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MOTORBOAT & YACHTING

ULTIMATE SPORTS BOAT

Head to head and knot to knot, we pit the new crop of Scandinavian sportsboats against each other. Which one comes out top?

Text: **Jack Haines, Hugo Andreae & Dave Marsh** Photos: **Paul Wyeth**



Time to come clean. We were just going to test the Axopar 28 OC but after we'd spent time on board we were so enamoured with its slick design, effortless power and brilliant hull we felt it rude not to pit it against its closest rivals, so we did just that – two weeks later.

As the new kid on the block, the Axopar inspired us to look at what else was on the market that could square up against it, and it also gave us an excuse to have a play in four cutting-edge Scandinavian sportsboats. If there is one thing the Scandis build well, it's sportsboats.

So, what do we have here in our little line-up? Well there's the Axopar seen in OC (open cabin) guise, but it can also be had with an aft cockpit (as opposed to the cabin on our test boat), a T-top or a full-on wheelhouse for those who want year-round protection. It comes with single or twin Mercury Verado outboards; our boat was fitted with the 250hp single option. It's the newest boat here and has been causing quite a stir at boat shows.

Next up is the all new XO 250, seen here in stealth boat black on black with a mean-looking 300hp Mercury Verado Pro lurking out back. It's hewn from aluminium and comes with suspension seats as standard – probably a good thing when you consider that it's the lightest but has the equal most powerful outboard engine.

The Draco 27 RS is less extreme than its XO rival but it brings to the table handsome lines, a high standard of fit and finish and a

single 300hp Yamaha that ensures it's no slouch in itself. The Draco brand was coaxed out of the ashes by Windy last year and the 27RS is the first model with Windy's influence well and truly embedded in its DNA. If you're reading this test thinking you might want a high-quality, cleverly designed dayboat then you should take particular note of what Hugo as to say about it on p64.

Then there is the Ranger 25 from Paragon, the boat that's been around the longest and is the most expensive, but with a reputation as one of the toughest, most capable pocket rockets ever built. It has inboard diesel power from a Volvo Penta D4 300hp motor, is slightly heavier than the others and has the sharpest hull. It also has the sort of sleeping accommodation you might actually use for a night or two so, it may be pricey, but you will be able to do the most with it.

The plan was simple, we would muster at Lymington's Berthon Marina, take them out in to the Solent for a blast in the calm and then see if we could find some proper sea to test them in the rough stuff off the Needles. They may be dayboats but that doesn't mean they won't find themselves in the lumps and bumps.

These boats have a tough job, they must be fast and fun enough to justify the sportsboat label but also safe and practical family dayboats; as comfortable pulling a waterskier or nudging up the beach as they are blasting long distances to make a lunch stop. And 25ft sportsboats also need to look the part, which we think you'll agree these certainly do. We'll turn the key, you turn the page and let's see what they can do.

SEE THE VIDEO


mby.com/sports




AXOPAR 28 OC

PRICE £63,414 TOP SPEED 40.7 KNOTS 0-30 KNOTS 10.7 SECS

There are many things to feast your eyes upon when first encountering the Axopar 28 OC. Primarily, there's the name, writ large down both sides – AXOPAR, it's the sort of label that might also be given to a razor, or a power tool, or an American pickup truck. Then there is the upholstery, which on our test boat was a lurid orange, popping out against the dark rubbing strake and bright white GRP mouldings. But more distracting than these features, or even the hulking 250hp gloss-black Mercury Verado perched on the transom, is the shape of the Axopar 28's hull. It's the sheer beauty and purpose of the thing; knife-like, twin-stepped, and 22° at the deadrise, it looks like it could cut through marble, never mind water.

The upright bow oozes intent, peeling down to a hard knuckle of spray rail, which deepens and widens as it surges aft. It's functional art and, thankfully, in the violent rapids off the Needles, with wind pouring over the flooding tide, its capabilities were brought right to the fore.

