

SEALEGS

8.5M ALLOY (8I)

■ Words and Images by Nick Jones



No need to worry about ramp admin with a Sealegs!

The backstory

It's a bizarre and wonderful feeling driving a three-legged machine in and out of the water as you please, invariably to the admiration and envy of seashore onlookers. However, for New Zealand company Sealegs, who has been pioneering amphibious recreational boating ever since its first production model was built in 2004, it's not unusual – it's par for the course.

Sealegs' Global Sales & Marketing Manager, Nicholas Glanfield, says Sealegs owners report up to four times more use from their boat after switching to a Sealegs model. And it's easy to see why – no boat ramp queues, no reversing trailers, no waiting for tides, and no need to round up a crew to assist.

The flagship model in Sealegs' Sport Alloy range is the 8.5m Alloy (8i). Nicholas tells me the 8i appeals to a range of client needs, from hardcore angling to cruising and exploring previously inaccessible areas with family.

This is exactly why Melbourne's Dean Francis commissioned his Sealegs 8i.

"We do a lot of fishing, watersports, cruising and overnighting – the Sealegs will tick all the boxes.

"I chase marlin and tuna offshore, but also love my bread and butter fishing in Port Phillip Bay for species like snapper and King George whiting," says Dean.

Dean has gone the whole hog accessorising his new baby. She is decked out in Bentley Blue and pearlescent white paint to match the Yamaha, and will be fitted with game poles, radar and a FLIR thermal imaging camera once over the Tasman. Arguably the coolest piece of tech onboard, however, is the Quick gyroscopic stabiliser fitted under the passenger seat.

"While I don't get seasick, my wife does. The gyro will make a huge difference for family boating and also eliminate fatigue during fishing trips with my mates," says Dean.

Construction

Although Sealegs licensed the hull design from Innovision, the 8i is built and fitted out at Sealegs' Albany facility. The Innovision styling is immediately apparent with the curving shear line, reasonably plumb bow, and sloping foredeck. Combine this with hydrodynamic stability chines, a decent waterline length and a fine entry, and you have all the makings for a soft and comfortable ride. The hull is rated for six passengers, and the all-wheel-drive Amphibious Enablement System (AES) on this model is specified to carry up to 3,000kg. A trailer is an optional extra for the 8i but is obviously not a prerequisite.

Interior space is generous with hardtop headroom

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1) The cockpit is uncluttered with the compact Quick gyro located under the passenger seat. 2) A livefeed video system has been incorporated into the Simrad NSS EVO3 16" so the driver can keep an eye on the front wheel. 3) Volume inside the cabin benefits from the plumb bow design, with good sitting headroom, two 1.85m berths with squab infills, and a plumbed head under the centre squab. 4) The four-stroke Briggs & Stratton 40hp petrol engine that powers land-based endeavours has been neatly hidden away inside the 8i's transom.

"THE 8I HAS A VERY PRACTICAL LAYOUT WELL-SUITED FOR SERIOUS FISHING EXPEDITIONS."

to spare for my 6'3" frame and plenty of internal beam thanks to the narrow side decks. Naturally, the alloy construction allows for more interior volume (and rod holders!) than the Sealegs RIB models.

While there are a variety of seating configurations on offer, our review vessel featured forward-facing seating for the driver and one passenger, with storage and the gyro, respectively, underneath each. Volume inside the cabin benefits from the plumb bow design, with good sitting headroom, two 1.85m berths with squab infills, and a plumbed head under the centre squab. A fabric privacy curtain rounds off all the necessities for a pleasant overnighting experience. NB: Nicholas told me about another Australian client who uses his Sealegs as an amphibious caravan for exploring the remote northern Aussie coast – no doubt handy for keeping the crocs away!

The four-stroke Briggs & Stratton 40hp petrol engine that powers

land-based endeavours has been neatly hidden away inside the 8i's transom, with air intakes on the front and the exhaust outlet behind. A starboard transom hatch allows access to the pumps and oil caps for the wheels' hydraulic motors. The centre of the transom houses a bait-station, and there's a step-through on the port side. The boarding ladder folds out from the corner to cleverly clear the wheel when on land.

Beneath the cockpit floor are a 250-litre fuel tank (serving both the Yamaha and the Briggs & Stratton engines), a large wet locker and sealed buoyancy chambers. U-DEK has been applied liberally to the cockpit, transom and side decks, giving a soft and warm feel. The attention to detail is impressive – even the rounded rub rails have been painted (I suppose the paint is unlikely to be rubbed off when you simply drive your boat out from the water!). Lighting is comprehensive, with various cockpit lights including strip lights under the side decks and even

courtesy cup holder lights so you'll never misplace a beverage.

