

Ranger 26

This late 60's/early 70's IOR and MORC racer/cruiser was a hot boat in its day, and it still acquits itself reasonably well. But lightweight construction limits the 26's suitability for offshore.

Jack Jensen, founder of Jensen Marine in 1957 and builder of Cal boats, was in the late 60s enjoying success with boats like the Bill Lapworth-designed Cal 40. But his boats sold better on the West Coast than in other areas of the country. In order to appeal to Easterners, Jensen formed Ranger Yachts and commissioned Gary Mull to design the boats. Both Cal and Ranger were located in Costa Mesa, California, and both were sold to the conglomerate Bangor Punta in 1973. When Bangor Punta moved production of Cal to Florida in early 1981, it pulled the plug on Ranger. In 1983, Bangor Punta sold Cal and O'Day to Lear Siegler, which produced a few small Rangers, and built the three lines in Fall River, Massachusetts until shutting them all down by 1987.

Gary Mull, a well-known West Coast designer, designed the Ranger 26 in 1968 as a fast, roomy, multi-purpose sloop. Early literature touted it as "the first yacht of her size range designed and built to big yacht standards." Construction ran from about 1969 to 1975.

Ranger Yachts also built a number of other models, including the 22, 23 (used in the movie version of "Dove"), 28, 29, 32, 33 and 37. The 37 was the last bonafide production boat to win the SORC—in 1972. Ranger also built a centerboard 26 in the late 70's, but it is a different boat, and was less successful than the 26 reviewed here.

The Design

Underwater, the Ranger 26 has a very clean, saucer-shaped canoe body (hull without appendages). The displacement/length ratio is 254, so she's no super lightweight. The fin keel is swept aft a bit as is the balanced spade rudder. Interestingly, the rudderstock is nearly vertical, however. The bow has a pleasing rake to it while the transom is vertical. The waterline is unusually long for that era at 21' 9".

In profile, there is some spring to the sheer line. The profile of the cabin top is parallel with the waterline. There are two fairly large fixed windows in the main cabin and smaller ones forward for the head. The only light or ventilation source for the forward cabin is from an overhead hatch.

The rig is a high-aspect ratio sloop with upper shrouds and single lowers. The boom is quite high, diminishing the size of the mainsail for rating purposes. This feature also helps facilitate the use of a permanent boom vang and makes it less likely for crew to get bonked on the noggin.

One owner reported to us that his boat has a "San Francisco bay rig" that is 2' shorter than the standard mast.

The sail/area displacement ratio is 15.9—in concert with its moderate displacement/length ratio.

The Ranger 26 was designed for outboard power. A 6-hp. motor pushes it reasonably well. A special well is molded into the transom that enables retraction of the outboard's lower unit without bringing the motor head into the cockpit. The well is self-draining and there is a lip at the forward end to help keep following seas from sloshing into the cockpit. Offshore, however, the motor would best be stowed and the transom cutout fit with some sort of filler piece—epoxied plywood, King Starboard or the like.



The cockpit is fairly large and is protected forward by a fairly high molded coaming. The companionway sill, however, is quite low. In rough weather, it would be advisable to fit a sturdy lower companionway board.

Construction

We don't have a lot of information on the construction of the Ranger 26, but we'll assume that the hull is solid fiberglass and the deck balsa-cored. The lapped hull-deck joint is caulked and fastened with self-tapping screws. A bonded and through-bolted joint is much preferred. Indeed, a number of owners complained about hull-deck joint leaks. The toe rail is perforated aluminum.

The main bulkhead is also a problem as it is designed to carry the compression loads of the mast. One owner wrote, "The wooden door frame to the forward cabin serves as support for the mast step on the cabin top. The bottom end of the door frame is glassed to the hull in the bilge. Bilge water caused the bottom end to rot."

Other weaknesses include inadequate backing for stanchions, pulpits and deck hardware, which several owners said they had to fix. Leaks were also associated with the stanchions and hardware, as well as the extruded aluminum portlights.

On any older boat, bedding compound must be expected to have hardened and deteriorated. Removing deck hardware, rebedding and reinstalling is very important but admittedly an onerous task, requiring two people, one on deck with a screwdriver and the other below with a wrench on the nuts. If the fitting is near the hull, sometimes you can lock a pair of Vice-Grips on the nut and wedge it against the hull to resist turning from above. But for tightening, it's always better to have the person on deck hold the bolt stationary and have the person below do the tightening with the wrench.

Another owner complained about leaking keel bolts, which again require periodic caulking.

A last comment on construction came from several owners who noted that the rudder has a fair amount of play in it. Rudder bearings are another item that must be replaced on older boats. Like rebedding deck fittings and portlights, dropping a rudder for maintenance work is neither easy nor fun, but important nevertheless. If you don't have to dig a hole under the boat, count yourself lucky!

