

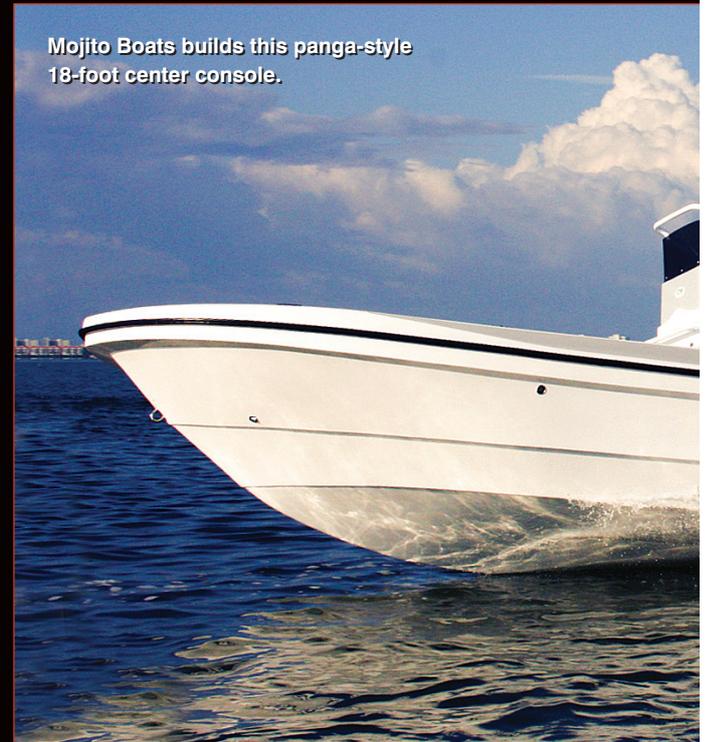
SMALL ON SIZE,

Cheaper to run and easier to maintain, these under-30-footers

A Classic Bay Cruiser 22 from Mathews Brothers.



Mojito Boats builds this panga-style 18-foot center console.



BY CHRIS LANDRY / SENIOR REPORTER

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series on small boats. Next month, we'll look at small boats that can be sailed or rowed.

A small boat makes sense in many ways. They're less expensive to purchase, operate, maintain, store and transport than large boats. And they make getting on the water — and staying on the water — easier. And during these choppy economic times where greater emphasis is placed on value and belt-tightening, more downsizing, not surprisingly, is taking place.

"There's very little to break on a small boat," says Renzo Rivolta, co-owner of the newly launched Mojito panga-style boats. "I think they're more manageable and certainly the fuel efficiency is a huge part of the appeal."

So is the fun factor.

"I think people are realizing that they had more fun in the 20- to 25-foot boat they had 30 years ago," says Jeff Messmer, vice president of sales and marketing for the tug builder Ranger Tugs in Kent, Wash. "Many boaters who have downsized realize that bigger isn't always better."

Large boats and yachts enable their owners and crew to cruise in comfort for extended periods across long distances. In addition, a bigger boat (let's say 30 feet and up) that is well-designed and built should handle rough seas better and offer a higher safety factor than a smaller vessel. But like everything, that comes with a cost, from the slip to stor-

age to maintaining more complex systems.

"A large percentage of the boats are essentially cottages," says Ted Boynton, owner of Stagepoint Boats in Westbrook, Conn., builder of a 17-foot skiff. "They may go somewhere for a couple of weeks, but for most of the summer they're tied to the docks, and [their owners] are using them as cottages."

Compared with the price of waterfront homes, that makes sense for many people. But others are content with day boating; they value the ease and ability to get under way at the drop of a hat, and the simpler maintenance that goes with small craft.

A small boat gives its owner a sense of independence and freedom, says Grady-White vice president of engineering David Neese. "As far as the value of small boats, besides their economy, it comes down to being able to operate it yourself or with a small crew," he says.

"You can just go, and you can just go without a lot of fuss," says Boynton.

