

TWO-MAN

# DINGHIES

for beginners



Do you want to learn or progress with your sailing, maybe moving on to asymmetrics? Fancy a boat you can sail with family and friends? **Jeremy Evans** checks out three all-purpose dinghies...

**Above** (clockwise from left) Comet Trio; Topaz Xenon; RS Vision.

**W**e tested our three dinghies – the Comet Trio, RS Vision and Topaz Xenon – from Cobnor Activities Centre in Chichester Harbour. This provided an interesting mix of sailing through crowded moorings and on open water, with strong flood and ebb tides changing the sea state from flat to choppy.

We had plenty of wind, launching into a Force 4 and coming ashore with the wind Force 6 and

increasing. Overall it was excellent testing conditions with the sailors having to cope with unforgiving slammer gusts in the semi-protected Bosham Channel and enjoying some wild rides with the kite in open sea off Cobnor Point.

## Comet Trio

What price for a degree of exclusivity? The Comet Trio is more expensive than the other dinghies in this test, but you're buying into a bespoke,

personal service which means you meet the man who creates your boat. Andy Simmons owns and runs Comet Dinghies, employing a small team who build dinghies in classic fashion, with glassfibre laminate and Coremat reinforcement. Originally launched in 1995, the Trio is the biggest boat in the range and designed by Phil Morrison – a personal friend of Andy who is in his own league as Britain's most popular designer of modern performance dinghies.

The Trio has built up its own following, despite being pushed out of the limelight by Phil Morrison's other designs for larger stables, such as the RS400 and Laser 2000.

Andy Simmons conceived and developed the Trio as 'a classic cruiser and racer' which could be sailed as 'the ultimate all rounder' – club racer, family cruiser or sailing school trainer. Its design is 'classic' in many respects. Look under the hull and there's a deep, chunky keel flowing into the transom, with a rudder foil that's exactly designed to match and balance the boat. The cockpit is really deep with proper side benches if you want to sit inside: no need to have your knees up by your ears! Some of the fittings looked tacked into place compared to the impeccable cockpits of the Vision or Xenon, particularly the telescopic spinnaker pole which is simply lashed onto the foredeck with the kite dumped into the forward locker. But I think that is part of the boat's bespoke charm and the bottom line is that it all works really well.

It was notable that the Trio capsized least among the test boats in difficult conditions. On the first occasion, I asked Andy to flip it over for the camera and he obliged. On the second, Trio novice Tom Dynes managed to capsize driving through a Force 6 slammer. The Trio is without doubt a stable and well-mannered boat, which is just as well as it's really not great to tip over. You won't come to any harm, but you will get a load of water inside the deep cockpit which has no quick exit route. This is part of the problem with any classic single-bottomed dinghy, compounded by the fact that the Trio has a raised section at the



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

stern which provides the base for a huge (optional) locker. So you will either have to bail, or sail off on a reach – the Trio behaved surprisingly well sailing in waterlogged mode – and wait a few minutes for the two self-bailers to suck it dry.

Another perceived drawback might be that the Trio's kite does not pull back neatly inside a chute. Instead it's a kind of crossover system with the traditional launch from a bag system. This may not look so neat or cool as a chute, but can actually be quicker and less frustrating due to the lack of friction – it's also possibly better for the longevity of the kite. Tester Charlotte Vessey – who admitted to being an asymmetric novice – found it problem-free to launch and handle despite very challenging conditions. One problem could be the stowed kite storing a few unwelcome dollops of water if waves break over the bow. It didn't happen to us and any water disappears as soon as the kite is hoisted.

There's a lot of room for two big blokes or even a whole family in that cockpit and it's as comfortable as can be expected to hike off those narrow side decks. The push-pull centreboard is really simple for the crew, who has the splendid choice of sitting up on the side decks, down on the benches or on the commodious thwart. The helm has bags of room at the back of the cockpit where the tiller felt deliciously balanced and light, even with a fair degree of heel on a dinghy that has a 'slicing to windward' feel reminiscent of a keelboat – unlike so many modern dinghies, you don't need to sail flat to survive. While the Trio's slab reefing did not appear as slick as the Vision, Andy demonstrated that it's quick and effective singlehanded. Just let go the mainsail, roll up the jib, pull down the reefing line on the leech, ease the halyard to pull down the luff, tension it all up and sail on!

### Trio verdict

Our three testers gave their verdict of the boat. Charlotte Vessey, an RYA Dinghy Instructor, said: 'I liked the Comet Trio which looked smart with its red hull, felt less tippy than the other two boats in those windy conditions and was comfortable to sail. Hoisting and sailing with the asymmetric



**Above** There's a lot of room in the Trio for two big blokes or even a whole family in the cockpit. The kite launches from a bag rather than a chute



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spinnaker was straightforward. There were not too many little bits of rope to get in the way which is great for an asymmetric kite novice like me, though I wondered why you had to manually haul the spinnaker back into its bag after dropping it.'

