

Size Matters

The new Ranger Tugs R29 proves that good things, and lots of cruising possibilities, can come in small packages.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY PETER A. JANSSEN



We were heading across Rosario Strait on a late spring Monday morning, with the San Juan Islands off in the distance, their low mountain tops peeking through the mist, almost as if they were in a Japanese painting, one unfolding into the other. I had just left Anacortes, on the upper coast of Washington state, with Jeff Messmer, vice president of sales and marketing for Ranger Tugs, on their new R29. I couldn't wait to get into the San Juans, some of the best cruising grounds in the United States, if not the world. Although I'd been there several times over the years, Messmer, a native of the area, promised to introduce me to places off the beaten track. That was fine with me.

So I had some surprises in store for the next two days in terms of exploring new islands, new coves and new anchorages. The real surprise, however, was the boat itself. As we cruised over the open waters of the strait at an easy 15 knots through light rain and 1-foot chop, I had to keep reminding myself I was on a 29-foot boat. This became a recurring theme during our trip.

Ranger Tugs introduced the R29 at the Seattle Boat Show this past winter; we were on hull 19. The company has made 21- and 25-foot models for several years. The R29 was a logical extension of the line, and it has already proven extremely popular. Some new owners, Messmer explains, are people moving up, families looking for a boat they can take cruising (two staterooms, a good-size



salon/galley plus a cockpit) to replace a smaller weekend. Others are owners of larger boats who are moving down in size, realizing the Ranger R29 offers many of the amenities and cruising capabilities of their bigger boats at a much lower cost. "The magic," Messmer says, "is to make all the features of a larger boat work on a 29-footer."

In addition, the Ranger Tugs R29 (which only weighs 9,250 pounds) is fully trailerable, even by a three-quarter-ton pickup truck. You'll probably need a low-cost annual permit to tow its 10-foot beam on the highway, but you won't need chase cars or wide-load escorts. And its vertical clearance is just 13 feet 2 inches on the optional triple-axle trailer (\$10,000), so you shouldn't have any problems with standard highway overpasses. This means you can

both extend your cruising capabilities while lowering your cost of ownership. "Say you want to do the Great Loop from St. Louis, Missouri, to Mobile, Alabama," says Messmer, "and that's all the time you have that year. So you put the R29 on the trailer in Mobile and come back home and then start in Mobile again next year. Or say you're cruising in Florida during hurricane season. Just put the boat on your trailer and head north." Not to mention, you don't need to rent a slip for the season if you have a place to keep the trailer.

But back to the trip itself. We left Skyline Marine Center in Anacortes in midmorning,

PARADISE. The small entry cove on Jones Island in the San Juans (opening spread) is a cruiser's heaven.

ILLUSTRATION: BRENDA WEAVER



headed past a small island owned by Paul Allen (it helps to have been a co-founder of Microsoft), across Rosario Strait and through Lopez Pass to Center Island. I'd never heard of Center Island before. My previous trips to the San Juans were to large marina/destination resorts at Roche Harbor on San Juan Island or Rosario on Orcas Island. As we approached Center Island we passed lush, green hillsides with splashes of light where the sun shone through. One tree had a huge eagle's nest on the top, but it was empty; this morning, nobody was home. It seemed a boater's paradise with pristine water, rocky shorelines, indented coves and only a handful of other boats around. Messmer's family has a summer home with a dock on Center Island, so we tied up there and walked up the hill to check things out.

Center Island actually is a small, 180-acre, summer home community. No motorized vehicles are allowed, so we took the family golf cart for a tour to the small landing strip. (Pilots buzz it first to chase the deer off and then come around again to land.) We also checked out the small community center with its own dock, the volunteer fire department and the bulletin board listing bikes and old outboards and older boats for sale. It seemed as if I'd stepped into the middle of a Norman Rockwell painting.

When we pulled out on the boat again, I realized how good the visibility was. I settled into the large companion seat on the port side, which could hold two comfortably. It's in front of the dinette, and the back of the seat flips forward to extend the dinette. The helm, with a single seat, is opposite. There are large opening windows on both sides of the boat, all with screens. Two big opening hatches let in lots of light overhead, one over the driver and one over the companion. Another surprise: There's a six-bottle, temperature-controlled wine cooler under the companion seat; a Nova-Kool fridge; and a Clarion sound system under the helm seat. Even when under way, it's easy to move around the boat. It's all one level, from the cockpit to the helm.



FIRST STOP. The brand-new R29 tied up at the dock on Center Island.