Layout and fishability

Starting in the 'control room', the helm is nicely presented with a clear division between the terrestrial and on-water controls. There is the usual assortment of marine switching and controls, plus Yamaha's digital engine gauge, a Fusion stereo head unit, a Simrad NSS EVO3 16" plotter/sounder, and a Zipwake trim control system panel. A livefeed video system has been incorporated into the Simrad so the driver can keep an eye on the front wheel. Both on-land and on-water steering are achieved through Sealegs' Enhanced Power Steering (EPS) system that utilises a single helm wheel.

Visibility is great thanks to a toughened, three-panel glass windscreen that utilises bonded panes rather than mullions. Three, two-speed wipers are on hand to keep the windscreen clean while sliding side windows and overhead

roof hatches provide further visibility and ventilation. The flow between the cabin and cockpit is nice and open, and Sealegs offer the option of drop-down clears if that takes your fancy.

The 8i has a very practical layout well-suited for serious fishing expeditions. There's no shortage of rod holders along the coamings and rocket launcher, with another five behind the bait-station – handy for keeping rods dry but within easy reach. As an avid kingfish angler, I appreciated the large livebait tank, complete with clear viewing screen on the customisable bait-station.

The usability of the cockpit is impressive. There's a uniform footing level, good toe room, and side pocket storage for longer items such as gaffs. The gunwales are a nice height for safely fighting fish or keeping kids onboard. There is also U-DEK-covered space on the starboard and port stern platforms for fishing or relaxing. With the aforementioned narrow sidedecks, access to the bow is not the easiest,

and although there is a sizeable forward hatch, the sloping bow would not make a comfortable casting area anyway.

Performance

Our autumn test day threw up some classic Auckland change of season conditions – ominous, dark clouds sped overhead, hurried along by a gusty south-westerly. Nicholas fired up the Briggs & Stratton and gave me a quick rundown on the terrestrial controls, the 40hp engine tucked under the transom allowing us to chat away easily.

Sealegs' AES features All Wheel Drive, with the front and rear wheels having their own wheel motor. A diff-lock option allows operators to turn all 26" all-terrain tyres in unison regardless of the traction available. Other user-friendly features include control of the engine revs via buttons rather than a throttle lever and an automatic braking system. The AES on the Sealegs 8i delivers a top speed of 7.5kph or 10kph with



Above: The V6 Yamaha 300hp provided good acceleration. Right: Sealegs' amphibious system offers All Wheel Drive and diff-lock

2WD, and the sealed hydraulic system is manufactured from marine grade alloy.

Our entry into the Browns Bay briny was a breeze, and the Yamaha was tilted down as the wheels were retracted up. I took the helm as Nicholas fired up the Quick MC2 X3 gyro. Manufactured in Italy, the Quick flywheel spins on a vertical rather than a horizontal plane – delivering the same centrifugal force and anti-roll torque as a conventional gyro at a smaller size and slower spin rate. This means they spool up to operational speed quickly and are air-cooled rather than water-cooled (so they can be spun up on land and ready for action when you hit the water). There was still a bit of time before the gyro became 'operational' on our trip, affording me the unique opportunity to see the difference the gyro made to boat handling.

The V6 Yamaha 300hp four-stroke felt like a good mate for the hull. She jumped onto the plane in seconds to provide a comfortable cruise speed of 26 knots and a top speed of close to 40 knots. Acceleration was solid throughout the rev range, and fuel burn was modest, meaning the 250L fuel

tank would provide a decent cruising range.

While conditions were slight, the wind was whipping up some chop further offshore, which the hull handled easily and with minimal spray. The simplicity of the single planning strake and hard chine on each side of the hull proved very effective. The 8i is easy to manage and responsive, holding in on turns nicely, while the Zipwake automated trimtabs kept her on an even keel in cross-seas. Unsurprisingly, stability at rest is excellent with the thick chines.

Nevertheless, things got very interesting once the gyro hit the functional zone. On straight tracks and at rest, the improvement was perceptible (and no doubt would be far more noticeable in rougher conditions). On sharp turns, however, the lack of roll gave the hull the foreign sensation of drifting, even though it was holding track and not sliding in the least.

The Sealegs 8i is an impressive amphibious machine – I'd be lying if I said I didn't daydream on the drive home about having one parked up alongside my imaginary beachfront property.



Specifications	
Model	Sealegs 8.5m Alloy (8i)
Hull design	Sealegs International Ltd
Builder	Sealegs International Ltd
Construction	5mm marine grade aluminium
LOA	8.5m
Beam	2.31m
Deadrise	16 degrees
Height on wheels	3.1m
Displacement (dry)	2,230kg
Fuel capacity	250L
Recommended horsepower	250-300hp
On land engine	Briggs & Stratton 40hp (petrol 4-stroke)
On land top speed	7.5kph (or 10kph with 2WD)
Pricing from	\$345,000
Price as tested	\$425,000

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