The Axopar handled the rough stuff brilliantly – yes it's the longest boat here but that aside, the hull can't help but scythe





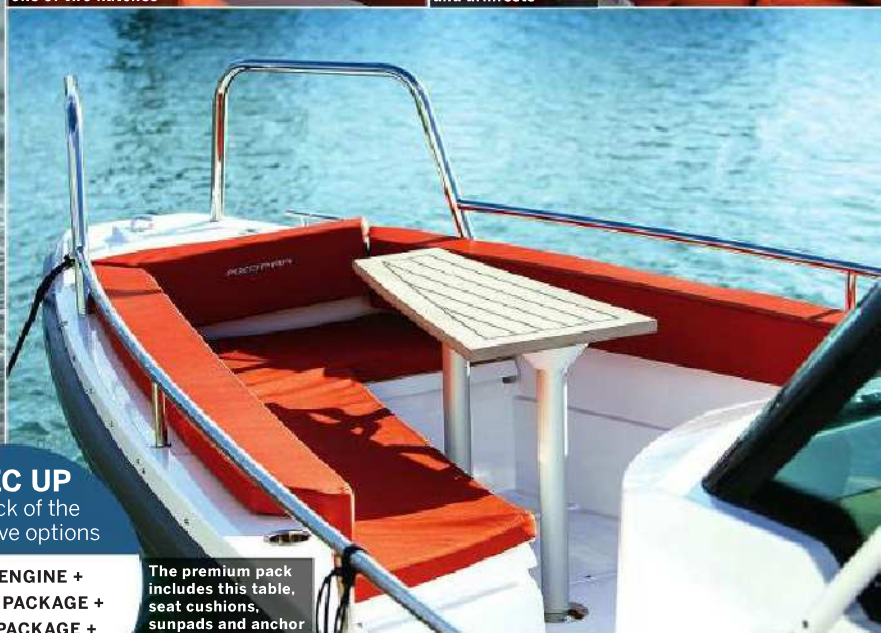
Access to the double cabin beneath the sunpad is through one of two hatches



Cubbies, lockers and handy grabrails abound



The helm seats have flip-up bolsters and armrests



The premium pack includes this table, seat cushions, sunpads and anchor

SPEC UP
Our pick of the must-have options

300HP ENGINE + PREMIUM PACKAGE + ESTECH PACKAGE + BOW THRUSTER + CANOPY

through waves like they aren't there. The purring Merc Verado is a fine partner for the hull and effortlessly propels the boat through the troughs, reacting in a split second to every minute nudge to the fly-by-wire throttle.

Unruffled upwind then, but how does that narrow bow fair when it's being pointed down the back of the wave? At first looks there seems a decent chance that a bow so light and sharp may be prone to being stuffed in a big following sea but that suspicion proved to be totally unfounded. It may be light but there is more than enough buoyancy in that slender forward section and a marked upward rake away from the water to keep it from burying itself into the back of waves.

The hull is so capable that I keep wishing I had more power at my disposal. The optional 300hp Verado or twin 150hp motors would give it usefully more punch but I can't help feeling that, provided the transom is strong enough, its talented hull could actually cope with the 350hp Verado SCi or perhaps even twin 250s to create a genuine 50-knot boat. As it stands the 28 managed a useful 41 knots flat out on test, which is enough for this versatile family dayboat but maybe not for the speed freaks, who are likely to be more at home in the slightly mad rocket ship that is the XO.

But there is far, far more to the Axopar than the impressive way it takes to the water, and one of the stand-out features is how much the yard has managed to pack on to the deck of such a slender craft. Starting at the (very) pointy end you have a bench to port with storage beneath and a teak table you can sit and picnic at while at anchor. The bow isn't physically wide enough to allow full U-shaped seating but some padding on the starboard bulwark does at least mean people can perch in relative comfort.

The forward section of the console then opens up to reveal a surprisingly roomy toilet compartment, complete with a manual pump loo and a small sink. This is dayboat gold and just the sort of thing that those upgrading from a RIB will be looking for.

ELEMENTARY PROTECTION

The helm position is cocooned by a tall wraparound windscreen, which provides a good amount of protection for an open boat. The driving environment is excellent thanks to first-class ergonomics and a perfect view out no matter if you're sitting in the firm, supportive helm seats or using the bolster function and leaning.

The area is dotted with cubbies, lockers, cupholders and handy grabrails like only Scandinavian boats are, plus you get a slot in the

The Axopar sits solidly in the water, inspiring confidence

The purring Merc Verado is a fine partner for the hull and effortlessly propels the boat through the troughs



Plenty of space in the cockpit for taking to the water on skis or a board

dash specifically designed to hold an iPad and a canvas chart holder that pops off the dash so you can take it away with you.

The only change I would make is to increase the length of the windscreen wipers – they don't sweep enough of the screen.

This entire area, as far back as the radar arch, can also be covered in a canopy to give even more protection but, as we found at the end of the test, this isn't the most simple of operations.