With their shallower drafts, small boats can take you into the skinny waters. Plus, most are trailerable, offering the flexibility to hit the road and visit numerous boating, fishing and diving locales.

Sure, they're no match for heavy weather, but if you pick the right day — and you're equipped with appropriate safety equipment — the right small boat can safely travel 30 miles or more offshore.

Small boats attract both newcomers and veterans, folks moving up in size and folks moving back down. "For a lot of people it's the beginning of a career on the water," says Boynton. "They start out in a Laser or a

small powerboat and move up to a cruising boat. And then at middle age or toward retirement, they start downsizing. Or they still have a larger boat and want something to take the kids or the grandkids out."

THE FLEET

The six boats highlighted here range from 17 to 25 feet: the Stagepoint 17, Mojito 18, Mathews Brothers Classic Bay Cruiser 22, Grady-White Freedom 225, Albury Brothers 23 and Ranger R-25SC. It's a diverse group, with a panga-style fishing boat (Mojito), a classic diesel-powered Chesapeake cruiser (Mathews), and a tug (Ranger) in the mix. We have deep-vees, modified-vees, and planing and semiplaning hulls, as well as one stepped hull (Stagepoint).

They have strong regional roots. The Pacific Northwest, New England, the Chesapeake, North Carolina, Florida and the Bahamas are all represented. The boat companies, aside from Grady-White, are mainly small builders operating up and down the East Coast from New England to Florida, with one (Ranger) based in Washington state. They build their vessels using basic fiberglass boatbuilding methods — hand-laid glass with core material and polyester or vinylester resin. There's no resin infusion or vacuum bagging.

A single engine powers each boat. Outboards hang from most, but the fleet does include one diesel inboard (Ranger) and one vessel that accepts an inboard, inboard/outboard or an outboard (Mathews).

The Grady-White can handle the most horsepower, at 300, while the Stagepoint 17's limit is 70 hp.

BUT BIG ON FUN

let you enjoy time on the water in its purest form



Grady-White's Freedom 225.



The Grady-White hits the highest speed, topping out at 49 mph. They're all pretty fuel-efficient — no surprise given their size. The Mojito Panga gets nearly 8 mpg at 23 mph, and both the Ranger and Mathews can travel about 5 mpg at cruising speeds.

Prices range from about \$19,900 for the no-frills, linerless Mojito 18C with a 70-hp Suzuki and a trailer to \$135,000 for the Mathews 22 with a 130-hp Volvo Penta I/O, the builder's most expensive engine option.

STAGEPOINT 17

The Stagepoint 17's roots extend back to the 1970s, when a Massachusetts boatbuilder combined the lines of a Nova Scotia lobster skiff with a more modern hull bottom, says Stagepoint owner Boynton. The beam was increased and a small step added to the bottom to enable the vessel to maintain planing speeds. The 7-foot, 4-inch beam also increased stability.

"Two adults can stand on the same side of the boat and it barely budges," says Boynton, who has sold about 60 Stagepoint 17s during the last decade. "It's stable at rest, at low speed and at high speed."

But it's the Stagepoint's look — the proud bow, tumblehome transom and teak console — that initially attracts buyers, he says. "It is a very good-looking boat," he says. "That's what [buyers] want to have at the end of their dock. It's a little more unique, distinctive. It has its own signature."

The boat functions well as a harbor cruiser or a fishing platform. It's also up to the task of towing water skiers or tube riders, says Boynton. With a Suzuki DF70 4-stroke bolted to the transom, this

center console cruises at about 25 mph and tops out in the low 30s. It has a capacity of six people and moves right along at 25 to 28 mph with four or five aboard, says Boynton. He has yet to calculate mileage data, but he says the lightweight and powerful Suzuki 70 burns little fuel.

