

TUNNEL TERROR

COUGAR

FINDING BALANCE IN THE JUNGLE

Cougar 21 MTR Tunnel/Mercury 2.5 EFI Sport Outboard

There is a certain liberating freedom in the sensation of finding a clear horizon, weighing into the throttle and feeling the spray-tinged headwind gaining force as the shoreline accelerates in the distance. Generally speaking, the spirit of the recreational lake-rodder rises in direct proportion to the arc of his speedometer needle.

The prospect of replacing the restrictive limits of the concrete world with a 90-mph rush finds even deeper pleasure when the experience is rooted in solid reliability.

Reconciliation of those two forces as compatible boatmates is duly noted with only nominal time in the seat of Cougar's low-slung 21MTR, a modified tunnel that underscores the notion that you don't have to pay for high-speed fun on the water with downtime on the beach.

Set up with Mercury's muscular 280-horse EFI Sport outboard, the 1,580-pound (fully rigged) MTR will run between 90 and 100 mph on top (we hit 90.4; Cougar says there's more) and will pin its occupants deep into the richness of Cougar vinyl at any given point in between.

It will perform at this level for hours on end on pump nourishment and will perform capably on command under controlled, low-speed constraints when called upon for skiing, boarding or just cruising at a leisurely 45 mph while using up slightly more than half of its allotted 7,500 rpm.

In short, entering its 17th year in production, the MTR remains one of powerboating's most potent antidotes to summer boredom. Dressed to

impress at full strength, the loaded 2.5 MTR trailers out for just over \$40,000, including the requisite rigging upgrades.

AT CLOSE RANGE

Standard rigging calls for a black anodized billet motor bracket with matched aluminum and inside knee braces, and our 2.5 traveled on an optional, rapid-action Bob's Machine hydraulic jackplate (\$1,318). A low-water external pickup kept internals cool under trim, and Teleflex high-performance hydraulic steering (\$937) effectively quelled wheel torque. The setup was propped with a Mercury 30-inch Lightning ET three-blade. The rigging was solid and clean.

The MTR forsakes the fiberglass liner route that's predominant among more recent

designs, utilizing instead a stunning artistic mixture of beautiful, flow-coated balsa flooring and partially exposed stringers, interior gelcoat accents and accented upholstery that perfectly mimics five colors of gelcoat. Our test boat's resulting, high-end look integrated purple, magenta and green in a white, checkerboard base, and the interior was neatly dressed with embroidered Cougar logos.

The hull is relatively narrow (89 inches), it's decidedly low profile, and interior space is definitely at a premium within the MTR. Still, there's decent legroom aboard, and passengers are comfortably nestled in a lumbar-friendly, densely padded seating arrangement.

The gleaming wood flooring uses color-keyed gelcoat

accents and is shaped by the hull's center pod and flanking sponsons. Buckets are through-bolted using powder-coated, angled aluminum, and the rear bench accommodates three, if cozily. There's surprising storage aboard, mostly in the finished, carpeted cavern below deck and in the storage hatch aft of the bench seat. An optional "blizzard" package embraced our interior hardware, which was all powder-coated. A solid billet, lock-in ski tow was standard.

The foot throttle was comfortably positioned down in the tunnel, and the stock-issue shifter control was an Altizer with lockout. A trick, Teleflex finger-trim system placed two actuator levers conveniently on the steering wheel hub; one controlled jackplate action, and the other trimmed the motor.

Angled, white bezels framed white-faced Gaffrig dials (personalized for Cougar), placed within convenient visual sweep. A Gaffrig mechanical trim gauge (\$675) was dash-mounted. A billet extension showed off a custom, engraved steering hub. Switches were conveniently placed and well marked.

Standard exterior hardware includes pop-up cleats and flush-mounted vents and gas fills. Clean installation of trim molding, hardware and windshield came as no surprise.

HITS AND MISSES

Cougar's custom execution seemed flawless, inside and out. The flow-coated woodwork, beautiful gelcoat and posh interior reinforced Cougar's top-drawer reputation, combining classic MTR styling with the feel of a contemporary lake-rod. Solid workmanship and stout construction bred security when the liquid-filled Gaffrig found the better side of 80.

Rear interior grab handles were missed in their absence. Also lacking are cup holders, integrated ice chest and interior lighting. We'd like to have seen a mechanical indicator

for the jackplate, and positioning of the trim gauge made it hard to read at times.

PERFORMANCE

Those who found the carbureted version of the 2.5 a bit temperamental at times will find the EFI version a pure delight at low rpm. Planing was smooth and steady, and the Lightning prop bit decisively and immediately, rendering no loss of the horizon. The hull trims out and packs air quickly and delivers crisp, hard acceleration up the ladder.

The Cougar showed great stability and superior driveability at speed, where the hull was consistent and controlled. The MTR covered the zone between 50 and 90 mph in a few blinks, and within it, our drivers reported the most fun. Our team rated top-end wheel feel "consistently excellent."

The MTR will turn with the better of the tunnels in its size range, and it's sure-footed around the buoys at speed. It showed no cavitation or blowout under normal, high-rev turning maneuvers.

Though we cut across typical lake chop with abandon, the Cougar's rakish profile is subject to minor overspray in rough water and wind. ■



SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Calm/light chop
Centerline length: 21"
Beam: 89"
Bottom: Modified tunnel
Engine/drive: Mercury 2.5 EFI Sport outboard
Horsepower at prop: 280
Ratio: 1.87:1
Prop: Mercury Lightning ET 3-blade
Overall weight: 1,580 lbs.
Base retail price (incl. trailer): \$33,914
Standard features: Pro-Max 200 outboard, Plexi windshield, gauge bezels, custom engraved wheel w/billet extension, Cougar gauges by Gaffrig, solid ski tow, flush fuel fills, five gelcoat colors, matching seat graphics, powder-coated hardware, billet motor bracket w/aluminum knee braces, custom flow-coated floors, foot throttle and shifter.
Options on test boat: 2.5 upgrade (\$2,543), hydraulic motor lift

(\$1,318), hydraulic steering (\$937), liquid-filled speedometer (\$105), mechanical trim gauge (\$675), extra gelcoat color (\$312), white-out blizzard package (\$351)
Price as tested: \$40,155
Top speed, radar: 90.4 mph
Builder's estimated speed in optimum conditions: 101 mph
Maximum rpm: 7,500
0-30: 6.38 seconds
0-40: 9.11 seconds
0-50: 12.94 seconds
0-60: 17.03 seconds
Speed at 2,000 rpm: n/a
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 28.9 mph
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 45.5 mph

Cougar Custom Boats
Box 772
Salmon Arm, British Columbia
Canada V1E4N8
(250) 832-3603