked secure.

VERDICT She's no beauty, takes a long time to deploy and is very heavy, but sails well, can handle heavy loads and rows nicely.

LOA 3.05m (10ft) **Beam** 1.3m (4ft 3in) **Dimensions folded** 3m x 0.5m (10ft x 1ft 6in) **Weight** Hull and thwarts: 55kg (121lb), Sailing accessories: 15.7kg (35lb)

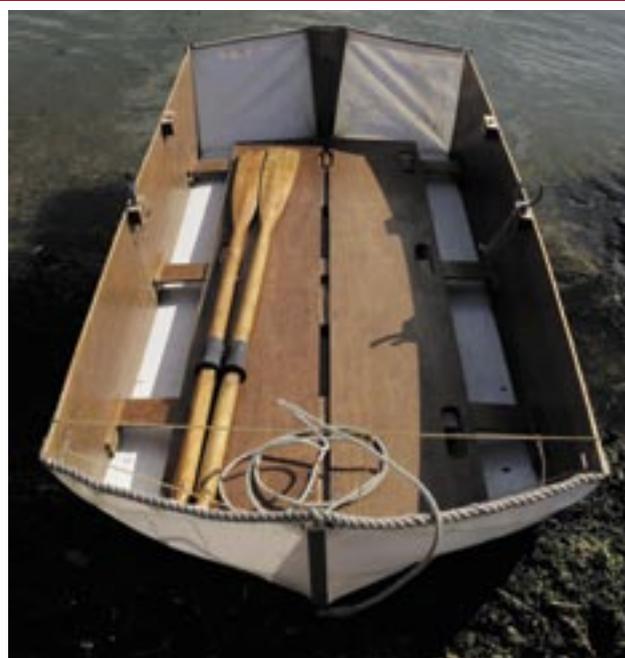
Options Battened mainsail, kick-up rudder. Alternatively, use a standard Mirror rig

Contact Stowaway Boats **Tel** 01327 264704 **Website** www.stowawayboats.com



» ORAGAMI 8

£230



Developed from a 1940s Prout design, this aptly-named, coracle-like dinghy looks flimsy, but was surprisingly sturdy on the water. She folds flat, to become a 2.4m x 61cm (8ft x 2ft plank). The floors and sides are made from marine ply, while the stems are cedar and the bottom is PVC. She can be stowed lashed to the guardrails, or alongside the coachroof, and took us two minutes to assemble. As I climbed in, a group of spectators gathered to watch me capsize, but the Origami proved stable and under oars she tracked surprisingly well. The rowing position isn't overly comfortable, as you sit on the bottom-boards, but as long as you keep the bow out of the water she slips along with little fuss. There's no footbrace, the gunwales flex somewhat, and she's so light that any headwind would make rowing difficult. Loaded with two passengers, we switched to the forward rowing position, and after a nerve-racking start she settled down. She wasn't easy to row heavily laden, but was surprisingly seaworthy. There's the option of an Optimist sailing rig, and a single leeboard. This was unavailable for our test, but she is reportedly stable and close-winded under sail. Under power, she only managed 3.7 knots with two passengers, but has been known to plane at 14 knots with one person aboard and a 3.3hp outboard on the transom!

VERDICT Appearances can be misleading! She's not the easiest to row, but is nonetheless a practical, if esoteric tender. Ideal for one person, she carries weight deceptively well. The main snag is that you can't buy an Origami ready to row away - you have to build her from scratch yourself. Plans and instructions cost £30, materials about £200, and building her takes about four days.