Boynton has used various boatbuilders on a contractual basis to construct the 17 through the years, but has partnered with builder John Neikle of Tiverton, R.I. The hull consists of hand-laid solid fiberglass, and the transom and decks are cored.

owner of the newly formed Mojito Boats division of Rivolta Yachts. "They do stand out in comparison to all the other small boats on the market, with their high-rising bow."

A panga-style boat is traditionally narrow, but this builder has given the Mojito 18 more beam for stability and higher freeboard for safety. The 18 carries a beam of nearly 7 feet. That's about a foot wider than some other 18-foot panga skiffs. Another difference: the Mojito is capped with a nicely finished liner. Most pangas have a rolled gunwale and no liner.

Small boats attract both newcomers and veterans, folks moving up in size and folks moving back down.

With the 70-hp Suzuki, a Stagepoint 17 sells for \$28,500, which includes the \$1,500 option of a teak console and helm seat. Without the topside wood and with a 50-hp Suzuki, the price drops to \$25,000.

Contact: Stagepoint Boats, (860) 399-2276. www.soundboatworksllc.com

MOJITO 18

Talk about diversifying. Rivolta Yachts, a Sarasota, Fla., builder of high-end custom express and sedan cruising yachts from 38 to 90 feet (as well as sailing yachts), has launched a line of panga-style skiffs.

"We've always been enthusiastic about the panga hulls — how seaworthy they are, how efficient they are and how unique they are," says Rivolta, co-

"We wanted to give it a step up in terms of styling and quality, and yet maintain the functionality and seaworthiness and the efficiency of a panga hull," says Rivolta.

A standard jack plate on the Mojito 18 decreases draft while under power. "Shallow-water capability is a must, whether it's a Rivolta yacht or a Mojito panga," says Rivolta. "If you have a boat, you should not have great restrictions on where you go."

The Mojito 18, as well as a 16-footer, are currently in production, and the company plans to introduce its first 22-footer in July, says Rivolta. A 20-foot model will follow. The builder is also offering a stripped-down version of the 18 — the 18C — that has a small-

er center console and no liner.

A 90-hp Suzuki 4-stroke matches up well with the Mojito 18. At 29 mph, the Suzuki burns 4.5 gph, which equates to 6.5 mpg. Top speed is 37 mph. It also does fine with a Suzuki 70.

The top half of the center console opens on hinges and folds aft, giving great access to helm wiring, engine controls and the battery. The console was designed with toekick around its perimeter for increased balance. A hand rail that wraps around the console adds to safety on deck. The uncluttered layout includes a raised foredeck casting platform with storage, and two stern compartments can be used for live-well, fish-box or dry-storage purposes.

Rivolta uses resin infusion to build its larger yachts, but the Mojito 18 is hand laid, Rivolta says. The boat with a 90-hp Suzuki and trailer sells for \$25,900. The no-frills, linerless 18C with a 70-hp Suzuki and a trailer is \$19,900.

Contact: Mojito Boats, (941) 345-6131. www.mojitoboats.com

MATHEWS BROTHERS CLASSIC BAY CRUISER 22

Hailing from Chesapeake Bay and debuting in 1998, this little yacht fits the bill for exploring rivers, bays and creeks, or for cocktail cruises and runs to dinner at your favorite waterfront restaurant. Like the rest of the Mathews Brothers fleet, which includes two 29-footers, and 38- and 40-footers, the 22 is a throwback design, with its raised trunk cabin, distinctive sheer and high, wood-framed windshield.

"It's a comfortable boat, a smooth boat to run," says Pete Mathews, owner of Mathews Brothers of Denton, Md., which he founded in 1995. "The 22 has a real classic-boat look from kind of a bygone era. I think a lot of people like that [look] more so today compared to a few years ago. I'm not saying people are sick of the big white boats, but I think people do get sick of all the fiberglass."

From bow to stern, wood accents the Bay Cruiser. The anchor platform, foredeck handrails, toerails and companionway door all are teak.

