

TOPAZ XENON



Topper's latest rotomoulded dinghy has been designed for racing performance combined with easily-handled fun. **Jeremy Evans** tries the Topaz Xenon for size...

The Xenon has already scored two firsts. For a start, Xenon is the widest dinghy that's ever been produced by thermoplastic rotomoulding. Its 2m beam is comparable to glassfibre hulled dinghies of similar size – exactly the same width as the RS400 which is virtually the same length, and wider than Topper's bigger, more cruisey Omega, let alone the Laser Vago or RS Vision. This is down to the fact that Topper have the biggest oven to cook the biggest boat!

In addition, the Xenon has been selected for this year's Endeavour Trophy, the annual 'champion of champions' regatta in which top crews from a host of major classes find out who is quickest in the same one-design boat.

Development and build

Topper launched the Topaz as their first thermoplastic dinghy in 1998, three years behind the Laser Pico which led the rotomoulded dinghy

revolution. Since then Topper have gone all-out on this form of low cost production, developing a five boat Topaz range, of which Xenon is the latest.

The basic principles of construction remain the same. Each complete hull and deck unit is a trilaminar moulding with polyethylene plastic skins inside and outside and a foam core to provide stiffness in between. The trick is to achieve a reasonably lightweight hull combined with the best possible rigidity.

The big advantage of thermoplastic construction is that it is much cheaper, quicker and less labour intensive than foam sandwich glassfibre construction, which until recently has been the preferred method for building most dinghies. Thermoplastic hulls are reckoned to save about two-thirds of the cost off a bare hull and deck, which could knock as much as a whopping £3,000 off the price of a ready-to-sail boat.

We had a first look at the glassfibre Xenon prototype last December, when it was being

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Above right The kite systems worked well, through the hoists and drops.

Top You can sail Xenon singlehanded with the jib furled and it stays nicely balanced under main only.

Above The Xenon felt precise, well mannered and easy to drive high upwind.

Below Capsize recovery held no problems, even singlehanded.

developed by Rob White at White Formula in Brightlingsea. The production boat is recognisably similar. You wouldn't notice the 'shrinkage' effect which makes thermoplastic hulls slightly smaller, and in terms of finish the production Xenon was clearly superior. Having produced five different designs in the Topaz line-up, Topper appear to have got their rotomoulding process very well sorted. Features include a really neat Xenon logo which is integrated into the plastic so it should never (only time will tell) scratch or fade. The Xenon is also clear ahead as the best looking boat in the Topaz range, helped by wide beam and low freeboard which give a more stylish and punchy appearance than the twin crew Omega or Magno.

Launching and layout

Having been out on the water with the prototype Xenon in the depths of winter, it was a delight to sail the production boat on a fine summer's day. A combi trailer is the only big extra you're likely to need for this boat. The roll on/roll off system is well engineered to provide hassle free trailer-sailing. Rigging the Xenon is straightforward – all the bits you need to reach are easily accessible

with no mystery to setting up the boat.

Our trail-to-sail rigging time was in the region of a relaxed half hour. Getting the mast up is no sweat for two people – attach the mast foot and shrouds, then get one crew to 'throw' the mast up from the back while the other pulls hand over hand on the forestay which uses the classic dinghy tensioning system.

Thermoplastic dinghies have a reputation for being on the heavy side, but they've got lighter as development has progressed. The Xenon hull gets close to most middleweight glassfibre dinghies – a fair bit heavier than an RS400 but lighter than a GP14 – so there should be no problems pushing it around the boat park on your own or pulling it up a club slipway with your fellow crew. Once you launch the Xenon onto the water, it turns out to be a stable and forgiving boat. Low freeboard makes it easy for the crew to get in over the side or transom, with Xenon showing no undue tendency to tip over.

There's also loads of room inside. Thanks to the wide beam and uncluttered cockpit, the Xenon really is a full sized 14-footer (close to 15ft LOA) with an excellent working area for two crew to race the boat hard or take a cruise accompanied by a couple of children. There's also convenient storage provided by two watertight bins in the foredeck.

Sailing

The Xenon rig is adaptable. For racing the 'Sport' sail area is similar to an RS400, but can be radically reduced for cruising by not deploying the kite (which you don't get with the Xenon Club), rolling up the jib and, if necessary, zip-reefing the mainsail which removes a big slab and lowers the centre of effort so there is less heeling moment. The wardrobe is by Hyde Sails and looks great. A Dacron jib should provide roll-up longevity while the laminate Mylar mainsail is see-through and extremely cool. As for the stealthy black kite – apparently Rob White had severe doubts that a black kite would prove popular, but on our super-sunny test day it gave the Xenon formidable style.





