

GROUP TEST SAILING TENDERS

We put half a dozen portable sailing tenders to the test to see which ones really deserve a place on your boat, writes Toby Heppell

Long-gone are the days that yachts would lash a clinker dinghy to the deck, or tow it bobbing astern, replaced instead by the ubiquitous inflatable rubber tender. For all its pack-down convenience, however, these bulbous craft have never been easy to row, and mostly can't be sailed, prompting heavy reliance on outboards, and with it, losing a peaceful means of exploring new harbours. With a sail and reasonable rowing abilities, however, you can get around without a noisy engine, occupy family for hours on end, and sail up creeks that a yacht could never explore.

New inflatable technologies, such as lightweight fabrics and drop-stitch construction enabling rigid high pressure structures, have opened the door to all-round inflatables that are far more capable than their predecessors.

We wanted to try out vessels that offered the best of both worlds – genuinely portable tenders that also double up as capable sailing dinghies.

The Seal, a new product, most closely resembles the once popular Tinker Tramp. The two Dinghy Go dinghies are the closest to conventional tenders, but with rigid inflatable floors, centreboard casings and stayless rigs. The Seahopper will delight traditionalists and fans of hard tenders, while folding completely flat, and the two wildcards were the MiniCat Guppy and the Tiwal 2, both of which offer plenty of fun afloat and could double as tenders if needed.

HOW WE TESTED THEM

We judged the six craft against a few key factors. First we measured the size of the bags in which the dinghies and all their kit were stowed, and weighed

each bag, giving us a fair idea of how realistically portable each is and how much space it might take up on board.

We then assembled each boat and timed how long it took from packed to ready. Whilst assembly will always get quicker with practice, some manufacturers sent representatives for the test, easing our learning process.

Once on the water, both Toby Heppell and Theo Stocker took the boat out for a spin, sailing the boats upwind and downwind, as well as rowing and motoring those that were equipped to do so (the MiniCat and the Tiwal were not equipped with rowlocks or an outboard bracket). We measured rough speed via GPS to give us an idea of what speeds could be achieved.

The weather during our test was a little variable with winds between 7-13 knots and minimal wave state.



BEST FOR SAILING FUN



TIWAL 2

£4,350

This was by a good distance the favoured sailing dinghy of all those on test. The second iteration of this inflatable sailing dinghy is smaller and faster to assemble than the Tiwal 3 but has retained much of the sailability of the larger model.

Of all those we tested, the Tiwal 2 falls mostly into the toy category rather than being an out-and-out tender. As such she has no cockpit, with the main inflating hull being something closer to a paddleboard. A metal tripod holds both daggerboard and mast in position offering a solid frame from which much of the performance of the boat is derived. This boat also required the highest pressure when inflating. Though it would be possible to inflate it with the included hand pump – variations of which come as standard with all the inflatables on test – ideally you would want an electric pump to achieve that pressure without either exhausting yourself before you have hit the water or significantly increasing the time it takes to put her together. With

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH:	2.8m
BEAM:	1.9m
TOTAL WEIGHT:	49kg
BIGGEST BAG DIMENSIONS:	148cm x 40cm x 35cm
ASSEMBLY TIME:	13min
WEBSITE:	www.tiwal.com/en

this particular model, setup speed is something of a unique selling point.

The rig is made of a three-piece glassfibre mast that simply slots together like a windsurfing mast. The

Dacron sail features vertical battens making it easy to roll around the mast when not sailing and a two-piece 'boom', similar in design to a thick sail batten, slots into a sock at the base of the sail.

SETUP

The Tiwal 2 was the fastest boat to assemble in our test from packed to ready-to-sail. In total she took 13 minutes to put together. Much of this speed came from her simplicity – so even after owning her for a while this time would only come down a fraction.

It must also be noted the final few minutes of building time were largely waiting for the electric pump to finish getting her to the required pressure. This will always be a limiting factor in terms of time to the water.