Performance

The PHRF rating for the Ranger 26 averages about 198 in fleets around the country. This is faster than a Columbia 26, whose rating ranges from 210 to 220, but slower than a J/24's average rating of 165-175.

Nevertheless, the Ranger 26 is a relatively quick boat for its length. The hull is quite flat aft, enabling her to nearly plane off the wind.

In his book, *Choice Yacht Designs*, author Richard Henderson (writing in 1979), wrote that according to a February 1969 issue of *Yachting* magazine, Gary Mull was the first designer "to have one of his model yachts surf in the Stevens Institute testing tank." He went on to say that the Ranger 26 "has this unusual ability to surf or at least surge, and yet she is an all-around performer."

Others who have raced this boat feel she does adequately in light and moderate winds, but really comes into her element in stronger winds. This would be born out by her comparatively high displacement/length ratio of 254 (a J/24's D/L is just 190) and comparatively low SA/D of 15.9 (the J/24's SA/D is 19.8). So it is true that in heavier weather the heavier boat gains its advantage over lighter, flatter bottom boats.

This still doesn't mean the Ranger 26 will be comfortable offshore. First, she's not a big boat. Second, she's not really built for it. Richard Henderson tells the story of Bill Homewood's participation in a Bermuda One Two race. The boat survived Force 7 conditions with a double-reefed main and 50% jib, even reeling off a 183-mile day. He finished the race in five days, seven hours, which is quite remarkable. But she leaked a lot at the hull-deck joint and he worried about the main bulkhead/door frame, which serves as support for the mast. He recommended beefing this up with a stainless steel girder.

The stability index, computed by US Sailing and based on the length of positive stability, is 114, which is below the 120 number we consider a minimum for offshore sailing.

Under power, the 6-hp. recommended outboard is OK, but not great, say owners. A few have gone to larger 8-hp. and 9.9-hp. motors. The boat is, however, quite maneuverable under power. But in larger seas, the prop may cavitate or come completely out of the water. This is a problem for most boats with outboards. A long-shaft model is essential, but because the motor is located at the extreme aft end of the boat, any extreme pitching motion is going to cause problems.

Interior

The accommodations are basic: V-berth forward, rather small head with locker, a dinette to port and settee to starboard in the main cabin, and aft, straddling the companionway, a divided galley.

The 8' 8" beam is generous compared to older 26-footers, but does not make it the most voluminous 26-footer ever made. In fact, two boats of the same era—the Northstar 600 and Paceship PY 26—have beams of 9' 0" and 9' 6" respectively. Still, there's adequate room in the Ranger, and besides, we're not big fans of excessive beams as they can make the boat quirky to handle upwind in rough weather.

Dinettes vs. fold-down bulkhead tables have their pros and cons. Dinettes are generally sturdier than fold-down tables, but they occupy more space and when you want to get rid of them the only place they can go is down...to make a berth.

The port-side dinette in the Ranger 26 has seating only fore and aft, which makes it difficult to hold your place when the boat is heeled, especially on port tack.

The galley is quite small, but then this is just a 26-footer and unless we were cruising for a lengthy period we'd probably rather have its small divided galley than a larger one occupying the entire starboard side of the main cabin where the Ranger's settee is located.

One owner said, "It has no real galley, but has a sink and space for a stove."

The space for the stove aligns it athwartships where it cannot gimbal, so one would have to add a single-burner, gimbaled stove like the old Sea Swing for cooking at any angle of heel.

While basic, the accommodation plan does provide berths for four (theoretically five, but for two to fit comfortably in the dinette they would have to be either very small or more likely, children). It certainly will suffice for overnights and week-long cruises. It would be nice if the head was enclosed from both main and forward cabins, but as configured, the only door is at the main bulkhead. This presents problems when non-family members are aboard and someone wants to use the head in the middle of the night. What are you supposed to do? Roll over so they don't think you're looking, keep your eyes and nose closed, and think about something else, like waterfalls or throwing rocks into the lake.

Such is life on small boats!

Conclusion

It's hard to believe that the Ranger 26 now is 31 years old! It doesn't look that aged. The boat sails well, though like any boat with a fin keel and spade rudder, she will require more attention at the helm.

Construction is fairly standard for mass production, but that's not good enough for offshore. The list of complaints concerning the Ranger 26's assembly is longer than for many other boats. Leaks in portlights and deck fittings can be fixed. Not so easy to remedy are the hull-deck joint and keel bolt leaks. And the weak main bulkhead will require some ingenuity to strengthen.

When one buys an old boat, adopt the maxim: "Anything can be fixed."

Asking prices for Ranger 26s range between about \$7,500 and \$9,500, depending on condition and equipment. The difference between a 1971 and a 1975 model, as reported by the BUC Research Used Boat Price Guide, is not that much—about \$900.

<END>