

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/columnists/cs-0506090302jun09,1,3640110.column?coll=chi-sportscolumnist-hed>

New `toys' float their boats

Complete with water cannons and loungers, battery-operated watercraft are made for easy summer fun

Lew Freedman
On The Outdoors

June 9, 2005

It might look like the "Sesame Street" of boating lines, but the boats really do float. The new line of Escape Electric Fun Boats produced by Johnson Outdoors has a show-stopping splashy look and indeed the boats were show-stoppers in January in Chicago.

The red-, blue-, yellow- and white-trimmed boats were unveiled at the 75th Chicago Boat, RV & Outdoors Show at McCormick Place and went on sale at the beginning of April. Those who witnessed the sneak preview of the lighthearted line were enthralled.

"They look like toys," show public relations manager Ellen Hopkins said.

Erich Pagel, director of market research with Johnson, based in Grand Rapids, Mich., assured everyone they are not.

"They are real boats," Pagel said. "The whole idea is that these are simple and easy to use so anyone can enjoy the water."

A glimpse of the little boats, which pretty much look as if they are made out of plastic, regularly brought smiles to the faces of patrons, some of whom had just explored \$1.3 million yachts with all the fixin's on the same floor. The difference? Well, the kids' Fun Boat is 7 feet long, seats a child and a lightweight parent, weighs just 125 pounds, can travel up to 3.5 m.p.h. for eight hours and lists for \$1,999.

Oh, yeah, did we mention the water cannon? Press a button with a finger and water shoots several feet in the air.

"Now that's a squirt gun," Pagel said.

There are two other bright models, all bearing the same colors. The 13-foot Touring Boat is canoe-shaped, weighs 140 pounds, has a carrying capacity of

Advertisement



600 pounds and costs \$2,499. The ChaiseLounger, 12 feet in length, weighs 300 pounds, can transport 700 pounds and sells for \$3,999.

Pagel said six people could hang out on the ChaiseLounger at once. Of course they might be as cramped as it was below-decks on the Titanic. More likely the image of a lovey-dovey couple tooling around the water at less than 4 m.p.h. with a canopy raised for shade will grab buyers.

The boats run on 12-volt batteries. No big engine and no technical seamanship is necessary to roam the waters. Pagel said the plans for the boats were in the works for about 2 1/2 years.

"These are for rookies," Pagel said. "They might be for women who don't want to hassle with a motor. This gets kids and whole families involved in boating. Boating has been a guy thing more than it should be. I think we're going to be growing boating."

The Touring Boat really does look like a canoe, but it doesn't require paddling.

"You could," Pagel said. "But why would you? This line is about simple and easy. Paddling is not easy."

Mary Leas of Minooka stopped in her tracks when she spied the Escape Boats and she was particularly enamored of the Touring Boat.

"Way cool," she said. "This is neat. This is a neat idea for people like me. I love canoes, but they're too tippy."

Unlike a real canoe where the paddlers face the same way while propelling the craft, the Touring Boat allows inhabitants to face one another in soft chairs. A table-like platform can be used to hold a tray of food.

"You can add running lights for those evening cruises," Pagel joked.

But really, he said, the human positioning means you get to look at one another while nature watching or fishing.

Leas saw lots of appeal in the Fun Boat idea too.

"With kids I don't want to haul the gas," Leas said.

Her cousin, Jeff Leas of Joliet, admired the ChaiseLounger. The ChaiseLounger garners the biggest laughs. A recliner that looks precisely like the lounging portion of the chair is attached to a catamaran. The steering mechanism is a joystick. The manufacturers' blurb on the ChaiseLounger reads, "The best seat on the water." And, actually you can't stand up on the vessel without some serious ballet training.

"This is more my speed," Jeff Leas said. "You can lie down."

If any one feature on the three boats fascinated the crowds more than any other, it was the water cannon. Apparently, you can't take the mischievous little boy out of the captain of his ship. It seems unlikely the Fun Boat will race to the assistance of any fire department, but the option of drenching unsuspecting friends from a range of 30 feet or so intrigued many passersby.

That got Pagel thinking.

"I'll have to work on a kit for a portable water cannon," he said.

Those will be for the big "kids" who are too large to fit into the Fun Boat.

lfreedman@tribune.com

Copyright © 2005, *[Chicago Tribune](#)*