There is little to report on in terms of difficulty or confusion. She was the easiest boat to assemble. As with the other inflatables we tested she comes in two bags, one containing the main inflatable hull and the other for rig, sails, daggerboard and rudder etc.

The Tiwal 2 was the second lightest of the boats on test, weighing in at 30kg for the main boat bag and 19kg for the rig bag. As with everything on test the larger bag is quite cumbersome and would be difficult to carry any distance.



THE TEST SAILING

The Tiwal 2 genuinely feels for all the world like a small performance dinghy and inspires confidence to throw her around. She did, however, feel possible to capsize, whereas the other boats on test felt much more stable. The sail works effectively but was a little short on power in the relatively light conditions for our test day. I suspect with a bigger sail or a bit more breeze a modest-sized crew could easily get her onto the plane, which would be impressive for an inflatable boat that is small enough to throw into an onboard locker.

UNDER MOTOR

The boat as tested had no option to attach an outboard making her something of a one-trick pony. However, the manufacturer has recently developed an engine mount, which can replace the rudder stock (available January 2020 and compatible with all models). Swapping the two over would be a fairly simple process, though we found it was much easier to attach the rudder stock when the main hull was partially deflated. As such we feel it's more likely you will decide before use whether you would be using her with a motor or with a sail.

Without a cockpit of any real description, the Tiwal 2 is never going to make a particularly practical tender but we felt she could carry two adults and a bag or two. Things on deck are likely to get a bit wet; provided you accept this and store your shoreside kit in a dry bag then using her to get from ship to shore would be possible.

ROWING

There are no rowlocks so rowing will never be an option. Being generous, without the rig in, you could probably treat her a bit like a standup paddleboard but she is too large to do this very effectively.

YM VERDICT

If you want a simple, quick and easy sailing toy that can double as a makeshift tender, this is the one for you. Realistically this seems rather more a boat you might store on board and let the kids race around in while you are at anchor. She certainly sails better than the other options on test and doesn't pretend to offer much else.

The Tiwal 2 is fun to sail but has limited practicality as a working tender





SEAL (PROTOTYPE)

Expanding

First and foremost, the Seal inflatable dinghy we tested was a prototype with some small modifications to come. Specifically she does not yet have the two bags within which she will be supplied as standard.

We measured the longest parts of all the equipment to come up with the rough dimensions the bags would be in the final instance. We're reasonably certain that we have provided an accurate representation of the size the bags will be, but in this instance the measurements in the comparison table should be taken as a guideline.

The Seal is most directly comparable to the Dinghy Go models (p90) though with some differences. She is one of two boats tested with a stayed rig and headsail with a sprit mainsail, reminiscent of an Optimist dinghy.

As with the other two-sailed option on test, the Seahopper (p86), this extra sail adds complexity to the rigging process but does help balance when sailing her. The headsail also means that the mainsail can be much smaller than on the single-sailed variations.

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 2.8m

BEAM: 1.5m

TOTAL WEIGHT: 57kg

DIMENSIONS (FOLDED):
110cm x 68cm x 40cm

ASSEMBLY TIME: 23min

CONTACT: i.thacker@ntlworld.com

SETUP

Set up for the Seal was straightforward and took a comparable time to the two Dinghy Go models – both of which are similar in hull design, though without the hard pram bow.

It is worth noting on the Seal dinghy that both the thwart and a small forward section slot into a groove along rubber runners down either side of each piece. This is much easier to do when the tubes are not fully inflated. With a bit of practice (and an electric pump) this could be done as the boat is inflating but if forgotten it would mean deflating the tubes slightly to install them and then re-inflating.

As previously mentioned the Seal comes with headsail and mainsail, which adds to the complexity of the setup. In light of this we were surprised when we stopped the stopwatch to find it had taken only a few minutes longer than the single-sailed Dinghy Go varieties. This is the a prototype of the dinghy and production versions will be available early next year.



