

NEW RHIBS

AN AFFORDABLE OPTION

BY KEITH INGRHAM

New Zealand boatbuilders have always been at the forefront of rigid hull inflatable boat designs. Some of the prominent builders such as Naiad, Rayglass Protector, Aquapro and Lancer lead the field of big-boat designs, with numerous other smaller production companies specialising in inflatable boats.

Like all manufacturing in New Zealand, as more companies look to go offshore to create new markets to remain competitive, they need to look at production supply close to those international target markets.

These challenges, while not without some risk, mean companies must make the most of cheaper labour and materials to remain competitive against the spiralling number of foreign imports into New Zealand. This trend has expanded into the marine boatbuilding industry, with companies like Aquapro being one of the more recent to move its New Zealand production of inflatable boats to China.

At this year's International Boat Show in Auckland we met an old, familiar face, Chris Bradley, late of the Auckland ferry scene, who is now the New Zealand agent in charge of marketing a new range of vessels, including RHIB inflatables.

Atomix Boats is a New Zealand company that has set up its production business offshore with a view to bringing a new dimension to boating in New Zealand. One of the founders, Joseph Clapp, has a diverse background, including time spent building and operating a small fleet of taxis, and working as a mechanic in his own workshop.

Joseph has always had a passion for boats, and when the



Nic de Mey at the helm of the Atomix 820

opportunity arose in China to take a New Zealand product and manufacture and market it internationally he put boats at the top of his list.

Joseph, like most Kiwis, had a keen interest in the sea, and wanted to give New Zealanders the option of making both inflatable and sports boats more accessible to the diving and commercial tender market as well as the recreational boatie.

To do this he needed a partner who was a Chinese national and turned to his old friend Xu "William" Wei, whom he met while he was studying in New Zealand.

Early discussions revealed opportunities in Xu's homeland, and between them they have now constructed a boat production

Clearly, building the boats in China has not compromised the quality and product materials

factory in Jin Hua, a city 300km south of Shanghai. Once the factory was enclosed they needed to develop the designs and hulls of the new range of vessels and train the local Chinese staff in New Zealand construction methods and quality standards.

This has taken some 2.5 years and they are now proud to see the first of the Atomix range being introduced into New Zealand. These boats are all New Zealand designed and built using New Zealand boatbuilding technological skills, guidance and quality control.

The moulds were built by Kiwis on-site, and a New Zealand team at the factory manages production and quality assurance. Other skills and labour have been derived from the local workforce, after giving them training and supervision at the factory.

"We have found the Chinese to be very willing and loyal workers who are quick to learn and adopt new skills," says Joseph.

The Atomix brand covers a range of RHIBs from 5m to 8.2m in length, consisting of GRP-constructed hulls and consoles, with PVC tubes. The vessels were designed by Brett Bakewell-White, who is widely recognised for his work in the offshore powerboat racing fleet, including *Sleepyhead* and *Pro-floors*, which currently lead the New Zealand offshore powerboat series.

Other projects to come off Bakewell-White's design table include the 30m racing supermaxi *Konica Minolta*, a 47m luxury motoryacht, and the fleet of high-speed RIBs for the New Zealand police used during the 2003 America's Cup regatta.

Here in New Zealand, Atomix Boats has taken a different approach to selling their boats during the introduction phase by selling direct from the New Zealand agent through Bakewell-White's design offices in Auckland. "What better way to get comfortable with your new boat than to meet the designer, take it for a test drive, and know that the design team is right behind you every step of the way," says Joseph.

With the support of the New Zealand boatbuilder Nic de Mey, all the new boats are fully checked on arrival and final fitouts completed, including outboard motors, controls and steering. The vessel is then mounted on her selected DMW trailer, tested and sea-trialed before being handed over to her new owner.

Atomix Boats launched its new RHIB 500 at the Auckland International Boat Show. This little tender or safety boat-type RHIB comes from the same design stable as her bigger brothers in the 820 series.

Chris says she is wider than most comparable RHIBs with a beam of 2.30m, so there's much more room for big fellows and gear, and improved stability. With the 60hp Mercury Big Foot outboard, the RHIB 500 can get along and handles superbly. She is fitted with an inbuilt motor well that provides added security at the stern from sneaky, back-door waves. There is a built-in under-floor tube for steering and engine cables, which keeps them clear of the deck and inflatable tubes, making one thing less to trip over.

The centre console and motorbike seating arrangement is functional and well balanced. The 500 comes with a 75 litre under-floor tank plus a 25 litre tote tank under the back of the seating base, while the battery is easily accessible in the ►

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