LOA 2.4m (8ft) **Beam** 1.1m (3ft 7in) **Dimensions folded** 2.4m x 0.5m x 0.1m (8ft 2in x 18in x 4in) **Weight** 45kg (99lb) **Options** 6ft version, sailing rig, and whatever else you can build yourself! **Contact** email: info@woodenwidget.com **Website** www.woodenwidget.com

» NESTAWAY PRAM

£4,350*

*(Glassfibre version from £1,750)

Yachtsman Ian Thompson founded Nestaway Boats after graduating from Lyme Regis Boatbuilding School. The Nestaway Pram is a work of art. Cold-moulded from khaya mahogany, she splits into two nesting sections, which should fit snugly on the foredeck or coachroof of a 30ft yacht. She's lightweight, too, and the two halves fitted together easily, with only two bolts to do up. She was good to row, with sturdy, well-proportioned oars and high-quality chrome rowlocks. The aft thwart makes a good footbrace. With one person aboard, she was a little bow-heavy due to the position of the thwart, over the join between the two sections. With several passengers, the trim was best with two rowers taking an oar each and one person sitting in the stern. Her sailing rig was a prototype set-up, but the boomless spritsail was easy to rig, and can be easily brailed up to stow.

The prototype had a fixed Optimist rudder, but the production boats will have a lifting rudder. With the helmsman sitting on the centre thwart she was a little bow-heavy - sitting on the floor improved the trim and proved more comfortable, too. The lack of a boom meant her upwind performance in light airs was not sparkling, but given some more wind she should slip along nicely. She was the fastest of all the dinghies we tested under power: our 2.3hp engine drove her along at 4.8 knots, and she carried her two passengers well, keeping them relaxed, comfortable and dry.

VERDICT The prototype has some teething issues, but this is a beautiful, well thought-out dinghy. She would tow well with her long skeg and high bow.

LOA 2.6m (8ft 8in) **Beam** 1.2m (4ft 1in) **Weight** 40kg (88lb) **Dimensions nested** 1.5m x 1.2m (5ft x 4ft 1in)

Options GRP hull, daggerboard or leeboards, keel rub strip, rubber fendering, launching wheel

Contact Nestaway Boats

Tel 01202 423094

Website www.nestawayboats.com



» CONCLUSION

HORSES FOR COURSES

It all boils down to personal taste, and opinion was certainly divided among our test team. Among the rigid tenders, the Nestaway Pram and Walker Bay sailed, rowed and motored well and took a heavy load without too much fuss. The Portland Pudgy was an interesting concept, which we'd like to try out in some more breeze. The folding boats belied their flimsy look, with the K2 sailing particularly well, despite her weight. The Origami proves looks can be misleading - and she's certainly a low-cost alternative to an inflatable.

CRAZY ALTERNATIVES

If folding, nesting and sailing tenders aren't quite wacky enough for your tastes, try these...



DUTTON COMMANDER - FROM £29,995

Cut out the middleman and drive straight to your mooring



POLARIS FIB

You've heard of the RIB - but how about a flying inflatable boat? If you hate getting wet, take to the skies with a cruising speed of 35 knots
COST: approx £12,000



SEABREACHER

Part-submarine, part speedboat, the James Bond-style Seabreacher is a high-speed two-seater tender made in the USA. **COST: approx £29,000**

WHAT'S YOURS CALLED?

- Mark Fishwick, author of *West Country Cruising Companion*, and a YM contributor, sails a 34ft gaff yawl called *Temptress* - so he named his tender *Slut*. His other dinghy is called *Crab* - 'because she drifts sideways more rapidly than forwards!'
- Rod Heikell, our *Blue Water Letter* correspondent, was into the numbers game with his former boat, *Seven-tenths* (the proportion of the world's surface that's covered by water). In a similar vein, his tender was called *3/5ths*. Instead of 'T/T' she bore the legend '1350' - which translates into ten-to-two. Spoken with a slight Kiwi accent (Rod is from New Zealand) it's 'tender to!'
- A boat *Rolling Stone* has a tender called *No Moss* and there is an Arab playboy's superyacht, called *Tits*, with two tenders - *Nipple 1* and *Nipple 2!*

» THANKS

Many thanks to Dan Houston, editor of our sister magazine *Classic Boat*, for the loan of his Origami tender

NEXT MONTH: We test six popular liferaft models that have passed the ISO standard, but not the more stringent SOLAS accreditation...