THE TEST

SAILING

Under sail, the Seal was well balanced, thanks to her two-sail setup. The general view of the testers, however, was that the mainsail could be a little bigger and provide a touch more power. That said, she was the second fastest under sail of those we measured – though, again these measurements should be taken with a pinch of salt due to the variable and puffy conditions we experienced on our test day.

It was easier to handle both sails than it had been on the Seahopper, with well-placed cleats for the jib sheets. Two adults would fit while sailing, but she has slightly less room than the Seahopper and you would expect that primarily she would be sailed in solo.

UNDER MOTOR

The Seal motored along quickly and was second only to the Seahopper in terms of outright speed. The tiller has a nice detail in that when sailing it has a 'u' bend in it, allowing you to lift the rudder, unlock the tiller and rotate it 90°, providing enough space to mount an outboard to one side without having to take the rudder stock off. Steering is then with the rudder rather than engine. The jib can be dropped easily and the mainsail, thanks to its sprit rig, is easily scandalised with a single line.

These small details mean this is probably the quickest and simplest of all the options we tried to convert from sailing mode to either rowing or motoring.

The Seal has a flat hull rather than the V-shaped hull of her competitors, a small detail that reduced her directional stability, though not badly.

ROWING

The Seal rowed easily with oars that remain attached to the inbuilt rowlocks clipped onto the side tubing when not in use. Again this makes converting from sailing mode to rowing mode a quick and simple task.

As with all inflatable tenders she performed less well rowing into a stiff headwind and particularly with the scandalised mainsail she was hard work. Drop the main, however, and the rig if necessary, and the effort required drops significantly. With the rig out she compared well with all the others on test.

YM VERDICT

The Seal and the Seahopper were pretty even in terms of interchangeability between sailing, rowing and motoring modes. Both felt as though you could go out sailing with a motor on the stern and choose whether to continue sailing, fire up the engine or row. The Seal we tested was a prototype and would normally be stowed. Once available this will be an impressive all-round option, and we imagine anyone who harks back to Tinker Tramp dinghies will find this familiar.



SEAHOPPER KONDOR

£3,499

This was the only folding boat in our test and looks for all the world like a small Mirror dinghy – her red sails doing little to discourage the comparison. She is beautifully crafted from marine ply, gleaming in the sun under her varnish. As such she is far away the most aesthetically pleasing of all the dinghies we tested. We raised concerns over the need to revarnish but were told she would sit outside happily enough in her folded state without the need for regular revarnishing for several years.

For what was the biggest and most like a sailing dinghy of all those we tested, the Seahopper was remarkably quick and uncomplicated to set up. Smaller 2m and 2.4m versions are available, but as Seahoppers don't fold longitudinally, she was the biggest when stowed. Realistically, you can easily see her flat packed and strapped to the bow but stowage below for most would be unlikely for all but the 2m-long Seahopper Scamp. This was her only major flaw.

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 3.05m

BEAM: 1.42m

TOTAL WEIGHT: 64kg

BIGGEST BAG DIMENSIONS:

360cm x 68cm x 17cm

ASSEMBLY TIME: 18min

www.seahopperfoldingboats.com

SETUP

When laid out the Seahopper has more separate components than the other craft on test, but we were surprised how intuitive and easy she was to put together. Officially our

set up time was 18 minutes, making her the second fastest of the group to put together. Though we are inclined to offer her joint first place in this category as she was ready to row in just five minutes, with the remainder of the time being given over to rigging up the sails, sheets, shrouds and so on.

The Seahopper was one of the three options we tested that comes with a stayed mast and headsail and this necessarily has an effect in terms of time and complexity in rigging.

Her overall weight is not much more than the others on test, most of this is in the hull, making lifting her a two-man job. During set up it is clear that everything has been well thought through and there are lots of nice little touches, like the buckles that click the thwarts into place.



