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A GRAND DAY OUT

The Grand Banks 54 (GB54) blends the traditional trawler appeal of a 'Downeaster-style' lapstrake hull with the handling and performance of a modern, fast semi-displacement planing launch.



A

vision in pristine white with teak trim inside and out, *Laughalot* is hull #9 out of Grand Banks' Malaysian factory – the first GB54 to reach New Zealand's shores and a new home in Whangaroa Harbour.

Her owners, Lyndsay and Darlene Smits, have owned several boats over the years, including an Oliver, a Don Senior and three Rivas, so they know what they like. When the recently retired couple began contemplating a new boat, they were drawn to the new GB54, which Darlene had seen advertised in *Boating NZ* magazine.

"We'd always liked the build quality of Grand Banks," said Lyndsay – the Smits had been aboard an older Grand Banks at their marina and loved it – "but trawler-style performance didn't appeal. We've always had 30-knot boats"

"Once we started researching the GB54, we realised it was exactly what we were after – the downstairs helm





review

Grand Banks 54

WORDS BY
JOHN EICHELSCHEIM
PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO
BY **ROGER MILLS**
AND **SUPPLIED**

station, walkaround decks, beds you can get in and out of from either side, and the modern-traditional hull design and styling.”

They were sold, ordering the boat sight unseen during Covid and putting their trust in Grand Banks’ reputation. They haven’t been disappointed, says Lyndsay: “The whole process, and the boat itself, surpassed our expectations.”

A GRAND DAY OUT

Laughalot had just finished her pre-delivery commissioning when we joined the vessel at Viaduct Harbour, Auckland, with Grand Banks’ New Zealand representative Matt Mason already aboard. Mason is a long-time friend and crewmate of Australian sailor Mark Richards, who regularly skippers Sydney-Hobart winning maxi racing yacht *Wild Oats XI*. Like Mason, Richards has contested America’s Cup campaigns, as well as numerous Match Racing series, Admirals Cups (Richards won in 2003), and coastal races. The friends still race together at Hamilton Island Race Week each year.

Richards started Palm Beach Motor Yachts in Australia 1995. Palm Beach was acquired by Grand Banks Yachts in 2014 with Richards becoming CEO. He has since transformed the company, modernising and expanding its manufacturing facilities and implementing wide-ranging improvements to the model range. Grand Banks was known for solid, seaworthy displacement trawler yachts, but newer models like the GB54 feature the easily driven warped semi-displacement hull first developed for Richard’s Palm Beach range. The hull design benefits from Richard’s extensive yachting experience.

Boarding the GB54 was made easy by gunwale doors, one either side, which was appreciated by Matt’s guests for the day, including ourselves. These open onto generous side-decks that are flush with the wide cockpit. The teak-trimmed boarding platform is similarly broad with access to the cockpit via a transom door on the starboard side. The upper deck completely overhangs the cockpit, but also shelters the side-decks for half their length. The gunwales wrap right around the boat



while steps up to the foredeck mirror a modest sweep in the sheer line, ensuring the stainless-steel railing, manufactured in-house, is at a safe height right around the vessel. Rather than teak capping on the coamings, the owners have opted for a bronze painted finish, which looks sharp.

Up forward, the foredeck is extensive, with a raised bow to accommodate the capstan, anchor locker and fender storage, a stainless-steel bowsprit/fairlead and a stainless-steel anchor. Non-slip surfaces provide secure footing on deck and on the



ABOVE The downstairs helm station exudes traditional class. Detailing is exceptional.

BELOW & OPPOSITE The GB54's interior features plenty of Grand Banks' traditional high-quality teak, but still manages to look and feel contemporary and light.





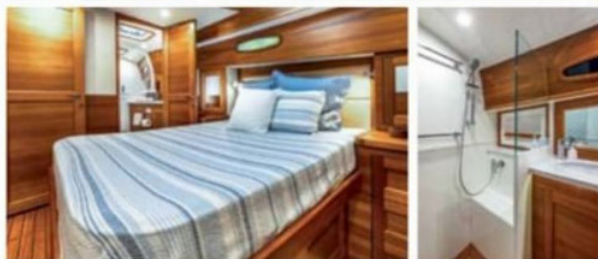
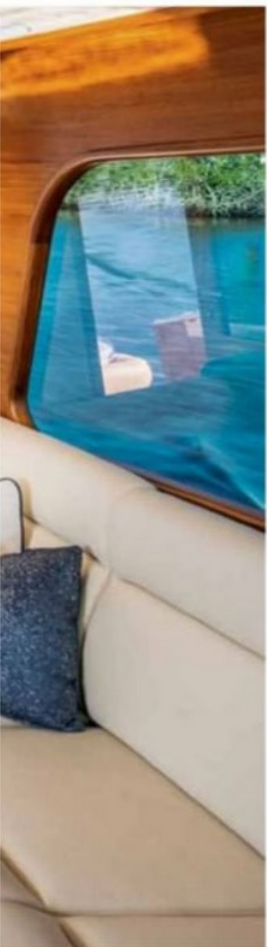
fore-cabin roof, and the cabin top provides ample lounging space when the sun's out.

