

Merry Fisher 635 Review



Boat Review - 'Glicca' - Jeanneau Merry Fisher 635

Author Sue Schofield - 'glicca@compuserve.om'

web page: www.glicca.com

October 2000

Cover pic- 'Glicca' on the Thames during commissioning.

Boats and cars have one thing in common - they are both a compromise between cost and practicality. Add to this the indefinable needs and wants of the owner and you end with two truisms:

1) my 'perfect' boat will not suit you,

and

2) There is no such thing as a perfect boat.

I've run power boats for twenty years or more, and sailed for about fifteen. I wanted a seaworthy day-boat and weekender for Solent cruising and photography, and for use as a charter photo/press boat (see www.glicca.com) but was concerned about running and servicing costs, especially as the boat will be used four days or five days a week in the Solent yottie season. My first thoughts were for a Dutch steel 30 foot (10 metre) workboat/cruiser, but in the UK, rising fuel costs mean a 30-footer with twin petrol engines demands that you need to own an oilwell to keep the boat in gas.. In addition petrol-engined power boats are proving hard to re-sell here and second-hand prices are falling rapidly. Costs therefore narrowed my choice down to twin diesels, until I started looking at servicing costs. Four hundred pounds plus to winterise a twin diesel rig? No thanks. That brought me back to either outboard engines again (cheap to service - expensive to fuel - usually with planing hulls) or single diesels. And single diesels brought me into the world of semi-displacement hulls which got me looking at day angling boats, notably those from Beneteau, Orkney and others.

Jeanneau's 'Merry Fisher' range are described as 'peche-promenades'. My ancient French translates this 'walking-fish' but I'm told it means fishing cruiser. So I ended up with a shortlist of three angling boats: an Orkney Day Angler, MF 635, and a Spanish marque whose name I forget. I had looked at the 'usual' options: planing cruisers and sportsboats, but memories of rough seas and white knuckles edged me further towards 'practical' boats. I was given a fine tour of the Orkney factory, and a custom quote for my 'walking-fish', which, for a 21 foot well equipped boat, came out at over 30,000 pounds. For that I got 20 knot planing performance from a three litre Mercruiser diesel, on a Bravo Two leg. My only reservations were that the boats were not quite as luxurious as I wanted, and rather workmanlike in their fit-out although 20 knots was quite tempting.

I suppressed an urge to write a cheque there and then and popped over to Walton Marine Sales on the River Thames, just outside London to see my second choice. Here were half a dozen Merry Fishers from the outboard models through to the diesel inboard 635 & 695. I took the demonstrator 635. out on the Thames and a week later at the Southampton Boat show, we took

out another 635 demonstrator. The deal was finalised on the basis of the stable ride and secure wheelhouse, and immediate availability if I bought a demonstrator.

The boat show special price gave me about 10% off the cost, plus loads of extras: prop protection, extra hatch, galley kit etc. I was tempted to go for the bigger MF695, but the extra cost was 10,000 pounds or thereabouts. In a rare fit of common sense I reasoned that ten grand would buy a lot of fuel, and quite a few nights in five star hotels should I need to sleep 'aboard'. I'm also quite content to marina hop, so extensive sleeping accommodating wasn't needed, although an enclosed wheel house for the English 'summer' was. The 10k saving would also pay for a marina berth in Cowes for many years.

The accommodation on the 635 is limited to a two berth cuddy cabin, with a chemical loo amidships, two other lockers under the side berths and plenty of stowage abeam.. There is a fully enclosed wheelhouse, with sliding glass 'patio' doors aft. The engine is a five cylinder 2.5 litre turbo-diesel, made by Nanni in France from a Kubota block and reminiscent of the five-cylinder petrol engines seen in the old Audi Quattros. If diesels don't appeal because of their exhaust fumes, then the Nanni will delight - there is no noticeable exhaust smoke or smell at all, even on start up or prolonged idle.

Drive is through a standard shaft and cutless bearing, with a rotary seal on the shaft instead of a stuffing box. Fuel tank is 100 litres, there is a freshwater pump, portable Gaz cooker, and sink under the helm seats, and extra stowage in the cockpit. A Navman fishfinder and steering compass were standard. Extras ordered were a matching NavMan GPS, VHF radio, second screen wiper, and a tonneau and bimini cover.