THE TEST

SAILING

Sitting in the Seahopper feels like sitting in a proper little boat. She doesn't have the wide buoyancy of an inflatable but felt stable.

Under sail the Seahopper was traditionally a rigger with a gunter mainsail and small jib. The wind was fading slightly when we sailed her, so she felt a little under-powered. As a direct comparison to the other boats on test she performed well, but the boat's small-dinghy feel lead us to hope for a slightly more finessed finish and slightly better handling under sail. The fit out was fairly rudimentary in terms of sheets, cleats and fairleads. For example, the horn cleats on the mast would have been better as camcleats to prevent the jib sheets getting caught when tacking, and the cleats for the jib cleats, essential when single handed, weren't so easy to use.

Having said that she handles predictably and sails efficiently to windward. We'd just have liked a slightly more polished sailing performance.

UNDER MOTOR

The Seahopper motors very nicely indeed. She was the fastest of all the boats under power. Again, she gave more of a sense of a sit-in tender than any others on test. Ideally we suspect that the Seahopper would want a single passenger to sit on the thwart for which an extension arm would be required to get weight far enough forward. She could carry a family of four and their bags for ship-to-shore purposes at a pinch.

ROWING

As with all rigid dinghies, keeping your weight central is important, particularly when stepping down from a yacht.

Once seated centrally on the thwart and with oars deployed, however, she rows extremely well, aided by her proper wooden oars. Where all the other boats tested were inflatable and so were much trickier to row into a headwind, the Seahopper surged ahead easily. We tried rowing her with mast and rigging still attached, and though it added a little resistance, she was still remarkably easy to row.

YM VERDICT

The size of the Seahopper when folded counts against her when compared to boats which stow neatly into one or two bags. All Seahoppers are customisable to a degree on order so our few gripes when sailing could easily be rectified before or after purchase. The Seahopper is clearly a boat you might use to go further afield – perhaps exploring upstream after anchoring in a river – as well as a mere tender, where the other boats on test were more of a compromise. To our eye she is the prettiest of all those on offer and would be something to be proud of rather than merely a convenience tool.



MINICAT GUPPY

£2,595

The MiniCat Guppy is a newer model to her bigger sister, the MiniCat 420. The Guppy was the only catamaran we had on test. In terms of usability, she was up against the Tiwal 2 in

that she is aimed more at fun sailing that tender work. The Guppy has been designed to be more portable and quicker to assemble than the previous 420. She certainly ticks the more-portable box and was the only boat in our test that came in a single bag and was fully 17kg lighter overall than the next lightest. Certain features feel a little lightweight when she is fully rigged, however. Each hull has an attachable skeg, which slot into the hulls via a pocket. These plastic skegs felt rather brittle though only time would tell if they are up to being dragged up beaches and slipways.

SETUP

The MiniCat took a lot longer than any other boat we tested to set up, at over half an hour. However, she was the only boat without a representative on site



SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 3m

BEAM: 1.5m

TOTAL WEIGHT: 31kg

BAG DIMENSIONS:
161cm x 33cm x 33cm

ASSEMBLY TIME: 38min

WEBSITE: www.minicatamaran.eu

and the lack of an occasional bit of advice certainly added to this. Officially, it took us 38 minutes from bag to beach, but our testers agreed this would be quicker a second time.

The boat has a metal central spine upon which the mast and the rudder stock sit. This is locked into the forward and aft beams – ready attached to the two inflatable hulls out of the bag – via a large pin and retaining rings at either end. Both ends of the central spine need to be offered up to the beams simultaneously. It was certainly a two-man job, though there's almost certainly a knack to it.

The rig was easy to set up with a simple three-piece aluminium mast and a pocket in the luff of the sail into which the mast slides. Shrouds and forestay all come connected to one piece of metal that attaches to the mast about two thirds of the way up, and spring clips make attaching them to the metal trampoline frame easy. A small central rudder provides steerage, and other propulsion would be via paddles.