Aft, there are three forward-facing seats aligned side-by-side with the same bolstering and bum hugging properties as the two main helm seats. It's a smart bit of design because it means that this 28-footer manages to give five of those on board a forward-facing seat, which is priceless on longer trips.

Then things start to get really clever because beneath the aft sunpad is a double cabin. Accessed from either end of the sunpad module via hatches on gas struts, the entire space is covered in mattress, save a small well to drop into at the forward end, and it genuinely feels like somewhere you may spend the odd night. It even has a pair of windows and LED lights for after dark. But even if you don't want to sleep in it at least you have a huge, easily accessed dry storage area to chuck kit into. It's a genuine benefit and something that sets the Axopar apart from the pack.

OPTIONS, OPTIONS

On top of this brilliant design and impressive versatility of the OC version Axopar also does an Open version with no aft cabin and an open cockpit for watersports or fishing (for around £9,000 less), an aft cabin version with a T-top and then two wheelhouse iterations with full-length canvas sunroofs with either an open aft cockpit or

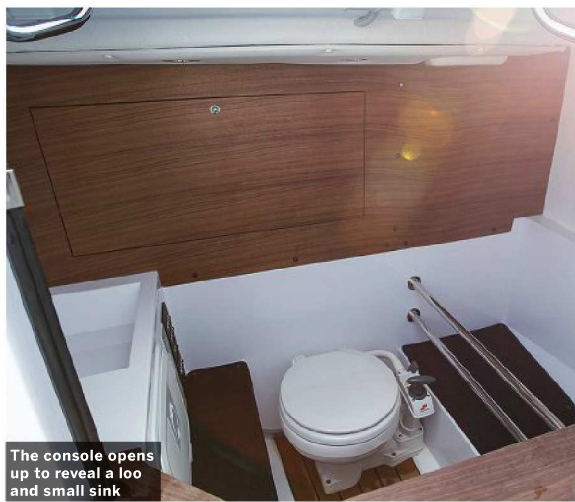


A real plus on a boat of this size, a double cabin with windows



A tall wraparound windscreen does a very good job of keeping things dry

Helm seats are comfortable either standing or sitting



The console opens up to reveal a loo and small sink

the aft cabin option. Got all that? It may seem a little confusing but it does mean that there is an Axopar 28 to suit pretty much every need, taste and budget while all using the same hull and engines.

No matter the body shape, the level of finish and practical detailing aboard the boat is always in evidence. There are full walkaround decks, guardrails from stem to stern, a lovely stainless steel A-frame and neat hinged cubbies either side of the stern, the perfect size for lines and fenders. The transom is actually very open, so even with the aft cabin you can easily get into the water with skis on. It doesn't come as much of a surprise at how practical and well thought out this boat is, though, when you learn that the man responsible for it is also the founder of Paragon and XO, Sakari

Mattila. He designs boats that tread the line masterfully between function and form and this may just be the best one yet.

Although our four sportsboats are rivals of sorts they are also quite different in what they offer, who they target and how much they cost. But the Axopar is the most rounded package of the lot, offering the dayboat deck space of the Draco with the protection of the Paragon and nearly as much go as the XO.

Having spent two days on board the boat all I could find to criticise was the length of the windscreen wipers, the lack of a ski pole option (a solution is being sought) and the rather exposed extensions either side of the outboard, which are vulnerable to being bashed on a pontoon. This is just a matter of adding some rubber capping, though. If that's all we can fault then that isn't bad going.

And then there's the real kicker. This OC version, with its excellent deck design, flawless seakeeping, punchy performance and suprisingly comfortable aft cabin and heads compartment is the cheapest boat here by quite a distance. The Open model with a 150hp engine and no cabin or heads starts at a barely believable £44,575 inc UK VAT. I'm not sure how the yard is offering so much boat for so little money. Yes, it's built in Poland to take advantage of the cheaper labour costs but that is not reflected in the fit and finish and, lest we forget, the high-class Draco is built there too.

