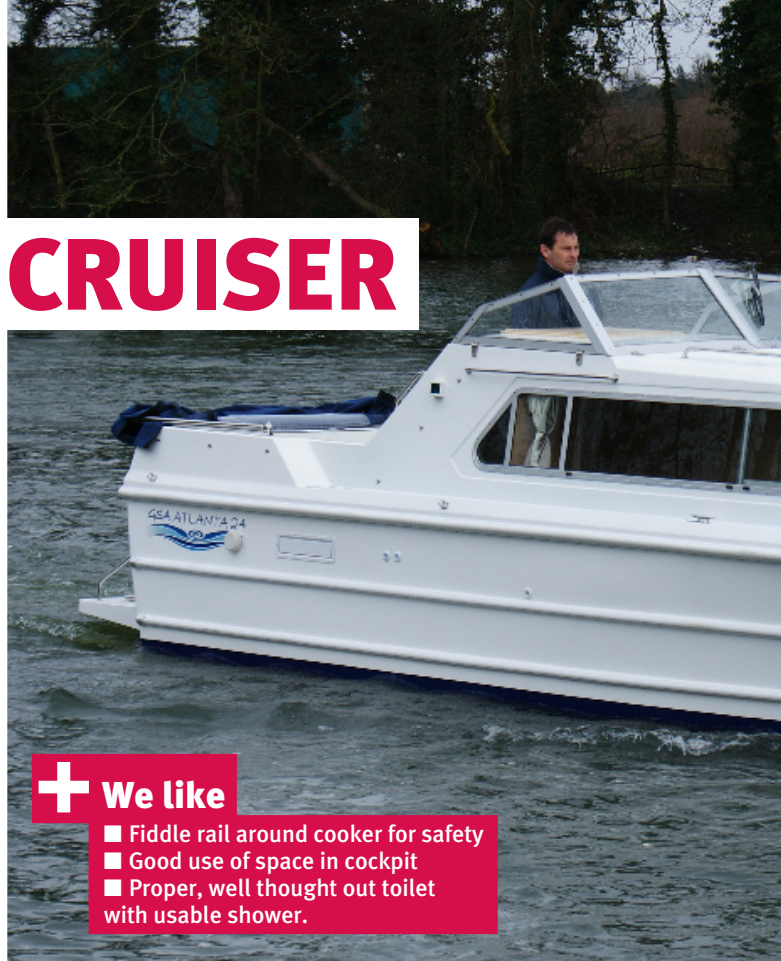


A GO-ANYWHERE CRUISER

The Atlanta 24 looks at home on the river – but will fit through narrow canal locks, too. **Mark Langley** tests it out...

The Atlanta 24 traces its lineage to the Norman 23, in the cruiser-dominated days of the early 1970s. Now built by Norfolk-based GSA Marine, it is instantly recognisable as the same boat – but has a much more luxurious interior.

Another change is moving the outboard motor from a simple well on the transom, to a separate 'bathing platform', which could make lifting it on and off easier. The space either side of the engine could be used to neatly stow the side fenders and aft mooring lines. Stepping aboard, the boat rocks a lot less than similar length cruisers. Fender eyes are along the hull: the twin rubbing strakes along the hull should take the brunt of rubbing in narrow locks, though as these do not continue to the bow, care might be needed when approaching locks. The short bow pulpit rail does not overhang, so avoiding catching on lock gates. Deck hardware is substantial, and properly backed through the balsa-cored deck.



+ We like

- Fiddle rail around cooker for safety
- Good use of space in cockpit
- Proper, well thought out toilet with usable shower.



The galley looking aft.



The helm with the canopy up.

The aft cockpit is covered with a pram style canopy with removable side-pieces. The main part folds down easily in one go, to rest around the aft coamings. Large clear panels mean the cockpit is light and easy to see out of when the hood is up. The main section will suffice for light showers: torrential downpours (as on our test!) require keeping the sides in place. There is full standing headroom under the canopy, so it stands much higher than the rest of the boat: this would have to be lowered for many canal bridges. The windscreen, with wiper for the helm, folds fairly flat.

The aft part of the cockpit is surrounded by a U-shaped seat. Right at the stern is a ventilated compartment for the standard Honda 13-litre portable fuel tank – much safer than jerry cans. The gas locker, in its own space, to port will take a couple of 3.9kg propane bottles, ample for a boat of this size. The void under the cockpit is largely left for open storage.

The hard-wearing settee cushions lift off easily and will cope with a good soaking. (The loosely-fitted carpeting to the floor might need to be replaced more often.) Under the port seat is a battery locker, with a 75Ah engine starter battery and a 110Ah domestic – a pleasant surprise on an outboard-powered boat. The Honda 15hp four-stroke has a maximum charge of 12 amps: just above tick-over it gives around 5 amps, rising to around 8 amps at cruising speeds.