THE TEST

SAILING

We had fairly high hopes for the MiniCat under sail and in the gusts of a dying breeze, she showed she would be fun in a blow, but without more wind, we were a little disappointed. The wind was at the lighter end of the range when we were out on the water on her. She certainly suffers from the age-old difficulty of catamarans in that she was very difficult to tack in the light winds.

As with most catamaran dinghies she is helmed from a trampoline between the two hulls and as such is very much a sit on, not in, experience. We found it quite difficult to find the right position to sit on her and felt we were either too far aft, dragging the transoms, or too far forward, digging the bows, perhaps a function of her diminutive size.

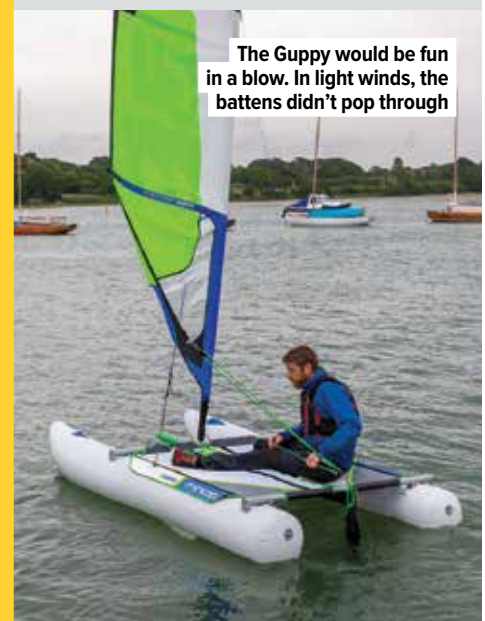
That being said, she was simple to sail in a straight line and had bags of stability. As with the Tiwal 2 she would be ideal for sailing around in for a bit of fun while the boat is at anchor. You might fit two youngsters on her but it would be a squeeze for adults.

YM VERDICT

The MiniCat Guppy is certainly the most portable of all the options we tested. We can forgive the time it took to set up as this would almost certainly get quicker with use. However, she was not as fun to sail as the Tiwal 2 and she lacks the versatility of the others. There also seems to be a few odd decisions made in the design process, like the small size of the rudder, and the fully battened mainsail.

The larger MiniCat 420 has the option of an outboard mount, so becomes a more useful option as a tender, though for that the bags are almost double the size.

For children messing around in a boat of their own at anchor, this is a toy that could easily fit onto a larger yacht. On smaller boats where space is at a premium, we would want more of an all-round dinghy.





The Nomad3 performs predictably and is comfortable under engine

DINGHY GO NOMAD3

£2,750

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 2.75m

BEAM: 1.5m

TOTAL WEIGHT: 48kg

BIGGEST BAG DIMENSIONS:
120cm x 43cm x 22cm

ASSEMBLY TIME: 21min



The oars were surprisingly good for rowing

The sail is just the right size to be easy to handle for kids but lacks power upwind