The reason for going for the MF635 against the Orkney was simple: The Jeanneau range had obviously benefitted from much user feedback and re-design, everything was in the right place, and much use made of custom plastics and moldings, such as the perspex tinted side windows, which wrap round to the aft section of the wheelhouse, and Securit windshield glass. This attention to detail carries all the way through the boat, including the steps up to the deck, integrated handrails to the wheelhouse, good engine layout etc. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but the Jeanneau sang 'buy me' as I went aboard, where the Orkney whispered 'I'm alright really'. The Jeanneau gave a very solid feeling of evolution and continual re-tooling and upgrading -she did not feel like a first-generation - just out-of-the-mould hull like some other basic boats in the same price range.

I had to sacrifice some speed with the Jeanneau, I would have got 18-20 knots from the Orkney, but the MF635 is currently giving about 14 knots at 2500 rpm, although the engine is not yet fully run in. Estimated running costs from Jeanneau are about 13 litres per hour, which equates to about four pounds sterling an hour at 2000AD prices, or about twenty-four pounds sterling for a trip from Eastbourne to Cowes, 66 miles distant. (The running costs for my 1.8 litre Mercedes saloon are 70p per mile!) Servicing is easy, everything is accessible, and there is an oil drain pump for the sump. (I understand that servicing Mercruisers and outdrive legs is a bit more involved.) The gear box is an Italian hydraulic unit, giving a slick feel at the throttle. Steering and throttle control is Morse cable and there is an extra tiller in the cockpit to complement the wheel steering. Walton Marine re-antifouled the boat for me, at no cost - the chosen goop is Micron Extra self-polishing anti-foul, because it does not have to be scraped off every year. (More cost savings). Insurance is 220 pounds per year, my berth at Cowes is 1400 per year.

What has become obvious in my brief ownership of 'Glicca' is just what good sea-boats these 'walking-fishes' are, specially when compared to planing boats of the same length. Glicca was

out in an October Force 5 last week, just atop the turn of the tide, about two miles off Eastbourne UK. Going out in the two-metre swell was comfy, but coming back against the wind and tide took me up against a breaking 3 metre swell. The boat confidently powers through the green/grey stuff at 12 knots whereas my previous 21 foot planing boat would have been reduced to wallowing around just on the hump, bringing big increases in fuel consumption and decreases in comfort.

To illustrate this, a fishing boat of the same length came into the lock as I sat basking in Glicca's glory, the skipper mopping salt from his eyes and saying how rough it was out there. The wheelhouse is warm and dry, although the diesel engine is a tad noisy for sustained full throttle running. Comfortable running is at 2000 rpm at about ten knots with plenty of torque in hand for the green stuff. Compare this to a Sessa 19 footer with a 115 HP Mercury outboard, in which I sailed the previous week in the same conditions. The planing Sessa was OK until the sea lumped up, at which point we had to keep her just planing at 15 knots. As we went into the sea the motor would slow and the boat drop off the plane. The 635 takes no notice of sea conditions and keeps going with the relentless feel only displacement or semi-displacement hulls seem to give.

To sum up, I'm delighted with the boat and her sea-keeping qualities, the Nanni diesel and hull combination is unfazed by heavy seas, the boat is warm and dry even in October in the English Channel. She's ideally suited for two-person inshore cruising with occasional overnight stays, the build quality seems good, and the semi-displacement qualities are a joy if you are prepared to accept 12-14 knots as a top all-weather cruising speed. At this speed you still get where you want to be regardless of tidal streams, and there is time to scan the charts, or watch the shore go by.

For inland non-tidal use the 5.25 turbo engine is way too big - selecting drive gives about four knots, with the engine just ticking over at five knots. There is an optional 50 HP diesel which would be much more suited to ditch-crawling. When buying the boat I had a notion that a sojourn in the French canals would be pleasant, and the MF 635 with a bimini top would again seem to be just the right boat - if 6.34 metres is long enough for you.

If you want space for a family then the uncluttered cockpit on the 635 is spacious enough, but the larger 695 will give better cabin accommodation, and an enclosed heads compartment. Jeanneau have just released the smaller MF 605 with the same engine as the 635, which should give the same kindly qualities at a slightly lower price if you need a day angler/pottering boat. Both the 635 and 605 can be trailered, given a car which can pull 1.4 tonnes. or so. Finally, the only other extra I would add at commissioning would be a wheel auto-pilot, although I wouldn't link this to the GPS given the current reports of GPS errors forcing boats off-track. Radar would be nice option - but again it's of limited use inshore, there being too much coastal clutter for my eyes.

'Glicca' turns heads wherever she is moored, 'walking -fishes' are still a rare sight in the UK but on the Continent by all accounts they are proving to be the ideal day/weekender boat for inshore cruising and pottering. And if you don't need 20 knots performance, live by the coast or by a tidal river then a Merry Fisher 635 may be just the boat you didn't know you wanted.