

SUNSATIION
288 INTIMIDATOR

The 25-foot Aggressor, 32-foot Dominator and the 288 Intimidator (a new 40-footer is on the way) have, in turn, racked up solid reviews in the press and on the water, where they're beginning to filter geographically outward from their Michigan birthplace. Each is finding growing favor among quality-conscious hot-boaters who do their boating in notoriously rough water-and, these days, that includes lakes such as Havasu, Mead and Powell, along with the surf.

The Intimidator is the most recently produced of this impressive formation and runs head to head with the 32-footer in popularity. It was introduced in 1995 and completely revamped two

years later. The makeover encompassed a complete and dramatic cabin restyle, and a stylish fairing replaced the old-school windshield. A complete ergonomic evaluation resulted in a new dash with easier-reading gauges and purposeful relocation of switches and controls.

ONBOARD

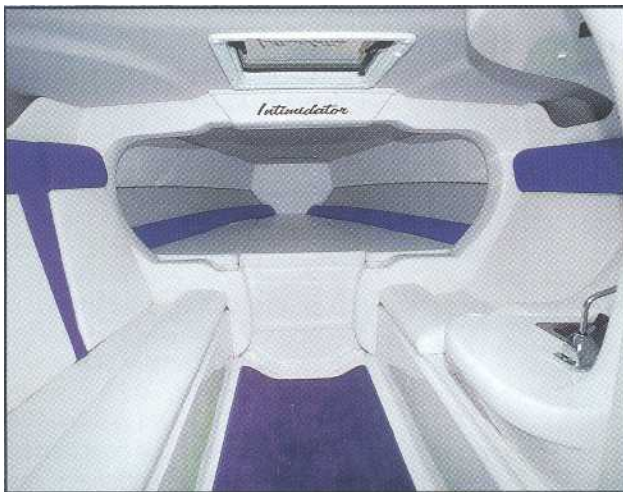
There's nothing like a bit of nasty water to wring out the true nature of a boat's foundational workmanship. We had our share of it, and it revealed nothing but the same rock-solid feel we've reported in past bouts with this and other Sunsatians. This out-





fit takes pride in its stylish and stout glasswork, and it's justified. The fully cored innerliner is beautifully tooled.

Our Intimidator left the mold white and was then sent to Mitcher T (Middleville, Michigan), who proceeded to produce



one of the wildest and most elaborate graphic treatments we've seen on a Sunsation. The resulting \$6,000 paint upgrade -a bargain of monumental proportions when measured by Florida's graphic specialists-was evocative of work from the best of the West Coast gelcoat masters. A base-coat clear-coat swirl of fades and blends dazzled our team's inspectors and everyone within visual range and moved one of our team to proclaim that the resulting finish "approached perfection."

Molded engine vents and recessed scoops for the five fixed cleats soften this boat's clean lines, which were also boldly accented by the whited-out trim railing and molding. A molded, nonskid grip is built into the deck walkway, and walking it is simplified by the two integral steps designed into the passenger-side foot support. The passenger's feet prop against the upper tier when seated and the lower tier when in standing mode.

The Sunsation is first and foremost a driver's boat, and the, experienced hot-boater begins to appreciate the boat's interior design and layout within minutes of being onboard. "Everything is where it's supposed to be," wrote one of our team, in an oversimplification of our feel for the boat.

Indeed, it seemed so as we eased into the deep, rich support of Sunsation's bolster seating, upgraded this time around with mechanical McLeods, and prodded the 385 horsepower that lay in the 454 Magnum's reserve. The bolsters wrapped us snugly, providing a balance of firm support and soft invitation. They bore embroidered logo work and clean, stylish lines and faced angled, molded footrests. Dual-ram Bennett tabs are standard, along with thru-hull exhaust.

Stainless interior railing was anchored into the bolsters' backs for the benefit of standing rear passengers, who could also opt for a supremely comfortable ride in an expansive, rear bench seat. Hidden storage is designed into the seat frames and in nicely finished side panels.

Grab handles were conveniently placed, as were drink holders. A dedicated fiberglass panel angles Kiekhaefer Zero Effort controls within natural arm's reach of the driver. At full throttle, the trim and tab controls were barely a finger's length away from the driver's touch.

Layered two-tone bezels (white and purple) accented Gaffrig, white-faced gauges, which were sparsely arranged within the Intimidator's large, layered dash and were easily visible. The dials and a full bank of well-marked, back-lit rocker switches were positioned in off-white, aluminum dash panels. A Sony CD system with four speakers is standard, and our test boat also featured an optional bull-horn (\$288) and Lowrantz depth sounder (\$446).

SUNSATION

288 INTIMIDATOR

Sunsation has attracted repeated praise in previous test reports for their inherent value, and nowhere is this trait more evident than in the cabin. A locking, private cabin door grants access to an environment that balances plush comfort with a clean, understated tone, and the detailed fiberglass work in the galley, bulkhead and seat framework was impressive—especially for a boat in this price range. An attractive galley area, equipped with a stainless sink and mirror and a small shelf, is neatly integrated into the fiberglass liner, alongside a decently comfortable jumper seat. It faces a roomy, five-foot, sofa-styled seat. T snap-out carpeting is standard.

