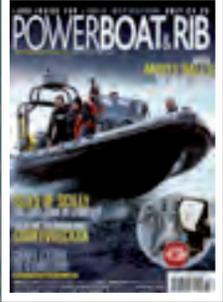
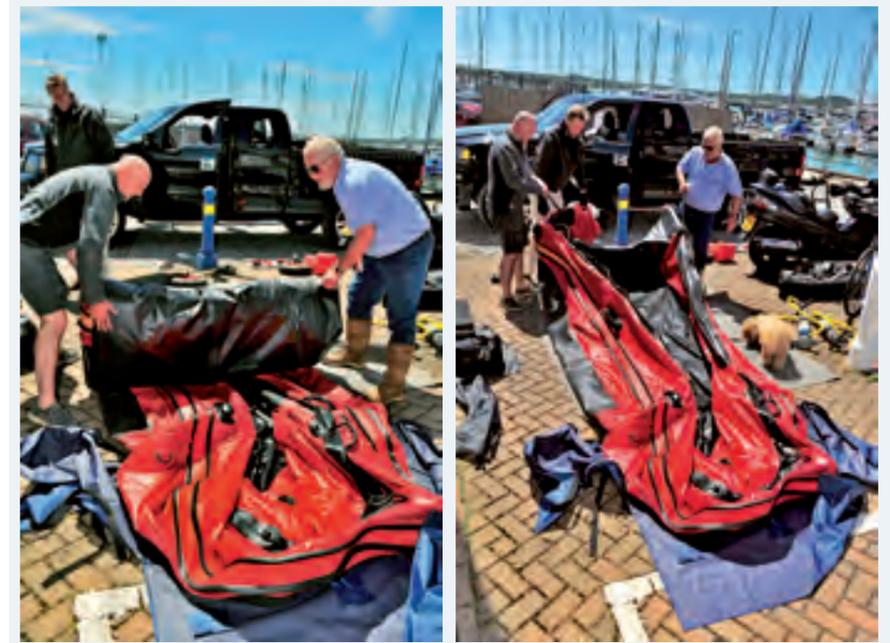


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A bit of weight forward helps the trim but the Vanguard 435 is a capable craft



Boat in a bag. Hardly a new concept, but one that is still highly desirable if circumstances dictate



Excel Vanguard 430

Don't discount the fully inflatable boat, says Simon Everett, who samples the portability and effectiveness of the Vanguard 430 from the Excel inflatables stable.

THE BOATING WORLD has changed over the years, and people's expectations and perceptions have driven this change. First boats are rarely the small dinghy of yesteryear – people expect to jump straight in well up the ladder and consequently they leapfrog the simple pleasure of learning the ropes in a small boat. When I tell people that I used to regularly go out to the Eddystone in my 10ft With dinghy, powered by an old, brown band, Mercury 9.8hp outboard, they stare at me in disbelief, but those experiences gave me a solid grounding in boat handling, seamanship and all that goes with it.

Before the With dinghy I had to make do with an Avon Redstart, a small inflatable of about 8ft that had a canvas bottom, and there was the option of adding slatted, wooden boards to give a somewhat less fluid footing. The small inflatable boat

was very much the mainstay of the tender industry, because it was lighter and more reliable than a Praam dinghy of the same size. Being soft and light, it was easy to stow on deck, or even deflate and stow below the aft bench. The advantages

of a fully inflatable boat are still as relevant today, and the Excel Vantage is a good example of how even the modest inflatable boat has evolved.

One of the main advantages of the fully inflatable boat is the sheer portability of the thing. Packed in its own kit bag, the Vantage 430 will happily go in the boot of a Land Rover or even a standard estate car. Kept inflated, it can be put on a roof rack. A small outboard that is also light enough to carry is all the propulsion you need to

Purposeful and capable



SAR or adventurous spirit the Vanguard 430 covers plenty of bases

explore as far as the fuel carried will take you. Once in sheltered or shallow water, the use of the supplied oars allows you to venture into water only a few inches deep, with the motor lifted to take the skeg out of the water, by either rowing or poling your way over the shallows. This ability will allow you to explore over sandbars into otherwise inaccessible inlets or lagoons. Some of the most beautiful and least visited places on earth are in these hidden backwaters that big boats cannot get near.

If your bag is outdoor adventures, exploring along the coast, close enough to pick mussels off the rocks, and camping on majestic, remote beaches, or perhaps

you need a rapid-deployment safety craft for flood or remote inland water duties, then the easy-to-use, fully inflatable Vanguard 430 could be all the boat you need. With an inflatable spine that shapes the keel line, aluminium duckboards that interlock to create a flat floor and built-in launching wheels that make it easy to haul the fully laden boat up the beach, this little boat can broaden your horizons and create lasting memories of fabulous trips, even on remote inland waters.

The taut, shaped bottom is far more capable than the flat, floppy versions of old – not as fast as a moulded, rigid hull, of course, but simpler and much cheaper. The inflatable boat is about half

The Vanguard 435 is a tough little boat that can be put to a multitude of uses ...

the price of a similar-sized RIB, in fact. The handling isn't razor-sharp like people have come to expect of a RIB, but nor is it like the old flat-bottom inflatables, which had all the elegance and cornering ability of a giraffe on ice. It comes out somewhere between – say 65% of the performance of a RIB in the same category.