RYA Senior Instructor Tom Dynes reported; 'The Comet Trio felt like a very well balanced boat which is very easy and forgiving to sail, yet still very responsive. It planed nicely with the spinnaker up, but was quite tippy and water came into the cockpit very easily – probably due to my inexperience with a boat I've never sailed before – which then drained very slowly. We capsized the Trio and the cockpit got swamped, taking about 5-10 minutes on a reach to drain through the self-bailers. Other than those minor issues the Comet was really nice to sail and had no problems handling Force 5-6 conditions!'

Gemma Frohlich, RYA Dinghy Sailing Coach/Assessor added: 'I had never sailed the Comet Trio before and was surprised at its power and acceleration once the kite was up. The side decks felt more 'grippy' for the crew than on the plastic rotomoulded boats, but the cockpit layout and sail controls did not seem quite so well planned with a spinnaker pole and gear that look like a plonked on afterthought!'

So overall, the Trio is a true all-rounder which does it all and should have strong 'oldie' appeal. If the wind fails, you can even chug along with an outboard because this is a big, steady boat. Our test boat also looked fabulous in scarlet with the kind of finish you won't get in rotomoulded polyethylene. But you do get very wet feet and

there's no instant remedy if you capsize. Plus you have to pay for the privilege of Trio exclusivity which commands a noticeably higher price than rotomoulded plastic!

## RS Vision

RS describe their Vision as the 'world's best selling family/racer sailboat in 2005 and 2006 – market leader in its class.' So clearly lots of people think this boat is pretty good.

The Vision is yet another dinghy designed by Phil Morrison, but surprisingly is his only design being built in rotomoulded plastic. On the plus side, rotomoulding is an excellent way to mass produce dinghy hulls which cost often considerably less than glassfibre, as well as being quite a lot more durable and resistant to knocks. On the minus side, plastic boats are not so shiny (higher grade plastic is unfortunately duller than lower grade plastic) as glassfibre, and if you hole it (very unlikely) it's much more difficult to repair.

The more rotomoulded plastic there is in a hull and deck, the heavier the boat will be. Rotomoulded boats are essentially heavier than glassfibre, although by how much depends on the type of construction. A glassfibre boat also has the potential to be stiffer than rotomoulded plastic when built to the same weight.

RS believe the Vision is as big as a boat can be built in rotomoulded plastic, without becoming unacceptably overweight. Less surface area means less plastic, which means less weight – which is one reason why the Vision is the narrowest boat in this test. The design also uses 'form shaping' instead of extra dense plastic when possible to provide stiffness – for instance the steps, curves and knuckles on the Vision's hull and deck all use the shape of the structure to promote rigidity.

The Vision is strong on simplicity, with a clean cockpit that's been carefully designed so there's nothing to snag the spinnaker or stop the crew from moving around with a Gnav (upside-down kicking strap) helping keep the area behind the mast clear and the boom well above most heads. Two separate 'compartments' provide plenty of room for an adult helm and crew, but there's also enough comfortable space to sail the Vision as a two-plus-two, which would be fine for any combination of mum, dad and two primary school-aged children. RS also recommend the Vision as a 3:1 instructor boat, but four adults looks like a squeeze.

One boat won't suit all sizes and shapes and the Vision's ergonomics have been carefully thought out to provide comfortable sailing for average-sized people – it's a bit of a crouch sitting on the side benches unless you're small, but the gently rolled side decks are comfortable and hiking over the side feels pretty good. There's also the option of using a trapeze kit (£99 extra) which gives more leverage and power upwind, as well as providing additional fun for the crew.

With the wind up, the Vision is quick enough to provide some good blasting with its full rig and spinnaker in XL mode. We also sailed the basic Vision T with reefed mainsail. The single-line slab-reefing system is quick and effective, with a yellow float on top of the mast ensuring that a learner crew won't invert the boat. This a problem for all modern dinghies, which unlike the



**Above** Our crews had no trouble flipping their Visions back upright after capsize, nor did they have any trouble getting back into the boat, and any water inside the Vision disappeared before it got underway.

**Right** The Vision is the only Phil Morrison design built in rotomoulded plastic.





PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

**Left** With the wind up, the Vision is quick enough to provide some good blasting with its full rig and spinnaker in XL mode.

Comet Trio float high on their side when the boat capsizes. However, our crews had absolutely no trouble flipping their Visions back upright after several capsizes – ‘righting lines’ are led back to the transom in case of difficulty. Nor did they have any trouble getting back into the boat, and any water inside the Vision disappeared before it got underway.