Although the GB54 is available with Volvo Penta IPS pod-drives, *Laughlot's* owners preferred traditional shaft drives, so this vessel is equipped with twin Volvo Penta D13 900hp engines housed amidships under the saloon sole, leaving space under the cockpit for a huge lazarette and excellent access to steering gear, tankage and more. A dogged hatch opens off the lazarette into the engine room, which is neatly laid out with good service access, Seafire automated fire suppression system, Fisher Panda genset, AC pumps and fuel management equipment. There's decent headroom too.

HELM OPTIONS

Matt took the helm upstairs to guide us out of Viaduct Harbour, using the bowthruster to ease us away from the finger. The upper deck is vast, the after part, surrounded by stainless steel railings and equipped with a Davco electric crane, is used to store the Yamaha outboard-powered OC tender when not in use. It also features an electric outdoor grill. Forward, under the cover of the moulded bimini top, is a generous seating area around a teak table to port, a sink and food preparation area with storage and refrigeration underneath to starboard and twin Stidd reclining pedestal helm seats addressing the fully-featured helm station. New Zealand-made clears had only just been fitted, fully enclosing the upper deck, which together with the hatch over the ladder to the upper deck, creates an all-seasons space.

Driving a boat upstairs is always pleasant, providing unsurpassed vision for the helmsperson, but the GB54's





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RIGHT Sheltered by the upper deck, the cockpit was the perfect place to enjoy an al fresco lunch on a fine winter's day.

OPPOSITE The upper deck is a great alternative for helming and socialising, with unrivalled views of the boat's surroundings. Clears provide all seasons boating utility.

luxurious helm on the main deck gives little away in terms of seeing where you're going. Large windows with relatively narrow mullions and wipers on each pane ensure good sightlines from the helm in all weathers, while deep side windows provide similar wide-ranging views for anyone relaxing in the saloon. The helmsman's side door also provides quick and easy access on deck when required.

The teak-trimmed helm console is traditional in style, but the layout works well and there's room on the seat for two or more to sit comfortably – no need to be lonely while steering this Grand Banks. A remote-controlled FLIR camera, which can be swivelled and zoomed, further enhances awareness of the boat's surroundings, even at night. Other cameras provide views of the cockpit engine room and anchor, displayed on any of the vessel's four 17-inch Garmin MFDs.

The teak-decked cockpit is a good size with a comfortable transom lounge addressing a stunning



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polished teak table. Shaded by the upper deck, it's the perfect place to enjoy al fresco dining. Access to the wide swim platform is via a transom door on the starboard side. Stainless steel staples provide security and somewhere for the BBQ and bait board and there's a pull-out swim ladder on the port side with handy grab rails on both corners of the platform. The vessel's third helm station is in the cockpit, furnished with throttle and thruster controls.

SUMPTUOUS INTERIOR

The saloon is all understated luxury with sumptuous cream leather upholstery, sisal carpet and acres of teak. The dark satin-



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15	1320	89	590
20	1668	146	479
25	1936	208	421
30	2240	278	378
Max	31.8	333	334
80% load	23.6	193	428

ABOVE & OPPOSITE *Laughalot* sweeps past Rangitoto Lighthouse at 27 knots. Steering is effortless.

RIGHT Plenty of space on the foredeck, which is easy to access.

finish teak cabinets, teak trim and a polished teak table doesn't make the GB45's interior feel the least bit gloomy, but rather keeps faith with the boat's traditional styling, contrasting nicely with the all-white exterior, light-coloured upholstery and white ceiling lining. Together they give the vessel an air of quality and class. Low-waisted windows, some of them electric, ensure plenty of natural light, which also floods down into the galley from the front windows. A large flat screen TV folds down from the ceiling.

Laughalot is a galley down version of the GB54, but the food preparation area enjoys easy access via companionway stairs and is completely open to the saloon from above. As you would expect, the galley is well-appointed with generous stone-look counters, good storage and all-electric cooking and refrigeration. The washer-dryer is tucked away under the companionway stairs, which hinge upwards for easy access.

