



MASTER CRAFT

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Boatbuilder extraordinaire Peter O'Brien has produced his finest achievement, a purpose-built gameboat that is truly world-class. David Lockwood is won over by the new-look O'Brien 47.

Peter O'Brien is one of the virtuosos of our gameboat building industry, but it's taken until now for the master to compose his magnum opus – his greatest work – a 47-footer that is truly world-class. Built on the back of decades of boatbuilding and fishing experience, the new 47 is pretty and practical, fast and nimble, comfortable and serviceable. The perfect compromise.

The second O'Brien 47 to come out of the moulds, *Kekoa* (Hawaiian for 'the brave one') is a purpose-built marlin boat that wowed this writer and, moreover, has won over her discerning skipper, Capt Luke Fallon. Coming out of the first *Assegai*, called simply *Assegai* – a boat built by another of our gameboat greats, Barry Martin – Capt Fallon had a great benchmark against which to judge his new boat.

Kekoa was launched on September 1st, 2006, in Townsville, where the O'Brien yard has long been based. Tellingly, the crew fished the Townsville Tournament the very next day. From there they headed north for what was described by many as the worst heavy-tackle season, in terms of weather, in living memory. They fished virtually every day until Christmas before steaming home via a two-week charter at Fraser Island.



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“Kekoa is proof positive that practicality and pretty lines aren’t mutually exclusive.”

It was at her berth at Marina Mirage on the Gold Coast that *BlueWater* caught up with the well-travelled skipper and *Kekoa*. Capt Fallon was just back after a week of trying to nail a client a World Record blue marlin on 3kg tackle. Previously, he’s accounted for black marlin to better than 1100lb, blues to 500lb, striped marlin, sailfish and lots more. He’s also managed to hook a World Record blue marlin on 3kg, but failed to finish off the feat and put it on the deck.

But, for this boating commentator, *Kekoa* was special for reasons other than the runs it had on the board and the undeniable fishing prowess of its

crack crew. I have spent time aboard O’Brien boats before fishing Cape Bowling Green and off Sydney. While built for the long term and especially smooth riding, as is a requirement of any boat operating out of wind-ravaged Townsville, they always presented as modest working boats.

Although Capt Fallon will tell you *Kekoa* is still a “purpose-built working boat”, it is proof positive that practicality and pretty lines aren’t mutually exclusive. In fact, production boatbuilders could learn a lot from the amazingly simple systems on *Kekoa*. Whereas many imported Yankee battlewagons are reliant on 240V power and a genset or two to run everything from fridges to bait tank pumps, O’Brien prefers virtually infallible (or is that inFallonible?) DC systems.

“The only reason you have to run the generator on *Kekoa* is for the air-conditioning and half the fridges,” explains Capt Fallon as we scuttle through the accommodating engine room that, compared to his previous boat, is a dream for the full-time skipper to work in. Should your generator give up the ghost mid-charter, no worries, you can carry on fishing and living aboard.

O’BRIEN BUILDING BLOCKS

O’Brien, a shipwright by trade, says the 47 hull is based on everything he has done in the past. This includes a lot of hands-on experience in the gamefishing industry, dating back as far as 1976, when he started driving and fishing Queensland tournaments. His son, Leigh, who works in the factory today, also became one of the best deckies in the business in his day.

But some things have changed, most noticeably involving the outside of *Kekoa* – that is, there’s been an acquisition of good looks!

“The O’Brien 43 remains one of the most popular boats of all time with working skippers,” explains O’Brien. “So we always knew we built great boats; we just needed a bit of style. The Yankee Carolina boats are great, but I didn’t want to build a pretty European-type of boat for the ladies.”

For a yard that produces just one handbuilt boat a year, it was obviously a big investment to make new moulds and, in effect, rebuild the Townsville factory. But that is what they did. O’Brien says it was a big undertaking, but clearly it’s paying dividends. He says he gets a lot of criticism about his small production run, but he will always stick to what he does best, and that’s making fully custom charter boats.

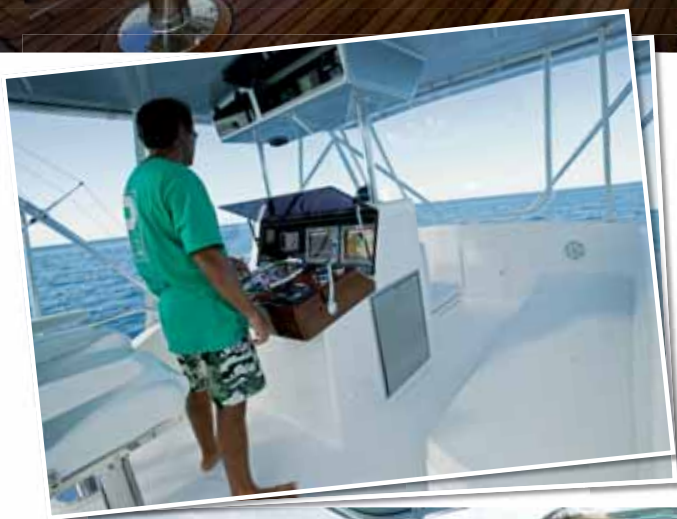
“I’ve built 36 boats so far and the new 47 is based on all the mistakes, the good and the bad things, I’ve learnt from,” says O’Brien. “You can talk all day about them, but gameboats are a compromise, a huge compromise.

