

Boat review
Inflatable Yacht

PUMPED FOR SAILING

Words by **Sarah Ell** Photos by **Bryce Taylor**





You've probably heard of inflatable stand-up paddleboards, but an inflatable sailing dinghy? Former Olympian Melinda Henshaw is bringing to New Zealand a new French design which makes getting out for a sail quick, easy — and heaps of fun.

Henshaw, who represented New Zealand in the 470 at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, was on holiday in the south of France with her family when they spotted someone sailing an eye-catching yellow inflatable boat. Her father negotiated the use of one, and she gave it a try — and loved the experience so much she negotiated to become the Tiwal agent for New Zealand and Australia.

The bright-yellow-and-grey Tiwal is the invention of French sailor and industrial designer Marion Excoffon, who wanted to create an easily transportable dinghy which could be sailed single- or double-handed, and would not only be fun but also offer a decent level of performance. Other inflatable sailing dinghies in the market, such as the Dutch DinghyGo, look more like tenders with sails, while the Tiwal looks and performs more like a lightweight skiff.

Excoffon, it appears, sailed with her family when she was growing up, but when her father refused to let her take the boat out by herself, she decided to make her own. She worked with design firm Fritsch-Durisotti to create a prototype, which she showed to a number of major marine manufacturers. None were keen to take up the challenge so Excoffon went ahead on her own. More than 500 boats have now been built, and are sailing in more than 40 countries.

The name comes from the Old Breton word 'divall', meaning 'to protect', and emphasises the boat's safety. The inflatable hull provides a stable, comfortable platform for novices to have a go at sailing, while providing plenty of wet fun for the more experienced, especially when surfing along in waves. Yes, it can capsize — Henshaw has tipped it out once in windy conditions, and on the day of our photo shoot the camera-boat's wake caused an unfortunate cartwheel. But it pops back up easily, the water running quickly off the flat deck surface.

Another advantage of the inflatable hull means it easily can

be stored on and sailed off another, larger boat. And while the manufacturers don't recommend dragging it over sand or rocks, it's certainly a bit more bump-friendly than a timber or glass dinghy.

The hull's made from a similar material to other small inflatable dinghies, a tough PVC with a UV protective layer, with the racks made from lightweight aluminium, and a carbon mast and foils. A lightweight rod — rather than a boom — is used for the foot of the sail, and it won't do too much damage to the heads of the unwary. Another advantage for those new to sailing. The rig can easily be shortened by using fewer tube pieces, to fit a smaller sail (5.2m²) for windier days or beginners (the larger sail is 7m²).

"I've taken a lot of friends out to teach them how to sail, and I've got a friend who's taken her kids out," Henshaw says. "If it's over 18 knots and I'm sailing by myself — and I'm 58 kg — I use the smaller sail."

While the boat is primarily designed for fun, where there are sailors there will, of course, be racing. A fun-oriented (but for some participants deadly serious) regatta called the Tiwal's Cup has been sailed three times in France (check out 'Tiwal Cup' on YouTube for some fun footage), with the challenges including racing to assemble the boat.

ASSEMBLY

The Tiwal comes packed in just two bags weighing 50kg all up. It easily fits into a car boot and can be stored in the garage. One bag contains the hull — the other the aluminium tubes for assembling the rig and racks, the foils and the dacron/monofilm sail.

The marketing blurb says it can be assembled in just 20 minutes, and Henshaw nails that on the day of our test sail, at the same time as answering questions from interested onlookers. First, the two chambers of the hull are inflated in around two minutes, using a battery-powered electric pump (like blowing up



an airbed), after which the centrecase is inserted.

The rig and racks are clipped together and Velcro-strapped to the hull, the sail sleeved and mast stepped, the mainsheet and vang threaded. The chambers are then 'topped up' to sailing pressure and we're ready to go.

On the day of our test sail Auckland's usual wind seems to have abandoned us, but we head off from Kohimarama and pick up a breeze not far offshore. I take the helm and main and sheet on, heading out to sea, enjoying the light slap of the waves on the hull.

There's definitely an 'inflatable' aspect to the ride, with the buoyant hull providing a comfortable, springy ride and a sensation of 'bouncing' along the top of the water. The deck offers a soft seat, thanks to the air inside and the EVA foam non-skid pads.

The Tiwal responds well to a bear-away, seeming to enjoy picking up speed on a reach. The most fun is catching waves and having a bit of a surf, the wide hull and v-shaped underside planing easily and quickly. It tacks easily, points well and certainly doesn't feel like sailing an inflatable tender. Sadly there isn't enough breeze to get out on the racks, but they would provide a comfortable helming position, with your feet tucked under a central hiking strap.



Quick and easy to assemble, the Tiwal offers exhilarating sailing.



Tiwal Sailing Dinghy

- ▶ **loa** 3.2m
- ▶ **beam** 1.6m
- ▶ **weight** 50kg
- ▶ **Maximum load** 190kg
(two adults or one adult/two children)
- ▶ **sail area** 5.2m²/7m²
- ▶ **construction** PVC hull,
aluminium racks, carbon rig
- ▶ **sails** North Sails
- ▶ **deck gear** Harken
- ▶ **price** \$9,995
- ▶ **contact** Tiwal NZ 021 611 623
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“The Tiwal dinghy comes in two bags, and weighs 50kg all up.”



Henshaw has had plenty of interest in the boat so far – just as the Tiwal caught her family’s eye in France, so it seems to attract attention here. She also took a boat down to Central Otago over summer to sail on Lakes Wakatipu and Wanaka, gaining a positive response from land-locked sailors there. The first two boats imported into New Zealand have gone to billionaire businessman and innovator Alan Gibbs, to be sailed on the lakes at his Kaipara estate.

Keep an eye out for Melinda and the Tiwal this summer, and don’t be afraid to bowl up and ask to have a try – you won’t be able to wipe the smile off your face. ☑