As an expedition boat it has so many useful features, not least of which is the enormous payload. The interlocking aluminium floorboards creating a rigid, flat deck that spreads the load enables the Vanguard 430 to carry over 1000kg. There is sufficient length on the flat floorboards to allow an emergency response team to lay a spineboard or evacuation stretcher, with the adjustable thwarts straddling over the top. This is one of the main uses for these boats – as highly portable emergency response craft. The fact that the entire boat can be unpacked from the back of a vehicle and rigged by two experienced crew in under 10 minutes makes it a very practical answer for this type of work.

The power plant chosen is the Suzuki 20, because it is the most compact and lightweight fuel-injected unit available, and importantly it requires no battery to run the EFI or engine management computer. A magneto generates sufficient

PRICE TESTED: £4,344 (inc. VAT) **BOAT ONLY:** £1,329 (inc. VAT) **LOA:** 4.35m **POWER:** 30hp **MAX. PEOPLE:** 8 **CONTACT:** www.meridian-marine.co.uk

BOAT TEST
Excel Vanguard 430

power to boot up the computer and initiate the fuel injection on the first pull of the starter cord to have the engine spring into life – from dormant mode to running in one single pull. From then on, the motor is under the watchful gaze of the engine management computer to return amazing fuel economy, all self-powered by the transistorised generation system.

Often the simplest solutions are the best. The effective forward dodger straps in place tight to the inflatable collar and uses kitesurfer design for its shape and structure. The heavy-duty ripstop nylon skin is supported by an inflatable support system. It is a perfect, lightweight and compact yet effective solution for

providing weathering ability on the boat. By placing vulnerable items in the covered bow area they can be much better protected by the soft dodger. Waves and spray are also shed to a much greater extent, making the ride so much more comfortable for the occupants.

When it comes to actually making a passage, the inflatable keel makes a big difference to the ride comfort and handling. By stretching the bottom fabric taut into a slight vee shape the boat rides waves better and has good directional control. It benefits from having some weight forward, because being so light and with 20hp on tap, the bow will tend to lift – not dangerously, just inefficiently – unless you keep the speed down when

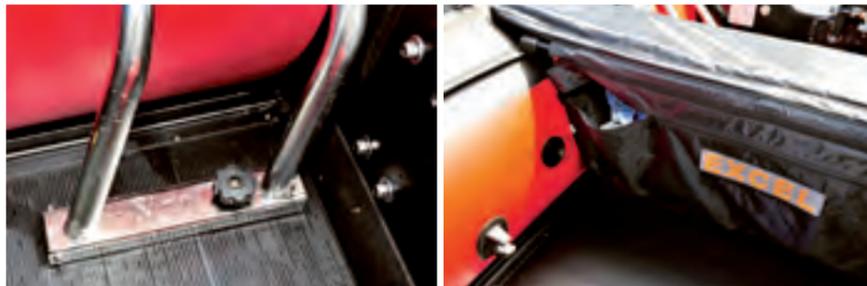
solo. With two people aboard, the boat trims happily and we managed 23 knots flat out, but at 18 knots she was happy, and for the kind of use this boat gets put to this is ample. Taking it a bit easier and keeping the motor at mid revs, where the best economy is achieved, gives a cruising speed of around 14 knots. There is no rev counter so we had to judge this by ear and throttle position.

The Vanguard 435 is a tough little boat that can be put to a multitude of uses, as already proved by two being supplied to the London Olympics for patrolling the surrounding waters of the Olympic Park and River Lea. Another eight were sent to the European Games in Baku for TV and press camera platforms, safety patrol, as workboats for setting out courses and as committee boats for start line duties. It also saw plenty of service in the Pakistan flood disaster a few years ago for SAR and flood evacuation duties, so there is no reason why it couldn't be used as a coastal expedition craft or just as an alternative pleasure craft for those on a budget. **PBR**

i **SNAPSHOT** Onboard the Excel Vanguard 430



For solo or light load use a detachable remote wheel is available.



The Vanguard even has an easily mounted A-frame.

Stowage is provided in fabric pocket hung off the thwarts.



The Suzuki 20: Compact, lightweight and batteryless.

Launching wheels fold up clear of the water

SPECIFICATION **i**

Length overall: 4.35m
Internal length: 2.85m
Beam overall: 2.00m
Internal beam: 1.00m
Inflatable collar diameter: 50cm
Chambers: 5 + 1
CE category: C
Passenger capacity: 8
Payload: 1080kg
Max. power: 30hp
Dry weight: 85kg
Packed dimensions: 145cm x 80cm x 45cm
Tube material: 1100 Hytex

PRICE **i**

Boat only: £1,329 (inc. VAT)
Boat with Suzuki 15hp: £3,353 (inc. VAT)
As tested: with A-frame, bow dodger, launching wheels, thwart cushions with stowage pockets and Suzuki 20hp £4,344 (inc. VAT)

CONTACT **i**

Excel Boats
Meridian Marine, Bassett's Pole, London Road
Sutton Coldfield B75 5SA. Tel: 0121 323 2333
www.meridian-marine.co.uk

WHAT WE THOUGHT **i**

THUMBS UP

- Ease of portability
- Simplicity of concept
- Good protection from the natty dodger
- Solid interlocking floor
- Very affordable

THUMBS DOWN

- A-frame single point fixing
- Remote steering – optional

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