A galley up (but still forward) version of the GB54 is also offered, which may be the preferred layout among Kiwi boaters.

There's luxurious accommodation in two good-sized cabins leading off the galley, each with an ensuite bathroom and separate shower (the port cabin's bathroom is also the vessel's day-head). Which of the two cabins should be designated the 'master' is





moot – both are large with king berths, generous storage and good wardrobe space in hanging lockers. The cabin in the bow has an island berth and a large overhead hatch for light and air, while the starboard cabin's walkaround berth is positioned athwartships and its bathroom is for the occupants' exclusive use. So arguably the starboard cabin should be the master, especially as it also has the larger hanging locker.

While the cabins are sumptuously appointed and tastefully decorated (Grand Banks owners work with the factory on interior decoration options), the GB54's graceful bow and relatively narrow beam mean it doesn't have the sheer volume below decks of some of the latest rather boxy European designs. Nor are there ports or hull windows, only overhead skylights, for natural light. The GB54 also comes in a three-cabin configuration (galley up).

EFFORTLESS CRUISER

Once clear of the restricted speed zone, Mason opened the throttles and *Laughalot* quickly slid onto the plane with minimal bow lift. At 20 knots and travelling with a very level attitude, total fuel burn was a respectable 140 litres per hour. The vessel is clearly fuel efficient and fast too – we saw a sprint speed of just over 32 knots.

While the warped semi-displacement hull, which transitions from a sharp, fine entry that slices through the waves to a relatively flat run aft with a modest 8° deadrise at the transom, is partly responsible for such good performance and economy, it's supported by the boat's construction.

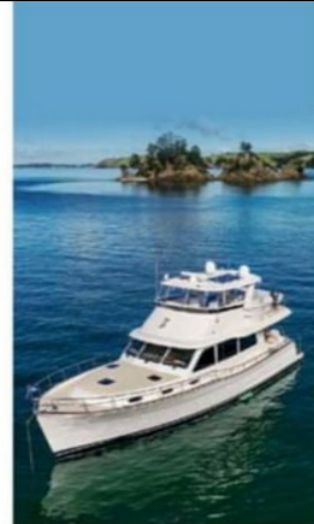
With the GB54, Grand Banks was very careful to keep weight down, using resin-infused carbon-fibre decks, reducing weight wherever possible and adding carbon where required for strength. All up, this 18m boat weighs under 30 tonnes fully laden. Lighter weight and a more efficient hull mean far better fuel economy and performance than Grand Banks models of old, says Mason.

The GB54 is also effortless to steer. Fingertip pressure is all that's required at any speed, and remarkably, the vessel responds beautifully to the helm at low speeds as well – there's seldom any need to resort to manipulating the throttles to direct the vessel where you want it to go, even at idle. The Humphree interceptor and fin stabiliser system provide great stability underway, minimising roll while also automatically regulating fore and aft trim. The fin stabilisers ensure that the vessel remains almost level in the turns – if anything it leans slightly outwards rather than inwards. And unlike most large motor yachts, the GB54's wake is very flat at any speed, a testament to its easily-driven hull form. So easily driven, *Laughalot* planes at 11-12 knots and cruises all day at 25 knots, or you can enjoy a 1000nm-plus range at 10 knots.

Quietness is another attribute we noticed, at any speed. That's true up on the flybridge or at the helm downstairs, even with the saloon doors and rear windows open. The engines are obviously well sound-proofed and vibration underway is minimal.

Returning to the dock was no more stressful than the rest of our day aboard the GB54. Matt transferred control to the cockpit helm station in order to ease *Laughalot* into her temporary berth, using a combination of throttles and thrusters to bring her alongside the dock. With the lines secured, it was time for us to part ways with this Grand Banks 54 – the Smits were set to take her up the coast the next day.

The Grand Banks 54 delivers traditional styling with timeless good looks, comfortable accommodations and performance with economy. The warped hull design provides remarkable seakeeping, enhanced by Humphree fin stabilisers, and the trawler layout gives a multitude of options for entertainment and onboard living. *Laughalot* may be the first GB54 in New Zealand, but I'll be surprised if she is the last. **BNZ**



Grand Banks 54

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HIGHLIGHTS

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Huge lazarette

Opening saloon
side windows

SPECIFICATIONS

loa 18.41m
length on deck 16.4m
beam 5.4m
draft 1.21m
displacement 25,000kg (50% load)
engine 2 x Volvo D13 @ 900hp
DriveShaft
fuel capacity 3,500 litres
water capacity 1,000 litres
holding tank 250 litres
cruising speed 20 knots
top speed 32 knots

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