

Whale of a boat

BY ITS OWN ADMISSION, LEADING AUSTRALIAN boat builder Riviera spent a long time evaluating pod-drive systems such as IPS and Zeus before making the leap to the next generation of marine engines.



While rival manufacturers were quick to take up the new technology, Riviera's design team studied pod drives for three years before deciding Volvo Penta's Inboard Propulsion System (IPS) was the right choice for the 4400 Sport Yacht, the company's latest European-style cruising launch.

The 4400SY debuted at the Sydney Boat Show in August, and while none has yet made its way to New Zealand, Riviera was gracious enough to fly me and my wife, Katelyn, to Hervey Bay, Queensland for an exclusive overnight trial consisting of a trip to the shores of Fraser Island – the world's largest sand island and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The trial boat was equipped with an engine upgrade – twin IPS 600 turbo diesels, as opposed to the standard IPS 500s – but if you want traditional shaft-drives, forget

it. As Riviera concept design manager Neil McCabe explains, the 4400SY was purposely designed and built around IPS.

"We believe the IPS technology is now mature so we can offer it to our clients," McCabe says. "The drives offer owners a greater sense of control and confidence."

The use of IPS also means there's no need for bow thrusters on the 4400SY, as we saw when leaving and returning to the Hervey Bay marina. The press of a button shifts the engines into low-speed mode, which is controlled via a joystick – there's no need to even touch the steering wheel. With the IPS drives' forward-facing, counter-rotating propellers capable of operating independently of one another, docking manoeuvres can be performed with pinpoint accuracy – even in a strong crosswind, in which case the drives' low-speed mode can easily be powered up from 1000rpm to 1600rpm.

Thanks to IPS, Riviera owners and users will find themselves relieved of the stress associated with docking, rafting up and other low-speed manoeuvres – and the company assures us that the 4400SY is merely the first of many IPS-powered

boats in the works.

But our weekend across the ditch wasn't about ogling engines. It was about experiencing the luxurious but relaxed lifestyle afforded by the 4400SY, and our adventure began with a morning jaunt to one of Hervey Bay's sandy atolls. We were accompanied on the 4400SY by Riviera public relations manager Denby Browning and charter skipper James Thorne.

A Riviera 41 Flybridge, with charter skipper Neal White in command and trained chef Billy Jones in the galley, served as the mother ship for the weekend and a good barometer against which to test the 4400SY's performance.

En route to the atoll, skirting the northwest side of Big Woody Island, Thorne maintained a fast cruising speed between 22 knots at 2820rpm and 26 knots at 2990rpm, against the tide, according to the Raymarine C120 chart plotter and Volvo Penta's instruments. At 26 knots the engines were using only 55 litres of diesel apiece. In contrast, the 41 Flybridge, powered by twin Cummins QSC 490hp shaft-drive diesels, was running at 24 knots but using 75 litres of fuel per hour per engine. Not only is that about 27 percent more fuel efficient, but you also get two more knots of boat speed.

The 4400SY's efficiency can also be attributed to its innovative construction: Riviera has used the latest infusion-moulding

technology to build a lightweight hull that doesn't compromise strength and durability. An environmentally friendly process, infusion moulding involves hand-laying fibreglass layers before the hull is enclosed, extracting air and then infusing resin throughout the hull, resulting in a consistent hull thickness, reduced weight and improved glass fibre to resin ratio, thereby improving overall hull strength.

Thorne and White anchored near the atoll and Jones went to work on lunch while the rest of us took the tender ashore to check out the scenery and enjoy a dip in the sparkling blue water. The water was warm for swimming, and the weather perfectly sunny with clear skies and a light, refreshing breeze. Katelyn and I strolled around the atoll, taking photos and pinching ourselves every now and then to make sure it wasn't all a dream.

After returning to the 4400SY, we gave ourselves a good rinse with the transom's hot and cold freshwater deck shower before settling down in the cockpit for a light lunch of prawn salad and white wine. Even though the day was rapidly heating up, we stayed cool thanks to the shade provided by the fixed cockpit awning.

Much like its predecessors, the 3600 and 4700 Sport Yachts, the 4400 incorporates al fresco dining and entertaining features in a big way, with appointments such as a wet



TOP: The main deck and saloon layout.
ABOVE: The accommodation layout.
Note the enormous aft cabin.

bar with stainless steel refrigerator, freshwater sink and optional stainless steel ice maker built into the port forward quarter. A long settee across the transom and high/low table with wine bottle holder and six drink holders provide room for up to four adults to dine in comfort.

