

Natural Attraction

An Avian Detour Adds Variety to Our Krogen Express 52 Sea Trial

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AFTER WE PASS UNDER THE WABASSO BRIDGE, I push the throttles forward, leaving the toney waterfront estates of Orchid Island in our wake. For many cruisers northbound on the ICW, the next 50 miles of waterway represent an exercise in arithmetic and tedium.

With the marked channel running right down the middle of the broad Indian River lagoon, the distant, low-relief shorelines offer little in the way of sightseeing, reducing most crews to counting the passing miles or waving at southbound traffic. But there are always points of interest if you know where to look. Our search will begin near the town of Sebastian and end at a small, nearby island that is home to one of Florida's most interesting bird populations.

It is an ideal day to be on the water. The season's first winter cold front pushed through last night, bringing crisp, dry air and clear skies to South Florida. A quick check of the instruments confirms that we are easing along at 16 knots into a moderate headwind, burning just less than 17 gallons an hour at 2,700 rpm. Those are pretty impressive numbers for any boat but especially for a 52-foot luxury yacht.

After duly noting these figures in my notebook, I relinquish the helm and return to the task of scouting for dolphin. Sure enough, it doesn't take long for some of the lagoon's resident cetaceans to drop in for a frolic in our wake. Technically, this is a working trip — a sea trial of a factory-fresh Krogen Express — but it feels more like a pleasure cruise.





Aptly named Pelican Island hosts a colony of white pelicans. Boats can approach but should be mindful of sanctuary boundaries.

Among our crew is John Tegtmeier, the principal at Krogen Express and a man who has become quite adept at blending the business and the pleasures of boating. By his own accounting, John didn't plan to own a boat company. After purchasing a 42-foot Krogen trawler, the former restaurateur and his wife, Betsie, were looking forward to years of leisurely cruising.

Then an opportunity presented itself, and he couldn't say no.

He recalls, "The company was building a fantastic line of trawlers but also had one faster boat — the Krogen Express — that was a whole different animal. They were doing so well with the trawlers that they didn't have a lot of time for the Express," he says. "They were looking for someone who could make the boat his full-time focus."

In the fall of 2001, John decided to become that person. Though certainly not the first retired entrepreneur to take on the seemingly idyllic title of boatbuilder, he felt comfortable in his choice, based on his knowledge of and love for the Krogen brand. "It was fun stepping into a product of such quality," he says, "but I knew we could make it even better." The original Express measured 49 feet in length. It rode on a unique hull shape created by legendary designer James Krogen, with styling by his son Kurt.

The second incarnation of the Express debuted in the fall of 2003. Now measuring 52 feet overall, it utilizes the same underwater footprints as the 49 but provides that little bit of extra elbowroom that was lacking in certain key areas. Built in the same Taiwanese yard as the Krogen trawlers, the Express 52 displays an identically exemplary level of interior finish, as well as very high mechanical standards.

Being a boater first and foremost, John has developed a very hands-on style of management, racking up more than 1,500 hours of time aboard the nine boats he has delivered to date. "I make a point of not only running each boat," he says "but also

staying aboard, using the showers and the bunks. You hear a lot of things at midnight that you don't hear in the daytime."

This attention to detail has resulted in more than 125 subtle upgrades in the Express 52 over the past four years, he says. "Any time we can find a way to improve the boat, we do it, within reason. Our goal is to build the best boat possible, and the cost of construction is not the driving force."

In the case of the latest 52, which I'm aboard today, the literal driving force is a pair of 480-hp Yanmar diesels, which can move this substantial yacht to a top speed of around 23 knots. Key to this performance is James Krogen's visionary hull design, which employs a long waterline with a plumb-stemmed, fine-entry bow and a full-displacement midsection.

Aft, there's a hard-chine, lobster boat-style stern with just five degrees of deadrise. The result is a boat that can run with great efficiency at its 9.4-knot hull speed — burning around 3 gph — and can also plane easily and maintain an impressively economical cruise speeds in the mid to high teens.

Being a former trawler owner, John says it took him a while to grasp the true value of faster operation. "Before [taking on the Express], I thought speed was just for people in a hurry," he explains. "Now I equate it with relaxation. When you wake up aboard a slow boat, the boat tells you where you can go that day. When you have the option of running faster, you can cover the same distance in four or five hours instead of nine. This leaves you more time to do other things — or gives you the option of outrunning a storm."

There is no bad weather to skirt on this day, but we do make use of the 52's 20-knot cruise potential to get us to our destination ahead of the rising tide. The charts show a depth of five feet at mean low water just to the west of flashing day beacon #71 — a fact our sounder confirms. That's plenty of water for the 52's moderate draft, so out goes the anchor and down drops the dinghy.



Not only does the extended hardtop on the Krogen Express provide ample shelter for the cockpit, but there's also room to store a substantial RIB up top. Our tender, like everything else on this upscale cruiser, is first-class. We are grateful for its speed and chop-cutting abilities as we motor across the wind and run eastward into the increasingly shallow water of the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge.

Perusing Pelicans

Students of history will be interested to note that this strip of unspoiled coastline holds the distinction of being our country's first national wildlife refuge, a status conferred by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1903. The centerpiece of this preserve is its small namesake island, which is now one of the major rookeries for the American White Pelican.

Though a nature trail and 18'-high observation tower were recently constructed on a nearby barrier island, the only way to get within close range of these birds is by small boat. A line of perimeter markers keeps us some 50 yards from shore, which is close enough to enjoy the spectacle without disturbing the island's avian residents.

With our ornithological appetites sated and the tide beginning to ebb, it is time to move on. But there is one more mission left to accomplish on this day. On board with us is Krogen Express's director of sales, Bob Loudon, who has for some time wanted to indulge his passion for waterskiing by trying it behind a luxury yacht.

It is his contention that the 52 will be able to pull him up onto a pair of water skis. Having done a good bit of skiing



The 52 features boarding doors on three sides of the cockpit (above), which is handy for dock and dinghy access (left), swimming or even unexpected activities such as waterskiing (below).

myself, I know the Krogen Express has sufficient speed but question its "hole-shot" performance. Big boats can certainly go fast, but it usually takes them a while to get there.

Undeterred by my skepticism, Bob lowers himself from the swim platform with the towrope in hand and gives us the signal to "hit it." The same moderate-deadrise stern sections that result in the 52's excellent fuel efficiency also bring it onto plane far more quickly than I would have suspected. Instead of foundering in the wake, Bob pops up on his first try, skimming down the ICW to the bemusement of passing boat traffic.

By the time we dock the 52 a couple of hours later, I am convinced of two things: that the Krogen Express is one of the most interesting cruising vessels I've been aboard in some time and that John Tegtmeier made a very savvy decision in his choice of a second career. ❦

RESOURCES

Krogen Express 866-457-6436; www.krogenexpress.com
Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge 772-562-3909;
www.fws.gov/pelicanisland