### Vision verdict

Tester Charlotte Vessey's reported: 'The Vision felt like the baby of the group – lighter and tippier but great fun to sail. We got quite a lot of speed up with the full mainsail and jib offwind, then sailed two downwind legs with the asymmetric spinnaker which was easy to launch and control. My only negative was that it seemed hard to sheet in the jib fully sailing upwind – but maybe that was just me!'

Senior Instructor Tom Dynes said, 'This is an ideal dinghy for a sailing school. My colleague Ben Murray-Brown took the new Vision out for a sail with its new school rig and a total novice crew who survived half a dozen capsizes. Ben rated the new Vision a big improvement with better reefing system and sails, much lighter rudder, watertight day hatches and the addition of front fender and towing eyelet which are ideal for school use.'

Gemma Frohlich, RYA Dinghy Sailing Coach/Assessor added: 'It was nice to discover the XL rigged Vision could keep up with the Xenon with me out on the wire upwind. This is a very versatile boat. At one end of the scale, the quick reefing system means that beginners have plenty of reassurance should the wind increase; but in a real blow with the kite up, this boat has enough performance to keep more advanced sailors on their toes!'

Overall the Vision is neat, simple and very carefully thought out. It's big enough for a young family, good for instructing and just about small enough to launch and sail singlehanded. Being self-draining is a major bonus after a capsize, and when pulled upright the Vision is stable and easy to climb back on. But utility and practicality makes the Vision look like a rather bland plastic boat. If

you want racing performance with snappier acceleration and response, look out for a second-hand RS200 or RS400 at much the same price.

### Topaz Xenon

The curiously named Xenon comes from Topper International, who have really gone for the rotomoulded construction system with their Topaz range of six different models from the 10ft Taz to the 15ft Xenon, designed and developed by Ian Howlett and Rob White. They stopped building dinghies in glassfibre a couple of years ago, believing that rotomoulded plastic is the way forward for volume dinghy production at a price which people can afford – around 30 per cent cheaper than a comparable glassfibre boat.

The Xenon is a good looking machine – particularly for a 'plastic' boat. That is probably because it has something of a race image, with more sail area (power) and beam (leverage to hold down the power) than either of the other two boats in this test. The appearance is enhanced by a rather sexy, see-through laminate mainsail and cool black kite.

The wide open Xenon cockpit has loads of space with side benches, side decks and a thwart for the crew to perch on. Two big blokes had absolutely no problem moving around, and in lighter winds you could just as well sail with a family on board. You can reduce mainsail size with the standard zip-up reefing system, which looks neater but is more fiddly than the slab system used on the Trio or Vision and definitely best performed on shore.

Topper employ a slightly different approach to RS when it comes to the problem of building a suitably stiff and light rotomoulded boat. The Xenon has an aluminium beam that runs full width across the foredeck as a major element of the rig structure, helping to support the stresses and strains of that powerful mainsail. So despite the expansive area of this wide, open-looking plastic boat, the Xenon doesn't feel heavy on the water and is light enough for the crew to manage with a trolley on dry land. For sure, a superlight variation of the Xenon built in epoxy foam sandwich

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**Right** The Xenon is a good looking machine – particularly for a ‘plastic’ boat. The appearance is enhanced by a rather sexy, see-through laminate mainsail and cool black kite.



PHOTOS: JEREMY EVANS

**Below** You can reduce mainsail size with the standard zip-up reefing system – a job best performed on shore.

**Bottom** The Xenon has plenty of power available.



glassfibre would be a different beast – but would also be twice the price!

Our testers had a lot of fun with the Xenon, which seems just about the right skill level for slightly more experienced crews looking to push their performance and ability. It's not that the Xenon is difficult to sail, but there is quite a lot of power available and a wide hull is not necessarily so easy when going through a gybe in strong winds. In light to moderate winds the Xenon should be easy and forgiving enough to keep control with intermediate skills, with more of a challenge as the wind blows harder – the Xenon should appeal to sailors who want to match low cost sailing with more challenging performance.

Unsurprisingly, our testers capsized the Xenon on a few occasions. Wide, buoyant dinghies are most likely to invert. The Xenon was fitted with a flat triangular float which attaches neatly to the top of the mainsail and, together with a sealed mast, helps prevent the boat going right over. It worked well, helped by our crews who didn't waste time getting their weight onto the centreboard, and the Xenon only inverted once out of more than half a dozen capsizes. Afterwards it was straightforward to pull the Xenon back upright,

with no problems getting back on board due to the low freeboard and any water self-draining straight out of the cockpit.

### Xenon verdict

After sailing the Xenon Charlotte Vessey said: 'The Xenon felt more of a challenge to sail in those winds – definitely tippiest, but not so that it was a battle to keep the boat upright. Sailing as crew, the position on the side decks was comfortable but I found it very hard to release the jib cleats which seemed to need a higher position.'

