



Clockwise from right:
 Crewsaver Air Deck
 230; YAM 240 (STI) Air
 Floor Sport Tender;
 YAM 200T; Excel
 Ventura XL200 (blue);
 Force 4 0+Life 235;
 Seago Go Life 230;
 (Inset right) 3D Twin
 V Shape 230 Air Deck
 Tender

9 inflatable tenders on test

Rob Melotti and the PBO test team put some lightweight, portable inflatable dinghies through their paces in Lymington

Inflatables are everywhere: paddleboards, canoes, kayaks, tents, kites and wings – and the technology has long been a practical option for tenders, RIBs, liferafts and lifejackets.

But what the 'new wave' of inflatables brings to the practical boating landscape is the air floor, which makes very stable, very lightweight tenders a very practical option for people with limited stowage ie owners of cruising boats under 30ft. And the market has responded with a selection of offerings under 2.4m weighing under 20kg. So which is the best and what should you be looking for to get the most for your money?

We tested nine models sold by eight different brand names. The boats were superficially quite similar, but in the accumulation of small details it was possible to pick a few favourites. We rowed and motored all of the boats solo, and most of them with two aboard. We weighed and measured them and found a lot to like.

The bags

The bag details matter when one of the main selling points of a product is its portability. We looked at handles, zips and overall design. Metal zips will corrode without a regular rinse in fresh water, but as long as the zipper track is plastic, then



Rucksack bags were easiest to carry

replacement zipper trucks can be fitted relatively cheaply. Carry handles at the narrow ends are very useful and half of the boats tested can be carried as

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LEFT Talamex Superlight SLA 230

BELOW LEFT Quicksilver Tandy Airfloor 240

RIGHT We weighed each of the boats in their carry bags

BELOW RIGHT All the boats were easily carried by two when inflated



rucksacks. A few of the boats pack away in bags that deconstruct on all four sides like groundsheets, with webbing straps and adjustable buckles crossways and lengthways. These are very forgiving and yet still pack up tightly and securely. We also looked at the quality of the bag material: is the bag likely to survive chafing, stretching, damp or UV exposure for as long as the dinghy itself?.

Size, weight and price

The table overleaf will quickly show you the lightest and smallest packs and there are four tenders priced under £500. The two longest boats in the test (YAM 240 and Quicksilver 240) were in the biggest bags (110cm and 120cm respectively), and were the heaviest packs weighing over 20kg even without any accessories.

Only three of the nine tested boats weighed in at under 20kg straight out of the box. There was an 11kg difference between the lightest (Force 4 02Lite) and the heaviest (Quicksilver Tandy Airfloor 240). The Force 4 comes in a rucksack bag that is 20cm shorter in length than the Quicksilver and over £100 cheaper.

But unless size, weight and price are your only criteria,

then a simple numerical comparison could miss some important details.

Pumps and pressure

Some of the air floors are rated for 1psi; others at 11psi. Most of the sponsons were rated at 3.6psi, which shouldn't require too much brow mopping for foot- or hand-pump operators. Five of the boats came with foot pumps, but the double-action hand pumps with the 3D and the Quicksilver were a joy to use.

Manual handling

It's an ironic linguistic quirk that a tender should be so regularly treated without much tenderness. Even a few hours' use on a clean slipway incurred scuffs, dings, grubby marks and a few minor tears to the carry bags. Grass is far kinder than concrete for inflating, but is in short supply at busy locations. We looked at keel strips, rubbing strakes, safety line attachment points, bow handles and more... including the relationship between price, weight and fit-out.

We tested six boats on one day and three on a follow-up – turn the page for reviews.

LEFT We found quite a variation in boat weights



Which one is best on test?

This group of boats can be subdivided in a few different ways: by length, by price and by weight (note there is also a group of rucksack boats and a trio of air-keel boats). I think the best on test goes to the 3D Tender, which manages to keep the weight down, comes complete with a very high-spec pump, a very user-friendly rucksack bag with a big front pocket and a 'slight V form floor' that inflates as a single chamber. There are no safety lines or a bow handle, so carrying the boat when inflated is less natural than some of the others and it's the second most expensive.

The best bargain buy is probably the lightest, smallest package: Force 4, for me, is preferable to the very similar Seago model because of its 'open' rowlocks. But if you prefer captive oars, the Seago is slightly cheaper. The Crewsaver is the same low price and probably more robust and seaworthy than the Force 4 or the Seago while being easier to carry when inflated than the 3D Tender. But without the V floor I think it's a less versatile performer.