A sharp entry, around 55 degrees, flattens quickly moving aft to a transom with a deadrise of about 7 degrees. The Bay Cruiser's hard chines help stabilize the boat, says Mathews. Cruising at about 20 mph, the 110-hp Yanmar diesel burns only 4 gph and pushes the boat 5 mpg. With a 130-hp twin-prop Volvo Penta I/O, the boat gets an impressive 7 mpg at 31 mph. A third power option — a 135-hp Honda — can also power this boat. At 29 mph, the 22-footer travels about 3 mpg.

A settee stretches across the stern and the cushion-topped engine cover also functions as a seat. The cuddy includes a 6-foot, 7-inch V-berth, small hanging locker and space in the cabin well for a portable marine head.

Mathews encourages buyers to come to his shop and see the boats being built. "They can watch the boat grow up on the shop floor from all this raw material," he says. "We also do a lot of hand woodwork with this boat and people really enjoy that."



Stagepoint Boats in Westbrook, Conn., builds this 17-foot skiff.

The Classic Bay Cruiser sells for \$128,500 with the 110-hp Yanmar, \$102,500 with the Honda 135 and \$135,000 with the 130-hp Volvo Penta I/O.

Contact: Mathews Brothers LLC, (410) 479-9720. www.mathewsboats.com

GRADY-WHITE FREEDOM 225

The Grady-White Freedom 225 was launched in 2003, but the Greenville, N.C., builder has manufactured a dual console in various configurations for many years before that, says vice president of engineering Neese. "The idea has always been to give the owner the freedom to do anything he wants," says Neese. "At boat shows, I often talk about how big the cockpit is, similar to a center console. And it has a fishbox built in and a live well built in and gives the consumer what he needs to fish. But at the same time, you have the protection of a full windshield."

The 225 was designed for the family, with a fold-down two-person transom seat, port-side companion seat with aft-facing seat on its backside and wraparound bow seating. A head is housed in the port-side console.

With ample foam flotation, the 225 is unsinkable, says Neese. The self-bailing deck's fishboxes, coolers and other compartments are all above the waterline and drain overboard, he says. Cockpit-sole toerails and mul-

Albury Brothers designed this 23-footer to be a no-nonsense boat.



iple hand rails demonstrate the manufacturer's attention to safety, he says.

A single Yamaha F200, F250 or F300 powers the Freedom 225. The outboard is mounted on an engine bracket, which "really maximizes interior space," says Neese.

The builder employs resin transfer molding for a gelcoat-like finish on all lids and hatches. Hulls and decks are still open-molded. The bottom is solid fiberglass, while the stringers, transom and decks are cored with XL marine plywood and encapsulated in fiberglass.

"We have not yet chased the all-foam stringer rabbit yet just in the interest of having lighter weight," says Neese. "We don't really like our hulls to get too light."

Despite that, the Freedom 225 can run 3.5 miles on a gallon of fuel while cruising from 24 to 31 mph. All Grady-Whites ride the company's SeaV2 hull, a Hunt variable-deadrise design with a 20-degree deadrise at the transom and more than 40 degrees at the forefoot. "The hulls do a nice job of wave piercing and giving stability at rest," says Neese.

With an F250, the Freedom 225 retails for \$83,220. Pricing with the new F300 was unavailable. (The company recently renamed the boat from Tournament 225 to Freedom 225 and had yet to make the name change on its Web site.)

Contact: Grady-White, (252) 752-2111. www.gradywhite.com

ALBURY BROTHERS 23

Albury Brothers has been building small boats on Man-O-War Cay in the Bahamas since 1952. In 2004, the family agreed to allow Albury enthusiast Jeff Lichterman to expand the business and build Albury Brothers boats in the United States. The barebones 23-foot center console has been the most popular model, says Bob Chew, general manager of Albury in the States.

"A lot of times a guy will go to the Bahamas and rent an Albury Brothers boat and he falls in love with the ride and simplicity," says Chew. "These guys have owned boats all their lives and maybe have a bigger boat and just want to have a no-nonsense skiff."