DINGHY GO ORCA

£3,250

SPECIFICATIONS

LENGTH: 3.25m

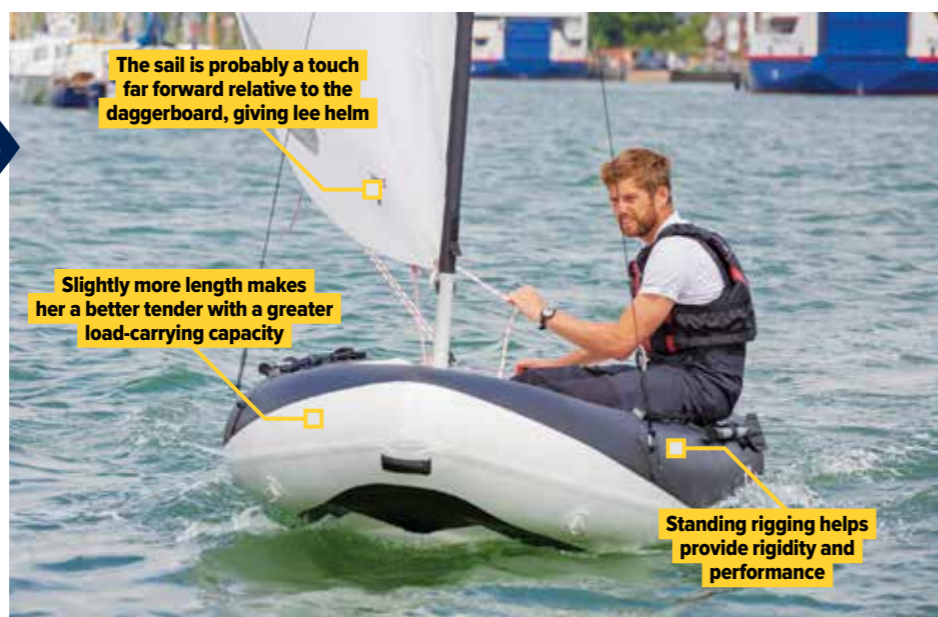
BEAM: 1.5m

TOTAL WEIGHT: 51kg

BIGGEST BAG DIMENSIONS:
120cm x 41cm x 26cm

ASSEMBLY TIME: 21min

WEBSITE: www.dinghygo.com



The sail is probably a touch far forward relative to the daggerboard, giving lee helm

Slightly more length makes her a better tender with a greater load-carrying capacity

Standing rigging helps provide rigidity and performance

BEST ALL-ROUND TENDER

Dinghy Go has become something of a market leader in the inflatable sailing tender field. The Nomad was its first boat to come to market, now on its third iteration with tweaks to the design over the years. The Orca is a newer offering from the company and is larger than the Nomad with a more pronounced vee in the hull and a larger sail. They both come with oars that attach to either side tube via a robust plastic attachment and which stow along the side tubes.

The Dinghy Go products both felt well thought-out and clearly have benefitted from plenty of time in development to create a product that attempts to be as versatile as possible.

SETUP

The setup process for both boats is almost identical. The hulls are inflated and there is a thwart that slides along two rubber mounting points via a groove

in the side of the fibreglass seat. They both have an in-built mast slot at the bow and both have a mast foot, which is added during the setup process.

Although the Orca is bigger than the Nomad and can carry an extra person – optimistically quoted as five by the manufacturer to the Nomad's four – the additional size is all in her length with both featuring the same beam. It does also carry a significantly larger sail – 5.2m² compared to 3.7m². All this means that the Orca is sold as a sportier version but we suspect most will be purchasing her for the increased space, either for people or luggage. Crucially, however, both boats require the same process for setting up and both came in at 21 minutes. Again there was a representative on site, so their 21-minute setup time is an accurate reflection of time to set up on the second or third go, once you have learned the tricks.

There are a few details that need to be done in a specific order. Like the Seal, the thwart needs to be installed at mid inflation, as does the mast foot. Though the thwart can theoretically be installed while the boat is deflated, the mast foot really needs doing at the mid-point. It seems there is scope to fully inflate forgetting about this and therefore a need to deflate again to get her ready.



The centreboard is held by the thwart and exits through a soft gaiter, which can be rolled away like a dry bag when not in use

THE TEST

SAILING

The Nomad 3 sails relatively well but feels rather more like a rowing-and-motoring tender with a sail. As such, her upwind performance leaves a bit to be desired and she generates a significant amount of leeway. This isn't a major issue and she sails along well but making significant headway to weather is a slightly slow process. For sailing around in a harbour or off the beach she works well enough.

With a bigger sail area and more aggressively veed hull, we were keen to see if the Orca could deliver more performance and make her a more viable option for ship-to-shore under sail alone. Results were mixed. The Orca does make better headway to weather, but carries a lot of lee helm. She is 50cm longer than the Nomad, and it seems much of this additional length has been added forward of the thwart and daggerboard. With the increased sail area and the mast still at the bow, the Orca has become a little unbalanced with too much sail in front of the daggerboard. It takes some getting used to, but she does go to windward better than her smaller counterpart.