The compact toilet.

FAST FACTS**Boat** Atlanta 24, 24ft x 7ft**Builder** GSA Marine**Price** £34,950**Find out more****GSA Marine**01362 688738, www.gsamarine.co.uk

The v-shaped front berth.

The 230V landline means it would be easy to install a small charger to keep the batteries topped up when moored.

The helm seat is to port, with a simple dashboard in front and single-lever control mounted on the cockpit coaming. The panel features useful level meters for the holding tank and fresh water tank, though a voltmeter for the state of the batteries might be more practical. (Since each craft is custom-built, the owner could specify this.)

The cabin has a folding hatch above the door to ease entry down the two shallow steps. Immediately on the right is a full height, though fairly shallow wardrobe. The manual flush toilet (opposite) is standard, using canal/river water to flush, discharging to the tank under the cockpit. A cassette toilet is an option, and would mean not having a seacock to maintain – a boon on canals. The good-sized wash basin has a tap which lifts up to become the shower head: the moulded GRP floor and walls (plus curtain) make this a perfectly usable shower. Unlike many boats of a similar size, the loo is not claustrophobic.

Just forward is a dinette, which via a pull-out arrangement becomes a cosy seating area for four people. It also drops down to a berth: on the test boat the cushion arrangement was not easy to master, but changes have been made for later boats! The berth is

just about 6ft in length, and 3ft 3in wide – an intimate double or a pleasant single berth. (When it is pulled out, you can still squeeze past to the toilet.)

Two v-berths in the main cabin are comfortable settees, but easily make a large double bed (or two singles). Lockers underneath all of the berths have good storage space, accessed from drawer fronts or lifting the cushions. Not all the storage space is lined, so anything in here needs to be secure against condensation. The interior of the cabin is lined in a thermal mousse material: even on a cold day, the cabin quickly warmed up from body heat. Thick curtains, plus warm wooden veneer finishes on the bulkhead and furniture, made the boat feel very welcoming and cosy.

The two forward berths have halogen reading lights, and a shallow shelf runs above for glasses, watches and cups of tea. The overhead hatch acts as the forward escape, while also increasing the airflow to the cabin. There is a halogen downlighter over the dinette, another over the galley, plus a fluorescent lamp in the toilet: an owner might consider adding more (LED-based?) lamps.

The galley itself has more storage than many small narrowboats. The long granite style Formica work surface has a three-burner gas hob at its centre, surrounded by a fiddle rail to prevent pans from sliding off – especially when someone roars past in a large gin palace! It is also a useful handhold around the galley, though with the headroom around 5ft 10in, taller people might have to slouch a little.

Appliances are a matching SMEV combined oven/grill and an efficient 45-litre isotherm fridge – essential on a boat with limited battery charging. The tap folds into the recessed sink, allowing a glass lid to be lowered, but no drainer is fitted. Hot water comes from the gas-powered, 10-litre Truma Boat Boiler under the aft deck: this heat the contents from cold to about 70°C in around 50 minutes. (A 450W mains electric element can be fitted as well.) 10 litres may not sound much, but it will give a decently long shower. The boat as standard has no heating: an LPG warm air heater is worth considering for those cruising through the winter.

Honda outboards are notoriously quiet: apart from electric engines or sail, there is probably no quieter way to push a boat. True to form, on starting the engine, we had to go aft to actually check that it was running. Even on a damp, miserable day, it started first turn of the key. Although you have to look at the engine to check the water tell-tale, so you know coolant is coming through, the remote control panel has a warning for overheat and low oil pressure – a big relief compared to earlier engines, where constant vigilance was needed in weedy (or plastic bag-strewn) waterways.

The boat steered easily astern, as well as ahead, and the wheel was quite positive. The single lever control was a bit high and easily caught: it would be better moved to the right of the wheel. The Thames was running strongly and with wind, but the boat conducted itself well even at low speed. The 15hp engine is more than enough for tidal rivers in most conditions, and should consume, at around 4mph, around 1 to 1.5 litres unleaded petrol an hour. The boat stopped in its own length and manoeuvred easily into tight spaces.

The Atlanta's fittings and joinery are a big move up from previous versions. The GRP work is flawless, showing the skill of the laminator, and the joinery precise. As this was the first production boat, there were some minor niggles: but since each boat is unique, an owner can add their own ideas at the building stage.

This would be a good boat for a river-based couple planning occasional forays onto the narrow canals. It would also be suitable for entertaining a few friends, especially if the cockpit seating could be pressed into converting to a double berth, leaving the dinette free.

If you fancy a larger narrowbeam cruiser, GSA Marine are to restart production of the 32ft centre-cockpit version. This will be on sale around the £54,000 mark, making it one of only two large, canal-friendly GRP cruisers still in production (the other being the Viking 32). If it can match the standard of the Atlanta 24, it should prove popular.