They say that if something is too good to be true then it usually is but fortunately, in the case of the Axopar 28 OC, that couldn't be further from the truth. **Jack Haines**
Contact Offshore Powerboats. Tel: +44 (0)1590 677655 Web: www.axopar.fi

THE DATA

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE FROM inc UK VAT	£53,635
MERCURY VERADO 150hp	std
MERCURY VERADO 250hp	£63,414
MERCURY VERADO 300hp	£63,414

ESTHEC DECKS	£5,712
PREMIUM PACKAGE	£1,612
BOW THRUSTER	£1,900
CANOPY	£1,200
TRIM TABS	£749
12V FRIDGE	£768
FRESH WATER SYSTEM	£749



PARAGON RANGER 25

PRICE £136,625 TOP SPEED 34.3 KNOTS 0-30 KNOTS 9.94 SECS



The helm may be simple but it's effective and easy to use

The Paragon Ranger 25 is not only the boat that's been on the market the longest, it's also the slowest. This became glaringly obvious as we charged towards the Needles and the other three, all capable of over 40 knots, careered away from me as the Paragon's 300hp Volvo Penta D4 diesel engine maxed out at 34 knots.

But I wasn't concerned about this because I was well aware of what lay ahead: a steaming flood tide being pulled into horrible spiky troughs by a stiff breeze travelling in the opposite direction. This is where the Ranger 25 would make up the ground and flex its muscles. And that's exactly what it did. The trio of rivals fared well enough in the confused chop filling Hurst Narrows but once we got out to the slam-dunkers by the Needles, the Paragon's blade-sharp hull, with its 26° deadrise, extra weight and low-down diesel-fired torque brought it barreling to the front of the pack, where it stayed.

Make no mistake, these were nasty conditions and the Ranger was totally faultless. It was unflustered throughout and, despite the stiff breeze, took only a few light splashes of water on board, even with the white horses galloping menacingly from all angles.

The Ranger looks after its occupants, not only in the way it handles rough seas but by being cleverly designed and with an impressive amount of protection for an open boat. And remember, there is the original wheelhouse version too for those who want more shelter.



The Ranger looks after its occupants with an impressive amount of protection for an open boat



The aft cockpit is spacious but spartan with just a bare teak bench to perch on



Handy features include the sink and fridge on deck



The twin cuddy is a proper space that's actually useable



Tall, wraparound screen and coamings create a very safe, well protected inner cockpit

SPEC UP
Our pick of the must-have options

D4 300HP ENGINE + GREY HULL + 4G RADAR + ELECTRIC ANCHOR WINCH + SUSPENDED HELM SEAT

Even the way the Ranger 25 looks simply drips with ability; the battleship-grey colouring, substantial rubber buffer that wraps around the boat's perimeter, the network of solid railings that keep you safe in the cockpit and the central radar arch, all hint that the Ranger is going to keep you and your crew safe and secure.

Like the Axopar, you step down into the helm position, which allows the already tall windscreen to give you even more protection. The dash itself is close to the seat and upright, which puts the wheel, throttles and rocker switches right in front of your chest, while the chartplotter and engine information screen sit higher up but angled towards you. It's a simple, unfussy layout that befits the boat's turn key nature. This is a boat built for archipelago island-hopping that is sure to get you from A to B even in the rough stuff; it doesn't need to be packed with flourishes, it just needs to work and it does.



Real teak deck adds warmth and class

Like the Axopar, you have three forward facing seats behind the two main helm chairs but the aft cockpit isn't half as clever. It's fine for fishing or getting skis on but the only place to sit is a rather hard transom bench.

For socialising you will find yourself sitting in the central inner cockpit area, with the two helm seats swivelled around to meet the teak table that slots between the two rows of seats.

PACKED WITH FEATURES

The Ranger, at £132,625 with this engine, is the most expensive boat here, but then you are getting the most boat for your money. You have the long-range cruising capability of a single diesel engine on a sterndrive, the largest fuel tank, a proper twin cuddy with a pop-out loo and heating, then, on deck, you get a fridge and a sink with hot and cold running water. The Ranger 25 may look pricey in this company but it is the most capable and could take you the furthest. It may not be the new kid on the block, nor is it a blistering speed machine but I couldn't have cared less when the going got rough. **Jack Haines**
Contact Offshore Powerboats.
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Web: www.paragonyachts.se

THE DATA

SPECIFICATIONS

PRICE FROM inc UK VAT	£125,899
VOLVO D4 225hp	std
VOLVO D4 260hp	£129,349
VOLVO D4 300hp	£132,625
SHOREPOWER	£1,825
TEAK DECKS	£7,012
SIMRAD 4G RADAR	£2,400
UPGRADE TO 12IN PLOTTER	£687
GREY HULL COLOUR	£1,825
ELECTRIC ANCHOR WINCH	£3,875

These four boats are close rivals in many ways but quite different in others, not least the type of customer they will appeal to.