RANGER TUGS R29

SPECIFICATIONS

- LOA:** 29'
- Beam:** 10'
- Draft:** 28"
- Disp.:** 9,250 lbs.
- Fuel:** 150 gals.
- Water:** 70 gals.
- Contact:** Ranger Tugs, rangertugs.com
- Base Price:** \$214,937

PERFORMANCE

TEST POWER: (1) 260 hp Yanmar diesel engine. Speeds measured by GPS in East Sound, Orcas Island, Washington, in flat conditions with two people on board, half fuel and half water. Sound levels measured at the helm in dB-A.

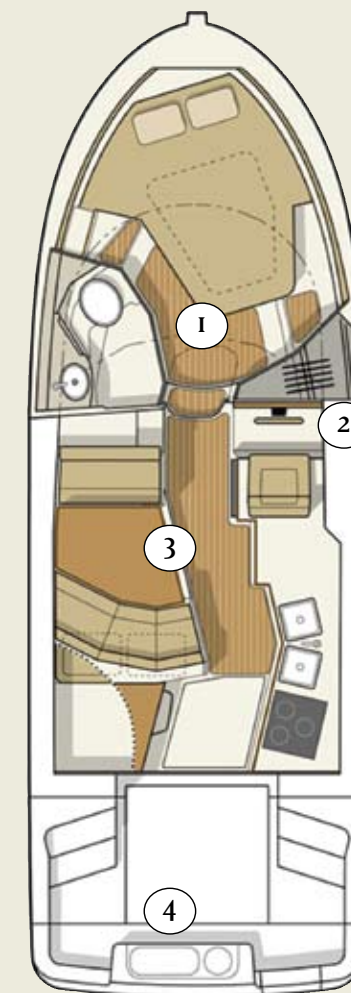
RPM	KNOTS	GPH	DB-A
675	2.9	0.3	54
1,000	4.3	0.6	64
1,500	6.0	1.3	62
1,800	6.7	1.9	65
2,100	7.9	2.9	70
2,500	9.2	4.4	69
2,800	11.6	5.8	76
3,100	13.9	7.5	74
3,400	16.3	9.4	75
3,600	18.3	10.7	75
4,075	22.3	13.4	77

PROS:

- Lots of cruising capabilities in a 29-foot trailerable boat.
- Very creative use of space in the salon.
- Good-size master and guest cabins for a 29-footer.

CONS:

- Can't move or adjust helm seat while driving the boat.
- The transom door to the swim platform needs some help. The latch to hold it shut doesn't fit well, and there's nothing to hold it open.



INSIDE: ① The comfortable master cabin with 6 feet 3 inches of headroom. ② The sliding door, which gives you easy access to the side deck once you slide the panel with the throttle back toward the galley. ③ The aft cabin, with room for two. ④ The cockpit, with the propane tank in the cabinet in the transom.

As I glanced at the charts, a seemingly unconcerned Messmer steered us between a handful of small, rock-strewn, islands. I was grateful for his local knowledge. I was mentally bracing myself for a hard grounding, but he'd been up here many times before. At low tide we passed Spencer Spit off Lopez Island on the left. It's a state park with a beautiful, inviting, white beach — you don't see many white beaches in this part of the world. A few mooring balls dotted a protected spot in the spit, but we were the only boat in sight. Up ahead, Mount Constitution beckoned on Orcas Island. At 2,454 feet, it's the highest spot in the San Juans, but it was covered by clouds this morning. Still, we headed to Orcas for a lunch stop, cruising up the six-mile-long East Sound, which cuts Orcas in half, passing Rosario on the right. It has been taken over by new local owners and is undergoing renovations, although the marina seemed open. At the top of the sound we tied up at the town dock and walked into the small village of Eastsound for lunch at the Sunflower Cafe (great clam chowder and sandwiches) and then wandered around Darvill's bookstore on Main Street.

Eastsound is cozy and inviting, but we had more to see, so we were off around to Jones Island, a state park off the tip of Deer Harbor on Orcas. We passed 25 tiny islands (some not much more than the tip of a rock) getting there, and I was sobered to see a substantial rock outcropping on the left as we entered the protected cove with its welcoming dock at Jones Island.

The Pig War, or How We Got the San Juans

Today, the San Juan Islands are a pristine, peaceful archipelago of a dozen or so major islands, as much a part of the United States as, say, New York or Seattle. However, it was not always that way. Indeed, the question of who owned the San Juans almost set off a shooting war between the United States and Great Britain.