“You have to make a dry boat that doesn’t thump, a boat that carries plenty of fuel and backs up well ... so weight distribution is everything,” he says, adding that they’ve moved the weight around on the 47.

The new O’Brien 47 has a variable deadrise hull with 18 degrees of deadrise at the transom, a deep vee for a 47-footer, and a small keel on which the boat can sit on the slip. The resulting craft has proven fast and dry, great in reverse and smooth under way. It’s also buoyant in the transom, but it doesn’t push any more water than usual and doesn’t dig in like a deep-vee.

Capt Fallon says *Kekoa* is more manoeuvrable than *Assegai* and he has nothing but praise for the twin Cummins 670hp QSM11 fully electronic diesels with Quickshift electronic controls. No smoke to deal with and great economy. But more on the performance later.





Top: Capt Luke Fallon surveys the expansive cockpit with its ample freezers and brine tank.

Middle: The central flybridge helm houses concealed electronics and Palm Beach-style split throttles.

Bottom: The helm atop the Black Marlin tower offers exceptional views and sports a full set of repeater electronics.

Each O'Brien boat is handbuilt, with the 47 taking six weeks to lay up the hull and deck, but up to 15,000 hours to finish the interior. The hull is fashioned from solid GRP with unidirectional rovings and vinylester resin, balsa-cored sides with glued 200mm square tiles to prevent delamination and distortion, and foam-cored decks to reduce weight. The doors and cupboards, even the shower liners, are all built by hand and often bagged for further weight savings. There is no timber in the boat.

ONBOARD SYSTEMS

Kekoa is built to survey (as, indeed, are all O'Brien boats) – in this case, 2B for

working, liveaboard charter fishing. As such, there are the requisite fire-fighting systems, the engine fuel and vent shut-offs, and a bilge manifold system with engine-driven option for draining the various compartments of the boat.

As mentioned, O'Brien is also big on DC power. "DC power is far more efficient than AC and just about everything is 24V on *Kekoa*," explains O'Brien. "It saves on servicing and weight. We still start generators to cook and fit quick-recovery hot-water systems, but there's not the reliance on generators, as you will find on some other boats."

Having said that, *Castille 3*, the O'Brien 47 under construction at the time of writing and destined to be driven by Capt Dean Beech, is a much more luxurious boat, with greater 240V systems. "We're building custom boats and so, in terms of the fitout, we will do, within reason, whatever the client demands," adds O'Brien.

Meanwhile, there are plenty of other smart things about *Kekoa*. A JEC Combi multiple water-cooled marine condensing unit is used for the air-con, water maker, onboard gurney or pressure washer and bait freezers. An engine-driven compressor powers all the boat's freezers, instead of a generator. And there is a common drain or plumbing system, rather than lots of lines and skin fittings. In fact, there isn't a skin fitting at all.

You can also remove an engine without having to cut through bulkheads or pull it apart and rebuild it in situ. The spacious, two-pack, painted engineroom also features fan-forced ventilation, one-third of the air in with two-thirds out, and excellent sound insulation for the already quiet Cummins (mounted on solid GRP bearers and flexible mounts). There is

room around all sides for servicing, big sea strainers (without glass inspection windows due to survey) and custom O'Brien muffler systems.

Kekoa also has a special O'Brien oil-change system, which includes an integral 150lt oil tank in the keel. This is where the boat's 1000lt water supply is also kept, for a low centre of gravity. The 2800lt of diesel is kept in another integral GRP tank. Elsewhere, in a separate utility room roughly amidships, are the filters for the water-maker, all the batteries, the charger, inverter and battery control system. It makes good sense to keep such things away from the heat of the engines.

FISHING FEATURES

Made for fishing, the cockpit is uncompromising, with perfect coaming heights and plenty of support for crew to lock horns on the leader. The coamings are teak and fitted with six heavy-duty Lees rodholders, with the amidships ones the swivelling type for towing big baits from bent butts.

Bridge access is by way of a vertical (crew only) three-rung stepladder, so as not to intrude on fishing space. Under this is one of the two big bait freezers and a brine tank. The dual-core system can be run off the engine or 240V. There is an additional fridge and freezer on the bridge for refreshments and long-term provisions.

There are also two infloor tuna tubes under the heavy-duty Relax chair, where they won't get in the way of the action. Capt Fallon adds a plastic tub for carrying live baits for those odd occasions that he livebaits, preferring it to a permanent tank that requires maintenance and may get in the way.

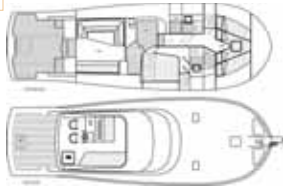
Although the Rupp triple-spreader outriggers are a lovely bit of gear, you need to look after them. Capt Fallon has made them even better by custom fitting jam-cleats under the gunwales, so there's nothing whatsoever around the decks upon which you can foul a line or snag a loop of leader.

