

A Solid Little Ship

On a blustery voyage to the lower Chesapeake, the Corvette 340 proves to be both comfortable and seaworthy.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY
GEORGE SASS SR.



H. GLENWOOD EVANS & SON
PEELERS &
SOFT CRABS

The north wind was just off the nose at about 20 knots and building; the sea conditions in the lower Chesapeake Bay on this fall morning were lousy, and they weren't going to get any better. In fact, a gale was forecast for that evening.



CRABS ARE KING in Crisfield, as the Corvette 340 enters the harbor (opening spread) and idles past the fleet (above). The waterfront in Smith Island (below).



The rain was pouring down and the wipers were having a hard time keeping up. Operating from the lower station, I scanned the forbidding horizon for other traffic. But aside from a freighter several miles back, we were alone.

For a number of years, I had heard good things about the Corvette 320, a British-built trawler with a reputation as a solid sea boat. Now, I was witnessing firsthand how its successor, the new Corvette 340, upheld this reputation. On a morning when most people would choose to stay at the dock, the 340 shouldered aside the waves, powering along at 16 or 17 knots — just another day on the water.

The Corvette was as solid as could be — no bangs, rattles or sense of anything about to shake loose. In

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short, it turned in a remarkable, businesslike performance. It's hard for me to remember a boat of similar size and style that delivers such reassuring performance in these conditions. I engaged the autopilot, leaned back and relaxed.

It's not surprising the Corvette 340 is a solid sea boat; it's produced by the same people responsible for Fleming Yachts, some of the best-made cruising boats on the planet. Corvette Marine first produced the 320 in 1974 as a twin-engine semi-displacement trawler. The boat was a hit for the builder, which kept producing it with periodic upgrades until the recession hit in 2008.

Shortly thereafter, the managers of Fleming, seeing an opportunity to move into a smaller boat market, bought Corvette and moved production from the U.K. to the Tung Hwa yard in Taiwan, where it builds Flemings.

While keeping the same hull as the 320, the new owners launched a round of improvements to the topsides and interior, all designed to make cruising and living aboard easier and more comfortable. For starters, it narrowed the side

decks by 6 inches and used the extra foot to widen the salon/galley/lower helm area. In addition, the raised aft deck was widened to the full width of the hull. This results in a larger master stateroom, which now has a centerline queen berth, increased storage areas and separate head and

shower compartments. The extra cabin width also allows for a larger flying bridge. Meanwhile, even shorn of 6 inches, the side decks are still 18 inches wide and offer secure stainless-steel railings and an ample space for line handling, fuel tank filling and other cruising chores.

Our shakedown cruise on the 340 started easily enough. Ray Currey, sales manager at Burr Yacht Sales in Edgewater, Maryland, walked myself and photographer George Sass Sr. through the boat before helping us cast off from the dealership's docks. A touch of the Side-Power bow thruster and we were off the dock, easing our way past a fleet of gleaming new Fleming motor-yachts. Twin Yanmar 6 LP 315 hp diesels are standard on the 340; this boat was equipped with upgraded twin Cummins QSB 330 hp diesels, as well as other cruising options, including an Onan 7.5 kW genset and Furuno NavNet 3D electronics at both helm stations.

As I realized on my first walk around the deck, this boat also comes with supersize everything. It's as if you took the rails and handholds and other accoutrements from a 55-foot boat and put them on a 34-footer. The immediate message is: This is a sturdy boat.

Under a bright sun and pushed by a gentle breeze, we headed down the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. Despite many years of cruising this region, neither Sass nor I had been to Smith Island, which is said to be rich in the heritage and history of iconic Chesapeake Bay watermen. We first set a course for Crisfield, a proud

old town on the mainland some 13 miles to the east of Smith Island. There awaited a large marina and promises of a variety of restaurants for the area's famous blue crabs. The southernmost town in Maryland, Crisfield calls itself "the crab capital of the world," a designation that had us working up an appetite as we cruised down the bay at a steady 17 or 18 knots.

As we cruised, I had a chance to get more familiar with the deck layout. You can board the Corvette most easily amidships through port and starboard gates in the



AT HIGH TIDE, the water in Smith Island almost covers the docks on a rainy day, while the area's crabbing boats show off their distinctive lines (top).



THERE'S LOTS of space on the Corvette. The view of the salon looking aft (left top), the master (left bottom) and the upper deck and bridge (right).

rail that drop down onto the hull sides. It's also possible to come aboard from the relatively small teak swim platform and climb a four-step ladder to the aft deck. Fitted with a pair of lounge seats separated by a teak table, the aft deck would be a pleasant spot to relax at the dock. From there, it's two steps up to the bridge, which also has two inward-facing seats plus a helm seat for two; the back of the helm seat flips forward to form another social area.

We drove from the flying bridge for several hours, enjoying the view, until we passed Kedges Strait and ran a few miles to Tangier Sound. The Janes Island Light guided us to the well-marked channel along the Annessex River and into Crisfield.

Crisfield is a natural stopping point if you're cruising anywhere from Norfolk, Virginia, to the upper Chesapeake. From the sound, you first see the condos that mark the Crisfield waterfront, with the town water tower just behind. Crabs are big here; for the past 60 years, Crisfield has held the annual National Hard Crab Derby race on Labor Day weekend. Crisfield is also known as "the town the oyster built" because a lot of it is built atop mounds of oyster shells that were used to fill the marshlands.

