

# Grady-White 281 Coastal Explorer: One Beefy, Brawny Bay Boat



Written by: [Lenny Rudow](#) on March 14, 2023.

Hybrid [bay boats](#) like the new Grady-White 281 CE are few and far between. It can get into skinny water, but it won't leave you soaked and bruised after a long run offshore. It has just about every fishing feature under the sun, but also has a slew of comfort and family features. It can be had with either a single engine or twins, and runs up to or beyond the 50-mph mark in either case. Ready to go for your virtual walkthrough and sea trial?



*The Grady-White 281 CE is rigged and ready for your fishing adventures.*

## Grady-White 281 CE Design and Construction

The 281 CE is designed to split the difference between inshore and offshore, so like most hybrid bay boats it has a bit less transom deadrise than is found on purely offshore oriented boats. In this case it's 16-degree, which helps boost stability and reduce draft. However, unlike other competitors it still sports Grady-White's SeaV2 hull designed by C.

Raymond Hunt Associates — and let's not forget that Ray Hunt was the marine architect who designed the deep-V type of [boat hull](#) in the first place. This variable-degree deadrise hull begins sharp at the entry and tapers down moving aft, so the sharper portions of the hull meet the waves while the flatter aft sections provide planing efficiency and stability. It also means the hull enjoys increasing buoyancy moving aft, which helps lift the boat as it moves through the waves.

A hull's design isn't the only thing that affects how comfortable the ride will be, especially when you point the bow for the edge of the Continental Shelf and open up the throttle. Construction counts too, and Grady-White's construction is, well, pretty much unassailable. They always have and still do overbuild their boats, which is why they're so beefy. Note that the 281 CE tips the scales at 5650 pounds without engines, and it's not tough to find hybrid bay boats in the same class which weigh up to 20-percent less. That extra beef and brawn helps the 281 CE dominate the waves, rather than vice-versa. Then consider the fact that Grady-White is downright obsessive about eliminating rattles and vibrations in their boats. Put these traits together, and you understand why the 281 CE doesn't bang or shudder like some other boats of the same size and nature when meeting oceanic waves at high speeds.

## Grady-White 281 CE Fishing Features



*The leaning post houses a livewell plus tackle stowage.*

While Grady-White puts a family-friendly spin on things and thus most of their models aren't known as "hard core" fishing boats, they do tend to be exceptionally thorough when outfitting the boat for angling and in the case of the 281 CE this is truer than ever. There's



an 18-gallon livewell aft and a 38-gallon well in the leaning post, with a full column water inlet. There are a total of eight flush-mount rodholders in the gunwales, the leaning post sports four rocket launchers, and there are four more in the hard top. A raw water washdown, under-gunwale racks, 70-quart fishboxes, and a 296-quart coffin box-style fishbox are all in the mix. The bow-mount trolling motor rigging, an item critical for inshore fishing, is an option you'll want to make sure to get if you take your fishing seriously.

Elevated casting platforms are also critical to many inshore anglers, and in the bow the 281 delivers more than most dedicated bay boats. An insert joins the bowdeck with the forward console/lounger/coffin box, so when you pull the cushions you have acres of forward casting deck. In the stern, again you'll want to pull the cushions before fishing to make use of the elevated deck. But the aft deck is quite svelte compared to many bay boats. There's a bit of an inshore/offshore trade-off made here to provide less raised deck and more cockpit space, which will be preferred when fishing in big water.

## Grady-White 281 CE Family Features

Remember how you need to pull all those cushions to use the casting decks? Leave them in place, and the entire front third of the boat is basically one huge, plush lounging area. Along with the coffin box lounger there are seat backs integrated into the forward deck which create two more forward-facing loungers. But unlike the drop-in or pop-up seatbacks found on other boats, these rise electrically at the press of a button. And aft, the entire deck serves as a full-beam bench seat.



*Those forward-facing seatbacks rise up at the press of a button.*

One item we have to call out: the ergonomics of all the seating aboard. We jumped aboard the 281 CE during the [2023 Miami International Boat Show](#), and as we putted down Biscayne Bay we had plenty of time to sit at the stern, kick back on the coffin box lounge, and test-relax on the bow loungers. Bottom line: there isn't a seat on this boat that isn't uber-comfy. Try them out for yourself and it's a sure bet you'll agree.

The stock-in-trade family features like a head compartment in the console, USB ports at the helm, Bluetooth stereo system, and freshwater shower are all present and accounted for. But the 281 CE has one big perk you're not likely to find elsewhere on this genre of boat, a swing-down hullside swim platform. It folds in and out at the press of a button, and is about twice the width of the standard-issue hullside doors found on many boats. Also adding to the family watersports fun, the aft seatbacks lift and swing sideways for easy entry and egress to the platforms on either side of the outboards. Just be sure to order the optional ski-tow pylon and the kids will be in for some serious excitement even when the fish aren't biting.



*An electric dive door in the side of a hybrid bay boat? Grady-White makes it happen, on the 281 CE.*

## Grady-White 281 CE Performance

Performance is on par with or better than the vast majority of the bay boats out there. Twin F300 puts cruise at a hair under 40 mph, and top end in the mid to upper 50s.



What's surprising is when you look at peak efficiency. The twin engine rig gets almost 2.4 mpg at around the 30-mph mark. Although the initial and maintenance cost may be higher with twins, both speed and efficiency get a boost — not to mention the peace of mind having twin engines gives you when you're heading out through an inlet and pointing the bow for distant horizons.



*Ready to hit the throttles? Performance on the 281 CE will not disappoint.*

Also note that the Grady-White has a whopping-big 160-gallon fuel capacity. Many hybrid bay boats have closer to 100 or so gallons, and as a result, rather limited range when it comes to offshore fishing. Accounting for a 10-percent fuel reserve, the 281 CE delivers well over 300 miles of range at most efficient cruise regardless of which engine package you choose.

## Grady-White 281 CE Specifications

- Length Overall without Engines: 27'7"
- Beam: 9'4"
- Weight: 5650 lbs.
- Draft (min.): 1'7"
- Transom Deadrise: 16 degrees
- Max HP: 600
- Fuel Capacity: 160 gal.
- Water Capacity: 18 gal.

There are plenty of hybrid bay boats out there, but they most certainly are not all created equal. In the case of the Grady-White 281 CE you'll find a boat that is as capable as they come in the size range and tilts a bit more towards family-friendliness than hard-core fishing machine. Is it the ideal boat for you and your family? That's a question we can't answer. We do know one thing for sure, however: taking this boat for a sea trial in the real world is even more fun than it is in the virtual one.