RYA Senior Instructor Tom Dynes said, 'The Xenon was a good blast! Its spinnaker system was very straightforward for first-time use in lots of wind and the boat felt good on the plane.' He added, 'With that kind of power and that kind of wind, the Xenon could also have done with a trapeze!' – which is available as an optional extra for the boat.

Gemma Frohlich, RYA Dinghy Sailing Coach/Assessor, said: 'The Xenon is obviously aimed more at the club racer type of sailor, particularly with those stylish see-through sails and black spinnaker. I really liked the fact that the kicker and cunningham mainsail controls were led aft. This not only saves the helm constantly having to ask the crew to tweak the mainsail, but also stops the boat nose diving if the crew has to move forward when you're sailing fast downwind.'

The Xenon has all the looks of an exciting sailing machine, designed to get the most rewarding performance from a low cost rotomoulded boat, with excellent cockpit and sail controls. A hinged mast step allows one person to raise or lower the mast when rigging and derigging. But it's not designed for novice sailors or school use. The boat is targeted as a potential club racer, but rotomoulded plastic has its limits and you might prefer a second-hand glassfibre racing dinghy.



Thanks to Cobnor Activities Centre (CAC) for providing facilities for this test. CAC runs a full programme of sailing courses and activities in Chichester Harbour – for details visit [www.cobnor.com](http://www.cobnor.com)

## Overall

Which boat did our test team prefer? Charlotte Vessey said, 'As a more "mature" instructor, I personally preferred the Comet Trio. It seemed to do everything the other two boats could do, but with less fuss or excitement which is maybe what those who are 20 years younger might like best. So if my two daughters wanted to go out with a pair of handsome sailors, I'd be delighted to see them enjoying a blast in the Vision or Xenon!'

Senior Instructor Tom Dynes gave his vote, 'In conclusion, the RS Vision is perfectly suited for sailing centre use, and I would recommend it to any centre looking for a mid performance boat or for a family looking for a fun blast or a day sail. The Trio and Xenon are both well suited for class/handicap racing and are also both pretty

exciting to sail. If I had to choose between them, I would go for the Xenon – it was pretty wild!'

So to make your choice you first need to decide where you stand on rotomoulded plastic – it's cheap, almost maintenance free and exceptionally durable, but not everyone will want to own an obviously mass-produced 'plastic' boat. The Comet Trio provides more individuality – and a delightfully traditional experience of allround dinghy sailing performance – at a considerably higher price than its plastic rivals. The RS Vision is a totally modern and absolutely functional multi-purpose sailing machine, recommended for a wide range of uses. While the Topaz Xenon proves that a plastic boat can not only look a lot better than a bath tub but also be a load of fun to sail in a breeze and is a boat to progress with. ■

## ■ TOPAZ XENON



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DESIGN:	Ian Howlett in 2005
HULL:	Rotomoulded plastic
LENGTH:	4.5m
BEAM:	2m
PN:	1070
SAIL AREA:	MAIN 12sq m
	JIB 3.5sq m
	SPINNAKER 12.75sq m
PRICE (Xenon Sport):	£5,295

DESIGN:	Phil Morrison in 2003
HULL:	Rotomoulded plastic
LENGTH:	4.6m
BEAM:	1.75m
PN:	1078
SAIL AREA:	MAIN 9sq m
	JIB 3.5sq m
	SPINNAKER 12.65sq m
PRICE (Vision XL):	£4,895

DESIGN:	Phil Morrison in 1995
HULL:	Glassfibre/Coremat
LENGTH:	4.6m
BEAM:	1.83m
PN:	1086
SAIL AREA:	MAIN 9.28sq m
	JIB 3.25sq m
	SPINNAKER 9.28sq m
PRICE (as tested):	£7,415

### From Rick Reading

The three words that re-appeared throughout the Topaz Xenon trial were SEXY, FUN and EXCITING. Intermediates through to top club racers will certainly enjoy a breathtaking sailing experience.

The ultimate verdict was that the 'Endeavour Trophy selected' Xenon was the most fun, most stylish, most spacious and offered the most progression.

### From Martin Wadhams

The test perfectly captures the Vision's winning ingredient – successful versatility. Simple and safe; small enough for one yet big enough for a young family; easy when reefed and sparkling performance with the XL rig around the race track. Outboard motor, trapeze and specialist institution equipment options complete the adaptable picture.

### From Andy Simmons

To some the Comet Trio may appear to be a little old fashioned, but she is a superbly comfortable dinghy that is relatively easy to sail fast, often embarrassing faster dinghies in handicap racing, although the 29 Trios at Exe Sailing Club say they are great for fleet racing too!

ANSWER BACK

ANSWER BACK

ANSWER BACK