UNDER MOTOR

Both performed well under engine. Though neither reached the speeds achieved by the Seal or the Seahopper they felt like reliable tenders. The increased vee in the Orca gave her a touch more directional stability than the Nomad.

You could happily motor across an anchorage or up a river on either boat. The Orca's increased length will certainly make her a touch drier in more wavy conditions and with extra space for luggage and passengers she comes out on top.

ROWING

Both Dinghy Go options rowed very well. As relatively lightweight inflatables they obviously suffered from headwinds and crosswinds more than a traditional tender might. We thought the oars might feel a little lightweight when in use, but both they and the retaining clips were sturdy enough to get the job done without any fuss. The Dinghy Go's setup of aluminium boom and mast means it is not really possible to row with the rig still in the boat, so these need to be dropped before you start rowing in earnest.

YM VERDICT

As a tender to row and motor with an option to sail both models work well. There are some frustrations in sailing both, but these are relatively minor issues that you will get used to over time. However, their principal role is as a tender, and they perform well in this department.

Given the very minor difference in weight (3kg) and size when packed (rig bags are the same size and the boat bag for the Orca is a couple of cm larger in length, width and depth) beyond the price we would say there is little reason to go for the Nomad over the Orca.

Boat	Bags	Total weight	Sailing speed (knots)	Motoring speed (knots)	Folded size cm (L,W,D)	Assembly time (minutes)	Price
Dinghy Go Nomad3	2	18kg + 30kg	4	4.6	120 x 43 x 22 + 100 x 61 x 25	21	£2,750
Dinghy Go Orca	2	20kg + 31kg	4.2	4.7	120 x 41 x 26 + 106 x 68 x 36	21	£3,250
Tiwal 2	2	19kg + 30kg	3.8	N/A	110 x 41 x 29 + 148 x 40 x 35	13	£4,350
Seal (prototype)	2 (none for test)	19kg + 38kg	4.6	5.2	(Deflated boat) 110 x 68 x 40	23	£TBC
MiniCat Guppy	1	31kg	3.8	N/A	161 x 33 x 33	38	£2,595
Seahopper Kondor	3	38kg + 10kg + 16kg	4.5	5.4 knots	320 x 68 x 17 + 360 x 23 x 13 + 109 x 45 x 17	5 (row) 18 (total)	£3,499

With thanks to Nestaway Boats, supplier for Tiwal and DinghyGo, for their help with this test. www.nestawayboats.com



ALSO ON THE MARKET

MINICAT 420

The bigger sister of the MiniCat Guppy, the 420 is a larger and more complex boat. As such she should sail better and comes with a furling headsail as well as a larger mainsail. She has been designed to sail with one or two onboard. The manufacturers claim it is 52kg total weight across two bags. The 420 can also come with an engine mount making her a more viable tender.



£3,595

TRIBORD 5S

The Tribord 5S is a compact inflatable boat from French sports brand, Decathlon, that packs down into two bags. It is clearly designed for the fun-sailing-for-kids end of the spectrum and is not dissimilar to the Tiwal boats in that the hull is broadly a large standup paddleboard. It has inflatable tubes to create a semblance of a cockpit. The mast is stabilised through standing rigging attached to the inflatable hull, so you would expect limited stiffness in the rig, which may be detrimental to sailing performance.



£2,100

BANANA-BOOT

Popular in Germany and in a few other areas of Europe, the Banana-boot is a folding boat, not dissimilar to the Seahopper in style. The hull is made from plastic and it folds flat, though retains its 3.2m length. As with the Seahopper this would probably make storage below unlikely on all but the biggest cruisers but it would happily sit up on deck when folded with the oars and rigging stored below.



£2,800