BRIDGE TO THE SKY

Electronics are concealed and protected in a console in the bridge. It's always a matter of personal choice but, for what it's worth, *Kekoa* has twin Raymarine E120s, including depth sounder with a 1kW transducer – all transducers are built in as an integral part of the boat – and simple Interphase forward-facing sonar (of dubious use for fish-finding from my experience). And the best thing of all: an underwater towing camera linked to a big screen in the saloon, so the crew and clients can watch the strikes.

There is also a teak helm pod with Palm Beach-style split throttles that,

SPEC CHECK



O'BRIEN 47 – KEKOA

PRICE AS TESTED

Price on application for full custom boat.

OPTIONS FITTED

Fully custom charter boat in 2B survey with the works.

PRICED FROM

Price on application to suit client.

GENERAL

Material: GRP hull and cored sides, decks and interior fittings

Type: Variable deadrise monohull

Length overall: 14.95m

Hull length: 14.33m

Waterline length: 12.60m

Beam: 4.70m

Draft: 1.00m

Weight: About 13,000kg dry with Cummins QSM11 670hp

CAPACITIES

Berths: 6 + 2 + 1

Fuel: 2800lt

Water: 1000lt plus desal

Oil: 150lt

Holding tank: 180lt

ENGINE

Make/model: Twin Cummins QSM11s

Type: Fully electronic straight-six, 4-stroke diesel engine with fuel injection, turbocharging and aftercooling

Rated hp: 670hp@2300rpm

Displacement: 10.80lt

Weight: 1188kg each

Gearboxes (make/ratio): Twin Disc

MGX5114A Quickshift transmissions 1.48:1

Props: Four-blade bronze

SUPPLIED BY

Kekoa Sports Fishing & Personalised Charters. See www.kekoa.com.au for details

BUILT BY

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even though they are electronic Quickshift models, exhibited no delay. Plus twin Smartcraft electronic engine-management and monitoring panels, a spread of analogue gauges, and a single-wire, power-steering system linked to a sturdy, sexy wheel.

Strataglass clears surround the bridge, which has twin high-backed Navigator helm seats that are nice and supportive for long, coastal delivery work. They don't get in the way of fishing, however, as Capt Fallon is one of those skippers who, calm or rough, prefers to drive from up top in the Black Marlin tower. A full set of repeater electronics is there, along with a pancake teaser reel. He loves to switchbait and, if you want a treat, check out the video footage of a blue marlin taking the bait (at www.kekoa.com.au). Wow!

INDOOR LIVING

While a working boat, *Kekoa* flaunts the new, upmarket finish that you can expect from O'Brien these days. A charter boat, it typically caters for five to six people in total and only a maximum of three guests for liveboard trips. Intimacy, great service and serious fishing action are thereby assured.

The twin doors on the centreline reveal a saloon flanked by lounges that double as impromptu beds for crew. Plus, there is a bed in the bridge for the skipper during those bad nights anchored behind the reef. Details such as ceiling handrails and a concealed rod locker for up to eight outfits are the mark of a good gameboat. Tackle is stashed under the lounges.

The aft window opens for fresh air and there are big views of the wake when indoor fishing. Plus, the 30-inch LCD television is, as touched on, linked to the boat's E120 and bait camera, so you can monitor the action in air-conditioned comfort. I'm told dinners are more often cooked in the cockpit than the galley and, take it from me, Capt Fallon is a handy chef. The galley is big on fridge and food-prep space, storage and spice racks for the gourmet.

Accommodation ranges through two cabins and there are two heads. The stateroom is amidships with an offset double bed. Up front, there are four generous bunks lining the bow. The finishes in all cabins are at once practical, but also comfortable for liveboard boating during the heavy-tackle season. The heads feature premium Tecma loos and the shower stalls are beauties.

CRUISING BEAUTY

Top speed with the twin 670hp Cummins is 31-32kt and, Capt Fallon will tell you, not a whiff of smoke. But with a working boat and professional



crew, fuel efficiency and fishability count for more. At 1850rpm, the boat cruises at about 25kt for 150-160 litres per hour and a range of around 400 nautical miles.

Of course, at 8kt, where the engines use 16 litres per hour, the range is a lot more. I'm told the trolling range is actually 1380 nautical miles. Capt Fallon spends most of his time gadding between the Gold Coast and Lizard Island and towing baits in between.

I put *Kekoa* through its paces and, yes, it backs up really well, as one might expect. At troll speeds it's got a sweet, bedded-in note that the fish obviously agree with. From an engineering and charter perspective, it's also a simple, quintessential, easily maintained, go-get-'em gameboat. But now, at long last, it has good looks. The complete package – made right here in Australia.

"Anyone that's in the industry who works boats will know I have all these boats in survey still out there and earning money," says O'Brien. "I am just continuing the tradition of providing these people with a reliable boat, and I think what we lacked in the past – the style – is there now.

"We are building a bigger boat, a more luxurious boat, and will end up building two boats a year," he says, before resuming work on his next 47. 📷