We headed for Somers Cove Marina, a full-service

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facility tucked inside a protected basin. Our route brought us along a small entry channel, past the town dock where the mail boats and little ferry-boats leave for Smith Island, and the old crab warehouse. We topped off our fuel tanks, tied up and walked two blocks to town. Crisfield, we thought, has seen better days. The big, white Bank of Crisfield on Main Street had a chain and padlock across the front doors, a victim of the recession. But

that evening we had dinner at the Watermen's Inn, also on Main Street, where we enjoyed some of the best crab cakes we'd ever tasted.

Back on the boat, I was given the master stateroom aft, while Sass was in the guest stateroom forward. One of the major attractions of the Corvette 340 is that it offers two staterooms, each with a private head and shower, at opposite ends of the boat — something rarely seen on a boat of this size. The forward stateroom was notable because berths sit along each side of the hull, while the head and shower are in the middle.

The salon has large windows all around. A traditional L-shape settee with a folding, high-low table is to port, facing a well-equipped galley on the starboard side. A pair of pedestal chairs face the raised helm, which I found quite user-friendly — although the electric panel in

front of the passenger seat requires some bending to access. Twin diesels, driving straight shafts, are located amidships for balance. Engine access for a quick check is via a small hatch in the teak-and-holly sole in the salon; a larger hatch provides more complete access, although you have to move the table to raise it.

Before we turned in for the night, we pored over the Smith Island charts on the salon table. The entrance channel on the Tangier Sound side is narrow, although it seemed to be well-marked. The real problem was the depth; there were a lot of places showing 4 feet, and as the Corvette drew 3 feet 3 inches, this didn't leave much margin for error. Our goal was to cross at high tide the next morning, at about 8:30.

We woke at dawn and headed to the dock office for coffee and any words of advice. The weather forecast was dismal; it was windy and raining now and would only get worse later in the day. The local knowledge was simple: Stay in the middle of the channel. We took that to heart, although at one point in the middle of the Big Thoroughfare (the ironically named narrow channel that runs into the island) our depth sounder read 3 feet. "I don't like this," I say to Sass as I pulled back hard on the throttles,

only to realize I'd already brought them all the way back. We were truly inching along.

From a distance, Smith Island, eight miles long and four miles wide, is so low-lying it appears more like a continual marshland dotted by small trees. Some hardy English settlers landed there in the early 1700s; the few hundred people who live there today support themselves by oystering and crabbing on local boats. The island is so remote it didn't have electricity until 1949. After winding delicately along the Big Thoroughfare, we tied up side-to at the county dock in Ewell, the small village in the middle of the island with a waterfront restaurant and a small marina. We walked around for a while but, in the miserable weather, we saw exactly two people. We decided to head back to the Chesapeake before the predicted storm moved in.

As we headed north up the bay, we agreed that we wanted to return to Smith Island on a decent day to spend more time and explore that isolated but intriguing slice of Americana. Powering north through the wind and rain, I decided if I did go back there, and if the weather was at all threatening, I'd want to return on a solid boat I could trust — a boat like the Corvette 340. ♣

CORVETTE 340

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA: 34'10"

Beam: 13'

Draft: 3'4"

Disp.: 23,236 lbs.

Fuel: 290 gals.

Water: 135 gals.

Contact: Burr Yacht Sales; burryacht.com; corvettemarine.com

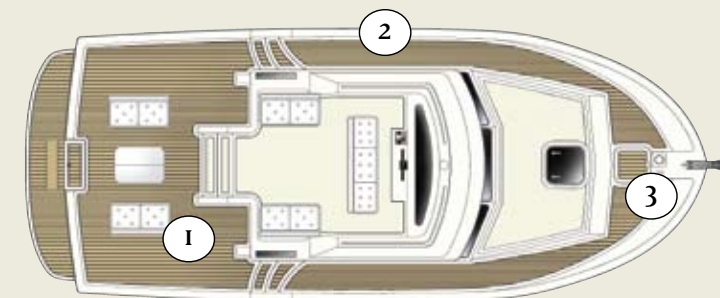
Base Price: \$415,000

Price as Tested: \$500,000

PERFORMANCE

TEST POWER: (2) Cummins QSB 5.9 330 hp common-rail diesel engines. Speeds measured by GPS on Tangier Sound off Crisfield, Maryland, in 15-knot winds and 2-foot seas with two people on board, three-quarters fuel and full water. Sound levels measured at the lower helm in dB-A.

RPM	KNOTS	GPH	DB-A
600	4.5	0.8	62
1,000	7.0	2.2	67
1,500	8.9	6.2	74
2,000	11.6	17.6	78
2,500	18.6	26.4	84
2,810	23.2	33.2	86



INSIDE: ① Raised aft cabin for lounging or entertaining with two settees and a teak table. ② Overbuilt, super-sturdy side rails. ③ Well-protected bow with deep chain locker; there's extra room for lots of lines and fenders. ④ Master cabin aft with walk-around queen, lots of teak and storage cabinets, a vanity/desk and a separate head and shower. ⑤ Forward cabin with two berths and a head with a shower.

COURTESY CORVETTE MARINE (3)