



GRADY-WHITE 281 COASTAL EXPLORER

THE LATEST MODEL FROM GRADY-WHITE IS A FAMILY-FRIENDLY CENTER CONSOLE THAT IS MORE THAN HAPPY TO RUN INSHORE OR OFFSHORE.

BY CHARLIE LEVINE

The wants and needs of boaters continually change and Grady-White knows this as well as any builder. The company launched its first boat in the late 1950s and it is constantly introducing new models and updates to stay ahead of the curve. The Grady-White 281 Coastal Explorer is the quintessence of this mantra.

The 281 CE is extremely versatile. This center console is ideal for families who like to mix it up on the water. The boat is equally at home trolling the offshore fishing grounds as it is nosing up to a sandbar with friends or following a school of redfish along an inshore oyster bar.

Stepping aboard the boat, it immediately spoke to me. I have two young boys, one of whom loves to fish and one of whom prefers to anchor off the beach and play in the water. This boat is ideal for both.

Every inch of the 281 CE is designed for multiple uses. At the forward deck, you can create a massive cushioned sunpad, especially

with the optional center piece that extends the seating. Lounge in comfort with electric, adjustable head rests on the side bench seats or add the optional table for entertaining. When it's time to go fishing, stow the cushions and you have a large forward casting deck. The boat is even pre-rigged for a trolling motor and I appreciated the unique platform that swivels out so the motor does not interfere with the anchor locker.

Staying on top of the fish in the 281 CE is as easy as pushing buttons. With a modern trolling motor on the bow, you can utilize the set lock function to keep the nose in place. The boat can also be optioned with Power-Poles on the transom for shallow-water anchoring and if you opt for the twin 300-hp Yamaha power package that was on our test boat, you can also incorporate Helm Master joystick controls. There's also a sizable anchor locker should you want to kick it old school and just drop the hook.



LOA 27'7"
 Beam 9'4"
 Draft 2'7"
 Displ.: 5,650 lb. (w/o engines)
 Fuel: 160 gal.
 Water: 18 gal.
 Power: 2/300-hp Yamaha outboards

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Whether you're running out to the fishing grounds, or stocking up on provisions, the 296-quart fishbox/cooler under the forward console seat, with a removable divider, is the perfect spot for your catch, drinks or food.

Perhaps my favorite feature of the boat is the portside sport deck that drops down electrically. A removable boarding ladder clips into the platform to help swimmers climb back onboard. The dropdown platform adds deck space when chilling at a calm anchorage and makes the 281 CE ideal for water sports like snorkeling or paddle boarding.

Another great example of Grady's ingenuity is the aft bench seat. Instead of your generic, forward-facing transom bench, Grady designed backrest cushions that can be set in three different configurations. Place the backrests in the forward position and insert the optional center backrest for comfortable seating for three. Remove the center backrest and swing the port and starboard backrests forward to create a lounge. Or remove the cushions and turn the backrests aft for a walkthrough with a

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bolster to gaff fish or make a few casts.

The dash incorporates a comfortable layout with room for twin MFDs and switches below. The throttles are right in the middle of the console, an ideal spot for right-handed operators. I enjoyed a clear view ahead through an acrylic windshield that's integrated into the T-top with a painted aluminum frame. This T-top is rigged to fish too, with LED

spreader lights, rod holders, a radar flat and outrigger plates. The 281 CE has two plush helm seats with split, flip-up bolsters. Just aft of the seats sits a livewell and tackle storage box. Inside the console is a roomy head with teak accents and plenty of head room.

Once we idled out of the no-wake zone into Biscayne Bay, we jumped up to a 25-knot cruising speed, burning 2 to 2.5 mpg depending on the current direction. The boat cut right through the wind chop without taking any spray. The 281 CE runs on Grady's tried-and-true SeaV² hull form which pops up on plane quickly and stays on plane at low speeds. The variable vee shape never skipped or walked across the surface in hard-over turns at 70-percent load and the electric steering was super smooth. The boat has plenty of mid-range power to hop from cruise to wide open in a blink. We topped out just shy of 50 knots.

Running across the bay, we hit some big wakes that we slowed for and the boat landed softly. Like all Grady's, the 281 CE felt very solid with no wobble or flexing of the T-top. Frankly, it was an awfully fun vessel to drive and I didn't want to hand back the keys at the end of our sea trial. □