Runway lighting creates atmosphere, and cup holders are absorbed into the seat arms. Above, a large hatch provides ventilation. A padded vee-berth is plenty long enough to stretch at will, although the stowage of the portable, pump-out head below (a \$288 option) eats up some of the headroom, and it's slightly claustrophobic.

PERFORMANCE

We really liked the way the Sunsatation's driver's area was set up, with the controls, wheel and seat position aligned for maximum comfort and convenience. Set up by enthusiasts for enthusiasts, the Intimidator breeds a full-on sport-boat feel through the cockpit and cradles its passengers with comfortable seating and great amenities.

The hull dispatches low-speed maneuvers smoothly and easily, and the big-block Magnum/Bravo shifted easily and reacted instantly to command. We hit an easy-riding plane at just under 20 miles an hour, and slow-speed handling elicited good marks across the board. We hit 30 miles an hour in a respectable 9.78 seconds and felt a steady pull through the midrange and into the upper range of this boat's power curve. The hull loosened nicely and cleaned out well as we throttled into the midrange, and we cruised at 50 miles an hour at 4,000 rpm. The ride was outstanding, even in extremely rough water. The Sunsatation retained

a flat, sticky stance, while airing out beneath us, combining a strong measure of stability with a light, maneuverable feel. We were very impressed with this boat's handling properties in horrible conditions, and, once we became accustomed to the ride and feel, we were able to power through it at full speed. "Once you find the rhythm," read one driver's notes, "the feel is spectacular. It's set up perfectly."

At about 50, the Intimidator really freed up, and it was from that point that it was the most fun to drive. There wasn't a hint of porpoise, and the hull adapted nearly perfectly to every increment in our controlled speed testing. "It was a ten in every speed range," gushed one of our drivers. No doubt about it, this fundamentally sound hull design has grown into one of our team favorites in this size class.

We ran the Intimidator at nearly full speed through miles and miles of two- to four-foot chop and let the hull design do what came naturally as we cascaded across the capping waves. The Sunsatation was bred and built for this kind of

performance, and it didn't disappoint when we found ourselves deep in no man's land. We retained complete control of the ride and handling at speed, maneuvering delicately through the watery peaks and launching lightly off the rollers, to repeated, perfect reentry. We loved the way this boat drove.

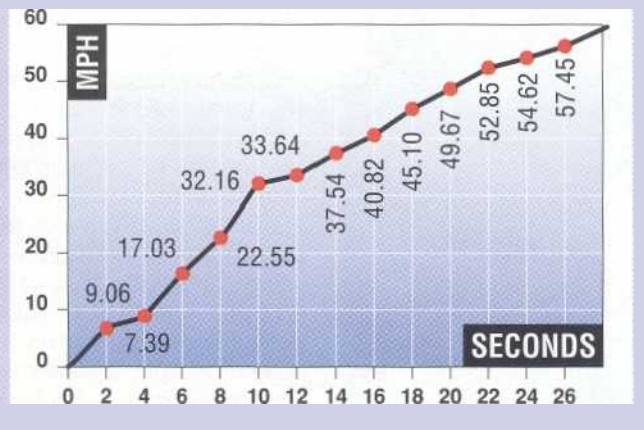
The only thing lacking was power: While the 454 Magnum is certainly suitable for anything the family boater might have in mind, including exhilarating 65-mile-an-hour power cruising across the lake or surf, the throttle-minded among us were left wanting more. This hull design likes power, and it wasn't tested in the least by what we had in the well.

SPECIFICATIONS

Test conditions: Rough
Centerline: 28'8"
Beam: 96"
Bottom: Stepped 24-degree vee-bottom
Engine/Drive: MerCruiser 454 Magnum/Bravo One
HP Q prop: 470
Ratio: 1.5:1
Prop: Mercury 24 Bravo four-blade
Overall weight: 4,500 lbs.
Base Price: \$68,621
Standard Features: MerCruiser 5.7L/Bravo One, stand-up bolsters, beverage holders, stainless grab handles, stainless cleats, auto bilge, thru-hull exhaust, locking cabin door, dual-ram Bennett tabs, hydraulic hatch, Mitcher T graphics, bow hatch, race fairing, embroidered carpet, cabin bead lighting, portable head, Gaffrig gauges, Sony CD system, Zero Effort controls, indirect cabin

lighting, breakers, lighted rocker switches, galley w/sink and mirror
Options on test boat: Bull horn (\$288), pump-out head (\$270), McLeod bolster seating (\$4,455), depth sounder (\$446), matched bezels (\$420), custom graphics (\$6,000)
Price as tested: \$80,500
Top Speed, radar: 65.5 mph
Mfg. est. speed: 65 mph
0-30: 9.78 seconds
0-40: 15.73 seconds
0-50: 20.98 seconds
0-60: 29.98 seconds
Speed at 3,000 rpm: 36.7 mph
Speed at 4,000 rpm: 49.2 mph
Speed at 5,000 rpm: 62.4 mph

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Sunsation has quietly risen to prominence in the enthusiast performance market with their outstanding line of performance vees, and a cost-for-cost comparison in this size class offers even more incentive to consider this low-volume, high-energy builder. You'll be hard pressed to find many boats in this realm that can equal the Intimidator's impressive value.