I didn't see the benefit of the two 200cm dinghies we tested: both were noticeably small in use without being smaller to pack and stow or lighter to carry. The 240cm V Floor models can carry bigger loads at greater speed, but if you really need that level of performance you have to accept the extra set-up time, weight and stowage. ➔

3D TWIN V SHAPE 230 AIR DECK TENDER

French manufacturer 3D Tender was one of the earliest producers of ultralight inflatable tenders. This model sports premium touches, such as davit rings and the most high-spec pump of all the boats



on test. In terms of convenience it is a rucksack carry bag with a large front pocket for the pump and accessories. The zips will need maintenance though.

The V floor is a single chamber, keeping set-up time to a minimum and keeping the weight down. The lack of safety lines on the side makes carrying as a two-person team a little less convenient than some of the other boats, but the keel strip will help preserve this boat. The rowlocks double as cleats and the rubbing strake will provide strength but little in the way of splashproofing for passengers. Price: £669.

■ oceanfirstmarine.co.uk

Force 4 02Lite was the lightest on test



FORCE 4 02LITE

This model is very similar to the Seago Go Lite (also tested), including the rucksack, which was our favourite on test for carrying comfort, although you do have to beware of any loose objects inside the bag dropping out of the side enclosure flap. The Force 4 02Lite was the lightest package overall and packed down to just 90cm long.

The oars were the smallest on test, which affected the rowing performance, but it was the only boat with open rowlocks – so you can use your own oars. The bench is adjustable, but I wasn't able to position it far enough aft to brace my feet against the transom under oars.

There are three D-rings for making a towing bridle on the bow but no ergonomic carry handle. The rubbing strake is minimal with no splash guard and there are no davit lifting eyes. Price: £500.

■ force4.co.uk



3D Twin V Shape 230 Air Deck Tender was a good all-round performer – and best on test

CREWSAVER AIR DECK 230

The pack we were sent for testing had the incorrect seat included, but we were able to substitute a seat from one of the other boats on test without difficulty.

The rucksack doesn't have a front pocket, but there are no zips to corrode and the adjustable webbing buckles mean the top opening of the bag is quite forgiving for repacking. The safety lines are robustly attached to the hull, which is a feature that will pay dividends long-term, but adds a bit of weight. The rubbing strake is also weighty, but the splash guards will keep water out of the boat.

The coned aft sponson caps are hard plastic, enabling vertical storage without damage and the rowlocks double as cleats.

There are davit rings in the bow and through the thick transom board, plus the bow handle is wide for ergonomic carrying.

Price: £470.

■ crewsaver.com



Crewsaver Air Deck 230 is solidly built and joint cheapest, but is outclassed by 3D Tender's lightweight V floor design



EXCEL VENTURA SL200

From a Midlands-based company that specialises in inflatable boats, this came with a great double-action hand pump and was the only boat on test with an over-pressure valve – a useful feature for exposure to the hot sun. The safety lines



are sturdily attached and splash guards make up part of the rubbing strake protecting the sides and keeping water out of the boat. The rowlocks double as cleats and the bow handle is wide enough for a proper grip. Davit fittings are supplied and the sponsons are shaped to add waterline length and buoyancy aft. The duffel carry bag was the sturdiest on test.

The boat comes with a good long set of oars, although we had to sit side-by-side to make any progress under oars with two adults on board.

Price: £500.

■ excel-inflatables.co.uk

Excel Ventura SL200's double action hand pump made short work of inflation

Quicksilver was big – but also heavy



QUICKSILVER TENDY AIRFLOOR 240

This boat has an inflatable keel as well as a removable inflatable floor. There was also a rigid slat athwartship between the floor and keel, which increases the weight overall. This is one of the priciest and heaviest boats on the test and one of the largest in packed dimensions. It features a fuel tank strap, a decent keel strip to prevent damage on slipways, a decent bow carry handle and rowlock cleats. The rubbing strake is quite meaty as well without being particularly splashproof. The carry bag is very forgiving – opening flat like a groundsheet.

There were no carry handles on the sponsons and the safety rope fixings aren't as solid as many of the other boats on test, although there are rowlock cleats and the seat is fully adjustable.

Price: £608.

