

Initial Impressions Of The PortaBote

By Jamie Furlong

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For the first three years of our liveaboard life we had to make do with the inflatable dinghy we inherited when we bought Esper. Being flat-bottomed it was a pig to row; in the sun the plastic material went sticky; it performed terribly with our Yamaha Malta outboard and being bright orange it was affectionately known as 'the blancmange'. Just before we left Turkey, however, we were fortunate enough to pick up a Tinker in a boat jumble, complete with sailing rig, for 200 euros. It was to become our new tender and with a bright red canvas cover it proudly saw us all the way to India.

There were, however, two issues with our inflatable: it suffered when we beached it on the sharp coral shores of Eritrea; and its wooden bottom made it heavy and cumbersome to commission. Whilst we were

patching up punctures, breaking our backs hoisting the thing on deck, and losing pounds in weight when inflating the thing in the unforgiving African heat, another boat on the rally zipped around in their 10 year old folding PortaBote, looking rather smug.



PortaBote has been around for 30 years. It is an American company with a strong heritage in manufacturing folding boats for the marine and fishing markets. The beauty of the PortaBote is its simplicity. It is constructed of five sheets of polypropylene copolymer (developed by NASA and used in car bumpers), with four sheets making up the chined hull and the fifth making the transom. The joins are sealed, riveted and then sheathed in a hard-wearing black plastic tube. It comes in four sizes (8ft, 10ft, 12ft and 14ft) and three different colours but it was the idea

that it could fold in on itself and pack flat at just 11cm thick that really appealed to us a liveboards. That and the fact it's unsinkable, almost indestructible and, best of all, we could throw away the puncture repair kit!



One trip home and a puzzled customs official at Delhi airport later our new 10ft PortaBote was delivered to Bolgatty Marina. Having never commissioned one before it took me just a few minutes to spring open the folding boat and slide three plastic thwarts into their metal brackets. After slotting and screwing the transom in place that really was it. It was all done without reading the manual of course, which hints at how easy this thing is to put together.

I was keen to get her in the water and take her for a row. Stepping into the dinghy I was able to stand up, put my feet either side of the centre, and rock the boat sideways without it

capsizing. The built-in sponge flotation strip makes the PortaBote unsinkable. This all bodes well for getting into the boat from the sea after some snorkelling.



Being the lithe, slight person that I am I simply could not get that dinghy to capsize!



Rowing the PortaBote was easy and I found it more responsive to turn than an inflatable. Indeed it is fair to say that the PortaBote rows like a normal rowing boat. It'll be interesting to see how practical the bimini is. We bought this as an extra and could be very useful in the hot Indian sun.

The transom is designed to take an outboard and our friends had no problem mounting an 8hp Evinrude on their 10 year old PortaBote. We'll look at this over the next six months. It's also worth noting that like our Tinker, PortaBote does a sail kit.

After a comfortable row and feeling a bit pleased with our purchase Liz and I were able to slide the boat back on to the pontoon with ease. Our 10ft version weighs in at 28kg, which is far lighter than our Tinker, and easy to handle between the two of us. Before decommissioning I was able to put the boat end-up, get underneath and then walk with it on my back (evidence of this can be found in the video clip). You won't catch me marching

miles like this but if you [look on the PortaBote website](#) you'll find details of the RAF who carried one up Everest!



The RAF who took a Portabote to Everest (carried by a yak) so they could go boating at 20,000ft. A world record!



Those RAF boys rowing on ice!

Decommissioning the PortaBote was as easy as putting it together and after packing the thwarts into the supplied canvas bag I folded the thing up, slipped a cargo strap around it to prevent it from springing open and slid it back between the shrouds and the guardrail. It happily stows on deck like a large surfboard.



Our PortaBote aboard Esper. How easy is that to stow? Magic!

I have a couple of reservations that I'll keep an eye on over the next six months or so. The Tinker came with a lovely set of wooden oars that clip into place. The PortaBote is supplied with aluminium oars (with plastic handles) that slot into place. They are not fixed and whilst they didn't come out when rowing I may have to consider putting them on a lanyard for fear of losing them overboard. Also I note that there is no bung so any water that collects will have to be bailed. I'd also be

interested to see how she handles going into a rough, choppy sea. I have heard they handle this quite well but only time will tell. We've yet to see how easy she is getting on and off Esper and, most importantly, we need to examine how we put her together on deck whilst at anchor. I'll cover all this in the next review after we've taken her for a few test drives.



Talking of test drives, how about this shot taken of a Portabote at work in Indonesia? This is the National Geographic at work with orang-utangs.

Pros

- Indestructible
- Unsinkable
- No inflating
- Stows flat
- Lightweight for its size
- Rows well
- Stable
- Can be beached on coral and rock
- Plenty of interior space
- Extras like sail rig, trailer and bimini available

Cons

- Oars aren't fixed
- No bung
- Might take in water going into rough, choppy seas

Impressions So Far



My initial impression of the PortaBote is that it is easy to stow, simple to commission and hard wearing. In particular I like the design of the hull which appears stable and unsinkable. Beaching the vessel should be worry free as both the sheaths and hull material are extremely hard-wearing plastic. There are a few niggles but they're in there for the sake of providing a balanced review and the pros outweigh the cons by a factor of three to one. I do like the sound of no more punctures! Finally, don't let the official website put you off. Behind the home-made design are some fantastic case-studies, reviews, photographs and stories of the PortaBote's multi-million dollar success story.

Stay tuned for a follow up in a few months time when I give my final verdict and add some more video of the PortaBote in action.

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Find PortaBotes at

The London Boat Show, stand F106, 6th to
17th January

The Scottish Outdoor Show, SECC, Glasgow,
3rd to 6th February

The Boat and Caravan Show, NEC
Birmingham, 22nd to 27th February.