Although this layout keeps the cockpit open and accessible to the saloon, I would add some portable deck chairs on the opposite side of the table as it can be tough to carry on a conversation when everyone is sitting in a row.

The cockpit and saloon meld nicely via a

wide, pillar-less, stainless steel hopper window and aft bulkhead door. This excellent design element is also seen on the 3600 and 4700 Sport Yachts and proves its practical worth by making communication between skipper and cockpit passengers easy and free-flowing, even when the boat is travelling at cruising speed.

Katelyn, who suffers from the occasional bout of motion sickness, preferred to lounge on the cockpit settee while we were under way, and while in the saloon or at the helm we had no trouble conversing with her.

Although we didn't need to use it, as the

dinghy was carried on the 41 Flybridge, the 4400SY's swim platform was equipped with an optional hydraulic lift that greatly eases the launching and retrieval of a tender or personal watercraft. The boat's stern also has a huge storage locker, accessible from the swim platform, that's ideal for fenders, dive gear and water toys. A barbecue fitted to a rail on the transom was another highlight of the stern area—and a handy tool for Jones come dinnertime.

As Thorne set a course for Platypus Bay, a sheltered anchorage near the top of Fraser Island, I monitored our progress. The

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The boat's foredeck, two views of the saloon, galley, cockpit bar, aft cabin and main cabin.

4400SY's speed topped out at 32 knots at 3300rpm, against the tide. Riviera says the boat's top speed is 34 knots, a realistic claim given that we were fighting some current and wind.

We had a good hour of travel time ahead of us, and I became engrossed in a book of recreational boating charts of the Fraser Island area. Then a cry of "Whale!" rang out and Thorne slowed the boat to idle. Kate-

lyn, Browning and I went forward, cameras in hand, to scan the horizon for a glimpse of nature's most majestic mammals.

Hervey Bay is whale-watching territory—we counted at least half a dozen tourist boats motoring around in search of humpbacks—so spying one or two shouldn't have come as a surprise. But we encountered at least four pods of four to five whales apiece—including adults and calves—as we slowly headed toward Platypus Bay. At first they appeared as a brief spray of mist on the horizon, but as we got closer they seemed to slow down and take an interest in the boat; some came within 20 feet of the bow, entertaining us by rolling over on their backs and waving flippers in the air. Occasionally their great flukes would break the surface of the water and come crashing down as the whales went back under, delivering a tremendous smacking sound.

Whale-watching on the foredeck afforded us a chance to check out its amenities, which include a spacious sun pad with rails and drink holders, a remote-controlled spotlight, gleaming bow rails with safety wires, a self-loading bow roller and electric Muir windlass. The anchor locker has a rope/chain divider and two access hatches. Standard ground tackle is a 20kg anchor with 70m of 8mm galvanised chain.

As the whales moved off into the distance, Thorne sped up to continue our voyage. By now it was late afternoon, even

TOP: Room for two at the helm station.
ABOVE, FROM LEFT: The guest bathroom and laundry locker.

though time seemed to have stopped the moment we boarded the 4400SY. We were in no hurry to reach our anchorage, but Browning had suggested going ashore to watch the sun set once we got there. With that vague objective in mind we bid adieu to the humpbacks and settled in for the remainder of the cruise to Platypus Bay.

I was impressed with the helm set-up, whether driving or riding shotgun. The helm seat is a high-backed double chair upholstered in genuine leather. The helmsman's half of the chair is fully adjustable via electric controls on the dashboard, while a moulded footrest with teak inlays keeps driver and passenger comfortable. The seat has a bolster for skippers who prefer to stand. I had no trouble reading or reaching the instruments and controls on the dashboard, and the throttle and steering wheel are well placed for the driver's comfort.

The 4400SY handles with precision, maintaining speeds well over 20 knots in sharp turns. The ride was soft for the most part, with a few sharp bumps but nothing too upsetting. The 4400SY is perfect for locales such as Hervey Bay, but I would like to challenge it in rougher open water. Thorne and Browning had driven the boat up from Riviera's base in Coomera a few

days earlier, so I have little doubt it would prove its worth in a seaway.