Like the rest of the boat, the kite also worked well. For a start, the Xenon passed the barefoot summer sailing test, grip is very good and there are no nasty things ready to damage your toes. You can sit on the cockpit benches for light wind cruising, or sit up on the sidedecks and hike off the well padded toestraps which are adjustable for different length legs under the thwarts.

We did not get a lot of wind during this test session, but the Xenon felt precise, well mannered and easy to drive high upwind. Controls come easily to hand with ratchet power on the mainsheet, which is led from a stainless steel hoop, ensuring it is well out of the way of both crew while sheeting in without pulling the sail down. That operation is performed by the gnav, the upside-down vang which provides a very clear working area for the crew, plus has the additional benefit of holding the boom up when the mainsail is lowered.

Gnav and downhaul control lines are led to the central thwart where they can be trimmed by crew or helm. Most other controls are located on the aluminium cross beam which supports the mast and has become a trademark feature of the larger boats in the Topaz range, helping to provide hull rigidity with an uncluttered forward cockpit that has the centreboard case neatly integrated with the self-draining double bottom.

When we were sailing, the boom pointed back with a slight upward slant which will obviously reduce if you pull hard on the gnav or rake the mast by using a lower shroud position. This 'boom-up' appearance may look a little odd, but has the great advantage of providing loads of headroom for the helm during tacks and gybes. As it happened, turning through the wind either way seemed like a doddle.

The Xenon turns smartly but is really very stable. You can feel relaxed about standing up in the boat skiff-style during a tack, gybe or hoist when the black kite went up and came down without any trouble. This big black gennaker felt good in a Force 2-3, but will clearly provide plenty

of drive in a Force 4-5 when polished technique will be required to keep sailing in the right direction.

In lighter winds, you can sail Xenon singlehanded with the jib furled and it stays nicely balanced under main only. We're also glad to report that a solo sailor weighing around 75kg had no trouble righting the capsized Xenon, which came up dry - if truth be told, he had more trouble getting it to tip over!

Dual-purpose winner?

The Xenon has all the makings of a dual-purpose boat. It has great potential as a one-design racing class with good looks, enjoyable performance and a well-sorted platform for crews who won't need a load of expertise to get round a course while staying more or less in control. That beamy hull

Above left Rigging up holds no surprises, taking around half an hour for two people.

Tip The Xenon has the trademark Topaz cross beam in the front of the cockpit.

Upwind The boom points back with a slight upward slant, giving plenty of head room.

Left The main is made of see-through Mylar and can be zip-reefed.



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DANIEL SHAW/STUDIO

ANSWER BACK

from ?

should also be a good weight carrier for crews from heavy to flyweight – to prove the point, Topper's Jon Manners has been club racing a Xenon at Datchet and Maidenhead with his 12-year-old son Dan at a combined weight of around 110kg.

The unexpected face of Xenon is that it could also be pretty nice as a general purpose funboat for family sailing. Loads of room and a good turn of speed, combined with excellent stability, should provide the kind of ride that gets everyone back to the beach feeling enthused and elated – rather than in tears or ready for divorce! Best of all, the Xenon has a knockout price which looks great value whether you go for Club or Sport mode. ■

Above The beamy hull is stable, with plenty of room for the crew.

Thanks to Cobnor Activities centre (CACT) for providing facilities for this test. CACT runs a full programme of residential and non-residential sailing courses and activities in Chichester harbour; for details visit www.cact.co.uk

Specification XENON

DESIGN:	Ian Howlett in 2005
LENGTH:	4.5m
BEAM:	2m
HULL WEIGHT (fitted):	118kg
SAIL AREA:	
JIB:	3.5sq m
MAINSAIL:	12sq m
GENNAKER:	12.75 sq m
PRICE:	Sport (with gennaker) £4,795 Club £4,295

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COMPARISONS... Where does the Topaz Xenon fit in? Here are some alternatives...



■ LASER 2000

Phil Morrison's 1998 design provides a popular mix of family sailing and club racing with an asymmetrical kite.

LOA:	4.44m
BEAM:	1.65m
HULL WEIGHT:	100kg
CREW WEIGHT:	120-180kg
SAIL AREA:	
Upwind:	11.78sq m
Gennaker:	9.86sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£6,195*



■ RS400

Also designed by Phil Morrison, the RS400 is established as one of the UK's great competition classes.

LOA:	4.52m
BEAM:	2m
HULL WEIGHT:	85kg
CREW WEIGHT:	115-145kg
SAIL AREA:	
Upwind:	14.76sq m
Gennaker:	11.94sq m
GUIDE PRICE:	£7,995*

*Guide prices are approximate and include sails