■ quicksilver-inflatables.com

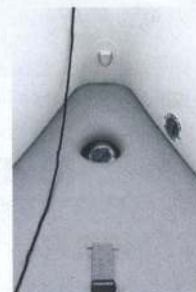


TABLE OF FACTS AND FIGURES	3D TWIN V SHAPE 230 AIR DECK TENDER	CREWSAVER AIR DECK 230	EXCEL VENTURA SL200	FORCE 4 O ₂ LITE 2.35	QUICKSILVER TENDY AIRFLOOR 240	SEAGO GO LITE 230	TALAMEX SUPERLIGHT SLA230	YAM 200T	YAM 240 (STI) AIR DECK
External dimensions (cm)	230 x 130	230 x 130	200 x 130	230 x 130	240 x 132	230 x 135	230 x 135	200 x 126	240 x 123
Internal dimensions (cm)	175 x 63	155 x 60	120 x 60	172 x 63	160 x 65	169 x 60	165 x 70	116 x 60	148 x 65
Pack dimensions (cm)	90 X 45 X 40	95 x 55 x 35	100 x 50 x 35	90 x 50 x 30	110 x 50 x 31	90 x 50 x 24	90 x 50 x 25	100 x 55 x 30	120 x 60 x 30
Legroom (cm)	73-113	66-105	28-67	81-109	20-80	73-92	19-96	57	95
Oar length (cm)	143	143	144	132	140	133	144	135	166
Weight overall (kg)	24	23	23	17.5	28.5	18	19.67	20.5	27
Weight – boat only (kg)	20	17	19	13.5	23.3	14	15.3	17.5	22.5
Rowlock type	Captive	Open	Captive	Captive	Captive	Captive	Captive	Captive	Captive
Solo rowing (knots)	2.4	2.3	1.9	2	2.3	2.5	2.6	1.7	2.3
2 up rowing (knots)	2	1.4	1.5	1.45	1.7	2	2.4	1.45 (side by side)	1.9 (side by side)
Solo 2.3hp (knots)	4.2	4.8	3.9	5.2	4.2	4.5	4.8	4.6	4.9
2 up with 2.3hp (knots)	4.5	4.3	n/a	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.3	n/a	4.5
Floor type	V floor (1 chamber)	Air floor	Airfloor	Air floor	inflatable keel (2 chambers & slat)	Air floor	air floor	Slat floor	Inflatable keel
Bag type	Rucksack	Rucksack	Duffel	Rucksack	Flat bag	Rucksack	Flat bag	Flat bag	Flat bag
Pump	Double action 60cm	Foot pump	Double action 30cm	Foot pump	Double action 30cm	Foot pump	Single action 30cm	Foot pump	Foot pump

SEAGO GO LITE 230

Seago is a distributor, supplying UK chandleries and there are similarities between this model and the O2Lite from Force 4. This model is very light and compact – just 0.5kg heavier than Force 4, but packs down to the same 90cm length. The oars are very short, but are fixed using a pin and thole system which some may prefer over the Force 4's rowlocks.

The PVC material is described as 1100 Decitex (Force 4 is 800 Decitex) and the backpacks of the two were identical: comfortable to carry and forgiving to repack due to their large side aperture



Light weight makes for easy handling on land and in the water

rather than a narrow top. The rubbing strake is minimal and there is no ergonomic bow handle.

Price: £470.

■ seagoyachting.co.uk



YAM 200T is not rated for two adults



YAM 200T

This 2m inflatable has a fixed seat and was unique on the test for having wooden slats to reinforce the floor. This means less pumping up, but slightly increased weight. Like the 3D tender there is no safety rope so carrying between two crew involves spreading your arms wide from bow handle to stern handle placed on the sponsons. It is rated for one adult and one child – the smallest by rating on the test.

There is a hefty rubbing strake with raised levels to block spray and the rowlocks double as cleats. The oars are miniature and the bow has three D-rings for rigging a towing bridle but no ergonomic handle for carrying. With two adults aboard we would have been better rowing side by side – but it was no slouch under engine.

Price: £615.

■ bhg-marine.co.uk

YAM 240 (STI) AIR FLOOR SPORT TENDER

This is the most expensive model on test and features an inflatable keel as well as a floor section, plus two sponsons to inflate. With that much to inflate a high quality pump would have been better, but there is a pressure gauge included in the package to get everything sufficiently firm.

The seat is fixed but the oars were nice and long, which made it the nicest boat to row. As with the YAM 200T there were no safety lines fitted and carry handles are spread far apart, which makes carrying more difficult. But there is a good, ergonomic bow carry handle and the boat is rated to carry 400kg, the highest rating on test. The rowlocks double as cleats and the rounded aft end of the sponsons have protective, hard plastic caps.

Price: £818.

■ bhg-marine.co.uk



The nicest boat on test to row



TALAMEX SUPERLIGHT SLA230

Talamex is a Dutch brand imported by EP Barrus. This boat had the narrowest diameter sponsons on test, which creates more internal space, but less freeboard.

It's an extremely lightweight package, with a thin transom board, but nice long oars and a good carrying handle on the bow. The pump supplied is a single-action hand pump and the bag folds out completely flat like a groundsheet, which is very forgiving for repacking. The bag has nice carrying handles on the narrow ends. The seat was massively adjustable and the rubbing strake is generous without offering very much splash guarding. The safety rope attachments

look a bit vulnerable and there are no other handles on the sponsons.

Price: £600.

■ talamex.com



Smaller diameter sponsons means more space aboard – but less freeboard