



LOA (w/twin 300s): 30'3"
 Beam: 9'4"
 Bridge Clearance: 7'11"
 Displ. (w/o power): 5,650 lbs.
 Power: (2) 300-hp Yamaha
 outboards
 Fuel: 160 gals.

Grady-White 281 CE

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS, IT'S A COMFORTABLE BOAT FOR USE INSHORE AND OFF THE COAST

Back in 2014, Grady-White splashed a boat that didn't look like its other models. The 251 Coastal Explorer was the North Carolina builder's first hybrid center console, a model built for fishermen and their families who had an interest in exploring inshore and offshore waters. The boat had lower gunwales than most Grady owners were accustomed to, two casting platforms and a hull that paired a deep-V forward with shallow draft aft. One part bay boat and one part coastal sportfish, the 251 CE found a loyal following.

Since then, the demand for hybrid designs has increased, particularly in the past few years as more people—especially young families—recognize the value of day boats built for all types of fun in a variety of water depths. To meet the demand, Grady-White just launched an addition to the Coastal Series. The 281, with a centerline length of 27 feet 7 inches, is sized for safety and comfort when running offshore; yet with a 19-inch hull draft, it's also right for an afternoon on the hook in skinny water near a serene sandbar. And because it's built to high construction standards and with salty, traditional lines, the 281 is something to be proud of when pulling in for a good meal at a three-star dock and dine.

I saw the boat at the Miami International Boat Show. It was tied up at a dock that was a bit off the beaten path for many show walkers, and yet people found the 281. That might say something about the builder's popularity. Bruce Richter, the company's senior design engineer, was onboard to answer questions.

"It's too big to be a true bay boat, but it's sized right for a day of fishing with the family, even offshore, particularly if you're running with the twin engines. You get that reliability," he said. "The boat has our patented SeaV2 hull, only the deadrise aft is shallower than what you find on our offshore models. It's 16 degrees here, versus 19 or 20 on the other boats. You don't want to take the 281 out to the canyons, but it can handle a sea."

The boat in Miami was powered by two 300-hp Yamaha outboards. That's max power and it will push the 281 to a top-end speed of 49.8 knots and a cruise of 25.3 knots, at which pace the boat gets 2.37 mpg, according to the builder. Standard power is a single 425-hp Yamaha that does 43.4 knots at WOT and cruises at 25.8 knots, where it gets 2.19 mpg.

Richter showed me the bow first, where there's a lot going on. Features include cushioned lounges to port and starboard, a cushioned section between them that converts to a table, and then another cushioned piece that inserts aft of the table, to further extend the huge sunlounge. Take off the cushions, stow them in the console, and you have a casting deck sized for two anglers, maybe even three if you have a skinny friend.

"It's complicated for an engineering team to put this type of section together,



Top: The bow has lounges with electric seatbacks and a cushioned coffin box. The area converts to a casting deck covered in non-skid. Below, left: The sport deck makes it easy to get on and off the boat when it's anchored.

grab on while wearing a wedding ring,” said Richter.

At the helm, the dash is designed to hold a pair of 16-inch screens, along with gauges for the Yamaha Helm Master system. Breakers are here too. Facing the helm are two adjustable bucket seats, although a bench is standard. The boat in Miami had switches for T-top lights, spreader lights and floor lighting; underwater lights at the transom are offered as an option. The combination seemed like just enough, to my eye. “When it comes to that stuff, Grady-White is not super flashy,” said Richter.

Fishing equipment includes tackle stowage and a bait-rigging station at the leaning post, two live wells, rod-holders and rocket launchers. When the crew isn't baiting hooks, there's an optional ski arch or pylon available on the transom to tow the kids in toys. A SureShade is optional for the cockpit. In the console is a private head.

My favorite feature is what Grady calls the “sport deck.” Located on the port side of the cockpit, it's an electric door that folds down to create a mini swim platform that makes it easy for passengers to get on and off the boat. It comes with a removable ladder.

Richter seemed proud of the bench seat at the transom, which covers more insulated stowage and doubles as a casting deck. It can be configured in a number of ways, thanks to seat backs that swivel. In the port corner, for instance, you can rotate the seatback 90 degrees from its forward-facing position; by doing so, you open up a walkway for an angler to move from the cockpit onto the swim platform. Once the angler is standing on the stern, he can rotate the seatback another 90 degrees so that it functions like a coaming bolster, giving the angler leg support and some leverage when fighting a fish.

“It's one of many details that have been designed, tested and refined to deliver the best experience for the owner,” said Richter. And that holds true, he said, if you're running offshore or staying inside. —*Jeanne Craig*



with so many pieces,” said Richter. “It comes down to centimeters to get it all to fit well and function seamlessly, to make sure all the lids open and cushions don't rub against one another.”

Cool tech in this corner of the boat includes electric backrests for the lounges, and a huge insulated coffin box that can be used for stowage or as a fish box. The builder also pre-rigs for a trolling motor at the bow.

At the helm, there's good visibility and comfort for the driver, thanks

to a full windshield that extends up to the T-top. “It's made of acrylic by a company in Miami that does fighter plane cockpits,” said Richter. “And it's scratch-proof. We know because we tested the material by blasting it with dry sand.” To further improve visibility, Grady designed the supports for the T-top to fall out of the driver's line of sight. “And the supports are made of a thick-grade aluminum piping that's covered with an automotive-grade paint that won't scratch easily, even if you