In the late 1700s, explorers from Russia, Spain and Great Britain roamed that part of the world, all trying to find riches in fur, land or gold, with Britain's Hudson Bay Co. finally having the greatest influence. An 1846 treaty tried to settle international boundaries by giving all of Vancouver Island to the Brits, while (intentionally or not) being ambiguous about where the boundary was for the San Juans themselves. The wording was not clear whether the line was Haro Strait, between the San Juans and Vancouver to the west, or Rosario Strait, between the San Juans and the United States to the east. Meanwhile, American and British farmers and miners coexisted on San Juan Island, often arguing about who owed taxes to whom.

Finally, in 1859, a disgruntled American farmer on San

Juan Island shot a pig belonging to a British farmer working for the Hudson Bay Co. after the pig kept rooting in the farmer's unfenced potato patch. The Brits threatened to arrest the farmer if he did not reimburse the owner \$100 (an enormous sum at the time) for the pig; the American offered \$10. The Pig War was on. The 14 American settlers on the island erected a 55-foot flagpole and pulled up the Stars and Stripes, which was spotted by a passing British warship. The Brits soon gathered three warships and 500 marines in the islands. The U.S. Army ordered Capt. George Pickett (who would go on to Gettysburg fame only four years later) and a company of 63 soldiers to protect American interests there.

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. The United States and Great Britain agreed to ask Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany to mediate the dispute. He appointed a three-man commission, which met in Geneva for a year before awarding the San Juans to the United States. The Pig War was over; the only casualty was the pig.

You do need to pay attention in this part of the world.

As we tied up I realized how easy it is to get around the Ranger Tugs R29. The side decks are wide with lots of nonskid, and you can hang onto the stainless-steel rails on the cabin top, which also can support a kayak or a bike, if you're so inclined. Docking is made even easier by the sliding door to the driver's right. Some creative engineering



WELCOME HOME. The salon, looking forward (top), has windows all around. The helm (above), with the galley aft, has a sliding door to the deck.



THE CRUISING LIFE. The dock on Jones Island, with the R29, is the locals' favorite. The island is a state park with great hiking trails.

makes it possible to slide the panel at the driver's right hand (with the throttle, two trim tabs and two thruster controls) straight back so there's clear access to the door. As a result, the driver can almost snag a cleat on the dock from his seat. (Many of the innovations on the Ranger Tugs R29 come from David Livingston, a boating industry veteran. He was president of Bayliner in the days when it was making 56,000 boats a year; he's also put in time at Regal, Wellcraft and Fountain, among other places. His son, John, owns Ranger Tugs, and David helps out.)

Messmer and I hiked around Jones for an hour or so, and we were alone as we circled the island, except for some deer in the forests and seals playing in the rocks along the shore.

Later that afternoon we cruised down to Fisherman Bay in Lopez Island, where I saw the advantage of the Ranger Tugs' standard bow and stern thrusters as Messmer backed into a slip at the Lopez Islander Marina Resort in at least 5 knots of current and a good 15-knot wind. He made it look easy. A word of caution: Stay in the middle of the S-turn channel coming into the bay; shoals abound. Once we tied up, I had a chance to look around the boat. The swim platform is large, with lots of extra cleats and D rings for tying up kayaks or dinks. Four black fenders are built into the trailing edge for protection. On each side of the cockpit, the three steps leading to the side decks (which also serve as boarding

stations) lift up to reveal large storage areas. A good-size center hatch lifts for easy engine access. (You can use another smaller hatch in the aft section of the salon for daily checks without having to go outdoors.) The engine is set low, with a shallow 6-degree shaft angle; it's a straight inboard, and a fairly large keel that starts about a third of the way back protects the prop and rudder. The aft sections of the boat have wide chines for stability.

We had a good dinner at the marina to celebrate a good day, and then I crashed. Messmer kindly gave me the master, forward. Another surprise: It has 6 feet 3 inches of headroom, plenty of room for me to change clothes and move about. I slept like a rock. The head is normal size, with a pullout shower. Messmer took the aft cabin, which you enter by lifting a teak hatch all the way aft in the port side of the salon, behind the dinette. It's certainly large enough for two people.

The next morning we walked half a mile or so down to the Galley restaurant — a must-stop, and it even has its own dock. I was puzzled when drivers of all the passing cars waved at us, until Messmer told me Lopez is known as "the friendly island" and waving is something of a tradition. Then we headed back to Anacortes, this time across Rosario Strait in a 2-foot chop on the beam, so we slowed to about 12 knots and had a comfortable ride. When we got to Skyline, we dropped the mast (which took about two minutes), and Messmer put the R29 on his trailer and headed home. Thinking back to the distances we covered and the comforts we enjoyed, I thought of the old adage: Good things do come in small packages. ♦

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE. Check out additional photos of the Ranger Tugs R29 at our website, motorboating.com.

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