After fulfilling our goal of going ashore to watch the sun go down, we returned to the 4400SY to find Jones working the transom barbecue. He was cooking a scrumptious meal of seafood and salad. After dinner we retired to the saloon to watch a DVD on the flat-screen TV that pops up from inside the bulkhead at the touch of a button. After that White joined Katelyn, Browning and me for a card game around the boat's folding timber table with high/low pedestal that converts it from dining to coffee table. We could all easily fit on the portside leather settee, which runs the length of the saloon, opposite the galley.

Although we didn't put it to much use because of Jones' work on the 41 Flybridge, the galley was well appointed with a dishwasher, recessed electric cooktop, microwave oven and refrigerator with freezer compartment, plus a pull-out pantry and numerous cabinets, drawers and overhead lockers.

Bedtime presented a choice between the 4400SY's two staterooms: a traditional forward cabin with island queen berth and spacious ensuite or the 9m² aft cabin with double athwartships berth plus a single berth for a child or extra adult passenger.

The aft cabin has private access to the main ensuite, which can also be entered through a door in the companionway, and its double berth lifts up to reveal a large storage area. A machinery room containing the water heater and plumbing manifolds is accessible through a small door in the aft cabin's forward bulkhead.

At first I was surprised that the boat offered only two cabins, but upon seeing the sheer size of the aft accommodation I realised Riviera's design team had cleverly

taken advantage of the space freed up by the IPS drives. With traditional shaft-drive engines much of that space would be lost. "Our challenge with the 4400 Sport Yacht was to develop a model that would fit neatly between the original 3600 Sport Yacht and the 4700," McCabe says. "It would have to deliver the benefits of the 4700 in a slightly smaller package. The propulsion system alone had a major effect on the design simply because it allowed us so much more accommodation space."

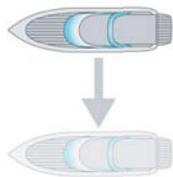
The night passed peacefully and in the morning we awoke to a fine breakfast of muesli, fruit and yogurt. Dingoes were running along the Fraser Island shore and off in the distance our whale friends had returned. But we had to get back to the Hervey Bay airport for our return flight to Brisbane, so Thorne fired up the IPS drives while I boarded the 41 Flybridge to get some running shots of the 4400SY as we made a beeline for the marina.

The breeze had strengthened somewhat since the day before, and I was given the dubious honour of docking the 4400SY. But thanks to the IPS drives it proved to be an easy and even fun task—so much so that I did it twice, from different directions.

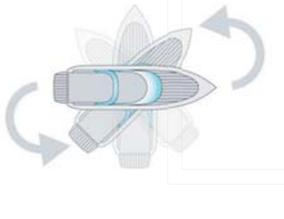
Reluctantly, Katelyn and I gathered our belongings and disembarked. The crew bid us a fond farewell and we left the marina with huge smiles on our faces. The 4400SY had proven an ideal overnight getaway, with strong performance and truly innovative features. Some people might prefer the three-cabin layout of the 4700SY, or the commanding views of a flybridge, but our experience aboard Riviera's latest was filled with extraordinary moments enhanced by a boat that couldn't have been better suited to the occasion. ■■■

IPS CONTROL

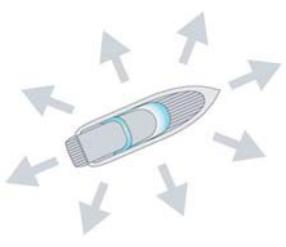
With the IPS low-speed system engaged, the joystick can:



move the boat laterally to and from the dock...



spin it 360°...



move it with precision in any direction.



TOP: A twin IPS installation.

ABOVE: Berthing has never been so easy.

SPECIFICATIONS

BOAT	
model	4400 Sport Yacht
designer	Riviera
builder	Riviera
construction	resin-infused GRP hull; hand-laid moulded GRP deck and enclosed hardtop with core
thickness	variable
loa	15.12m, 49ft 7in
lwl	13.91m, 45ft 8in
boa	4.58m, 15ft
draught	1.2m, 3ft 11in
displacement (dry)	12,500kg, 27,600lb
horsepower range	370-435hp
engine options	IPS 500 or 600
max speed	35kts
fuel capacity	1500L, 396 US gal
water capacity	460L, 122 US gal
price as tested	AU\$927,005
packages from	AU\$835,980
ENGINE	
make	Volvo Penta
type	2 x IPS 600
horsepower	435hp
displacement	5.5L
propeller	twin Nibral three-blade, counter-rotating
price	AU\$13,383
boat package supplied by	The Riviera Group