The 23's wide-open deck has just one seat (built into the forward side of the console) other than the leaning post. "The 23 is all about simplicity," says Chew. "There's no head in the console, no unnecessary hardware. It wasn't built for a specific purpose. You fish out of it, dive out of it, use it for general transportation." The company, in response to U.S. demand, has launched a 23 with bow seating and a fishbox under the cockpit sole.

The 23 was designed with rounded bilges and moderate deadrise at the stern for transitioning onto plane with minimal bow rise. "These boats tend to come up pretty flat," says Chew. "There's no hump you have to get over."

A sharp entry and deadrise amidships work to slice through seas. "The boat rides well at all headings," he says. "It's not like today's deep-vee, which is a great head-sea boat. Yes, a strictly deep-vee boat is going to be a little better in a head

sea, but as soon as you get into a quartering sea, these boats blow away deep-vees in ride comfort."

The Albury 23 with a 225-hp Suzuki travels 3.4 mpg at 28 mph and runs 45 mph with the throttle pegged. The boat is rated for 300 hp, and it can take twin engines, though most are rigged with a single.

The Albury is built with a solid glass bottom and PVC-cored sides, decks and hatches. Vinylester resin is used in the skin coat for increased blister protection. Base price for a 23 with a Suzuki 225 is \$62,995; the forward seating model is \$65,995 with the same engine.

Contact: Albury Brothers, (561) 863-7006. www.alburybrothersboats.com

RANGER R-25SC

Not all small boats revolve around being stripped down. Case in point is the Ranger R-25SC, a single diesel tug that can be equipped with creature comforts — air conditioning, generator, watermaker, all the stuff you'll find on a much larger vessel.

"We have customers using the boat like you would use a 40- or 50-foot boat, to go cruising," says sales/marketing vice president Messmer. "They just do it in a smaller package."

Not only does this pilothouse boat lengthen the season in colder climates like the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast, it also gives Florida boaters some relief from the sun and heat, he says.

The 25SC (Sport Cockpit) rides a displacement hull



Ranger's R-25SC comes with standard bow and stern thrusters.

that has some deadrise aft, lending it semidisplacement characteristics, says Messmer. "It's a hard-chine boat, which gives it stability and more lift," he says. "It's a straight inboard with a shallow shaft angle. It does have a keel, but only has a 26-inch draft. So owners are able to trailer it on pretty much a normal trailer and launch and retrieve like any other 25-foot cruiser." No special permit is needed to trailer the 25SC, says Messmer.

The R-25SC replaces the R-25, which was launched in 2006. The SC has a 25 percent larger cockpit, which

means the entire engine is under the cockpit sole rather than under the aft section of the pilothouse sole. "It's allowed us to reduce noise in the pilothouse," says Messmer. Other improvements include 2 inches of additional headroom in the pilothouse, and the builder has made space for a microwave oven, which joins the port-side galley's sink, stove and refrigerator.

"The challenge with a boat like this is to use every bit of space wisely," says Messmer.

The head with shower is abaft the galley and the helm is forward. The helm station has a large vertical panel for multiple electronics displays. The dinette area across from the galley/helm converts to a two-person berth. The forward V-berth

is a step down from the pilothouse sole.

At about 16 mph — a comfortable cruise for the tug — the 150-hp Yanmar diesel burns from 3 to 4 gph for 4.6 mpg. Fuel capacity is 90 gallons, giving the 25SC a 331-mile range at this speed. The boat has a top speed of 22 mph.

The builder uses a lead backing to mount the engine to the stringers for strength and vibration reduction. The 25SC has a solid fiberglass hull with a vinylester resin skin coat. The decks are cored with PVC foam. The Ranger R-25SC sells for \$129,937 with the 150-hp Yanmar.

Contact: Ranger Tugs, (253) 839-5213. www.rangertugs.com ■

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