The Draco 27 RS stands out for its clean, almost retro, looks and its practical and very sociable deck spaces. For a bowrider it feels remarkably safe, and as a watersports platform and family dayboat it is close to perfection. The hull may not be quite as sharp or as soft riding as the other three but it's still a Hans Jørgen-Johnson design and very sure-footed. The Draco also gave the XO a good pasting in our drag race, even if the XO did overtake it at the top end.

Speaking of the XO, this is the least family oriented boat here and is slightly mad in the most excellent of ways. The test boat's madness was enhanced by the black on black colour scheme and the 300hp Mercury Verado Pro outboard – you could make it look less SBS with a more forgiving hull wrap. But make no bones about it, the XO 250 is an absolute weapon out on the water, it's devastating in a chop and it is by far the most exhilarating to be behind the helm of. For the thrill-seekers and speed freaks, there is no other option.

The Paragon is the most serious cruising machine of the bunch and the one you would want to be in if the sea really kicked up. That mix of inboard diesel power, more weight and the sharpest hull of the lot puts the Ranger ahead in the rough and it is the one you are most likely to spend an entire weekend on, but you do pay, literally, for that particular convenience.

But when it comes down to the wire, the Axopar stands out as the most talented all-rounder of the bunch, and combines many of the best elements of the other three boats without ever feeling bland or compromised. Its dayboat credentials rival the Draco, its accommodation is nearly the equal of the Paragon and it is almost as fast and fun to drive as the XO, yet crucially, it undercuts them all on price. The XO, Paragon and Draco are all great boats and all can claim at least one discipline in which they lead the pack but in our opinion the Axopar is the first among equals.

THE DATA

MODEL	AXOPAR 28 OC	DRACO 27 RS	PARAGON 25 RANGER	XO 250								
Base price inc UK VAT from	£53,635 <i>(Mercury 150hp)</i>	£88,776 <i>(Yamaha 225hp)</i>	£125,899 <i>(Volvo 225hp D4)</i>	£56,460 <i>(Evinrude 150hp)</i>								
Price as tested	£76,400	£105,142	£156,584	£86,614								
Length overall	28ft 3in (8.6m)	27ft 4in (8.31m)	28ft 3in (8.52m)	24ft 8in (7.52m)								
Beam	9ft 4in (2.9m)	8ft 2in (2.49m)	9ft 8in (3m)	7ft 6in (2.28m)								
Weight	1900kg (ex engine)	1900kg (ex engine)	3300kg (inc engine)	1500kg (ex engine)								
Fuel capacity	260 litres	230 litres	320 litres	230 litres								
Water capacity	45 litres	42 litres	42 litres	na								
RCD category	C for (8 people)	C (for 9 people)	B (for 8 people)	C (for 8 people)								
Test engine	Mercury 250hp @ 5,500rpm	Yamaha 300hp @ 5,500rpm	Volvo D4 300hp @ 3,520rpm	Mercury Pro 300hp @ 5,500rpm								
Top speed	40.7 knots	42.3 knots	34.3 knots	44.2 knots								
0-30 knots	10.7 secs	10.2 secs	9.9 secs	11.2 secs								
SPEED AS TESTED IN KNOTS												
Speed	20	30	40.7	20	30	42.3	20	30	34.3	20	30	44.2
LPH	24.3	50.8	102	25.4	45.1	99.5	29.0	47.5	58	33.0	44.5	113
MPG	3.74	2.68	1.81	3.58	3.02	1.93	3.14	2.87	2.69	2.76	3.06	1.78
Range	171	122	100	145	122	78	177	162	151	139	155	90

“It’s nigh on impossible to pick a personal favourite in such disparate company, especially as one pair sports berths and the others do not. So I’d take the Paragon 25 for comfortable cruising, and the Axopar 28 for ultra-rapid cruising. The remaining twosome are both extremely capable high speed day boats. Ultimately, though, I’d run with the XO250 for the same reasons that I’d buy a Nissan GTR instead of a Mercedes SL500 – it’s hard core, and then some. **Dave**

“In the Paragon I wanted to turn left at the Needles and carry on until I reached Guernsey – the ultimate pocket cruiser. The XO 250 is at the opposite end of the scale – lithe, edgy and sensational to drive but a little too small and focussed for a family day out. The Draco makes a great alternative to a fast family RIB but for me the Axopar manages to combine the looks and driver appeal of the XO with the sociability of the Draco and the overnighting potential of the Paragon – a Range Rover Sport to the XO’s Nissan GTR. **Hugo**

