

Boat test

Topaz Argo

The first dinghies in the Topaz range were launched 14 years ago – **Jeremy Evans** tests the most recent addition

Topper Sailboats started working on rotomoulded polyethylene hull construction in the 1990s, developing processes used in windsurfer and canoe production. On its own, polyethylene would either be far too heavy or far too flexible, so Topper developed a three-layer system – the ‘filling’ in the sandwich is a lightweight honeycomb core, with a hard inner layer of polyethylene (Topaz use a formula registered as Metalicene) and a tough, UV-stabilised polyethylene outer layer.

The original Topaz, now available in four different versions, was launched in 1999. This was followed a year later by the tiny 9ft Taz, then the more conventional Magno, Omega, Vibe and Xenon dinghies, all designed and developed by Ian Howlett and Rob White. The 14ft Argo completes the range. All the boats are still moulded in Sussex and assembled in Kent.

SPECIFICATIONS

Designer	Topaz Design Team
Length	4.4m
Beam	1.85m
Hull weight	110kg
Mainsail	8.12sq m
Jib	3.3sq m
Asymmetric spinnaker	10.62sq m
Symmetric spinnaker	9.66sq m
PY	1050

Concept

★★★★★☆☆☆

Fourteen feet is a classic length for a dinghy – big enough to carry weight easily, but not so huge it’s a struggle to launch or ponderous to sail. Unlike the other boats in the range, the Argo is attributed to the Topaz Design Team and reflects the experience gained from over 14 years of designing, manufacturing and marketing Topaz dinghies. With a little more length, beam and volume than the Vibe, it has been conceived as equally suitable for sailing schools or families, with an easily handled rig that could be enjoyed singlehanded for fun, doublehanded for racing, two adults plus two children for cruising, or with a maximum payload of four adults for learning, which frankly might be rather a squash!

The Argo has replaced the larger and more demanding Xenon for the Endeavour Trophy ‘dinghy champion of champions’ annual regatta, and is being considered as a replacement for ultra-traditional RN Bosun dinghies, which have done service for many decades.

Hull, rig, deck layout

★★★★★☆☆☆

Having produced six different dinghy designs with 11 model options, it would be a surprise if Topper Sailboats had not got their seventh design fully sorted. All manufacturers learn by their mistakes and there were occasional problems with fittings pulling out of plastic on early boats. Jon Manners from Topper Sailboats explained that everything is now bolted into non-corroding brass or stainless steel plates on all Topaz dinghies, ensuring that it should be failsafe over a long period of hard use.

Like all the bigger boats in the range, the Argo mast is mounted on a sturdy aluminium beam spanning the foredeck and bolted into big inserts on either side, providing a ‘space frame’ effect that stiffens the front of the hull while spreading the load of the rig. The foot of the mast bolts onto the beam, allowing it to be raised or lowered through 90 degrees using the forestay. With a little practice, Jon says it’s easy enough to do this singlehanded, but obviously even easier if someone lifts or catches the top of the mast.

Although all Argo are offered in the most UV-stable colour of white, Jon Manners says a top cover is essential for keeping the boat



1 Xxx 2 Xxx 3 Xxx 4 Xxx





LEFT Xxx
RIGHT Xxx

clean and protecting ropes or elastics, and it's still advisable to avoid endless exposure to strong sun. It's difficult to avoid scratching any hull if you drag it up a beach, but the Argo has more than 3.5mm of solid colour to play with and the trick is to trim back scratches with an extremely sharp knife, which sounds alarming but apparently does the job. It is very difficult to imagine anyone managing to knock a hole in the Argo, but if you join the handful who have managed the impossible, hot air welding can apparently make an invisible repair.

Under sail

★★★★★☆☆☆☆

We tested the Argo at Datchet Water, a superb location for Topper Sailboats' long established test centre (also home of Datchet Water SC). The sun shone and the wind blew up to around 12 knots, sufficient to hike upwind and plane offwind, but died as soon as the camera appeared!

No one would pretend that the Argo is particularly light, but four moulded handholds under the gunwales should make all the difference if you have to carry the boat. With the close fitting trolley, launching and landing on the Datchet slipway was easy singlehanded, but an extra pair of hands would probably be required if it was steeper or more slippery. Off the trolley, the Argo is very stable and it's particularly easy to step into the cockpit via the low open transom or low side decks. With a high boom and gnav (inverted kicking strap) there is lots of crew space in the front half of the cockpit, with moulded thwart or side benches providing a comfortable perch. The swivelling centreboard takes up less room and creates considerably less hassle than a daggerboard, with the case providing a central structural role in the hull.

Apart from an attractive fleck, the Trilam cockpit has very good non-slip, which prevents you sliding without snagging your skin or clothes. I found the ergonomics of the cockpit first-class, sitting in or sliding out onto the side decks for fairly comfortable hiking, but bigger or heavier sailors might feel more comfortable in a larger boat like the Xenon.

With the wind nudging around Force 3 and virtually flat water, the Argo was responsive, easily driven and a tranquil pleasure to sail. Conditions were by no means challenging, but the Argo did seem particularly user-friendly accomplishing smooth tacks and gybes, coming out of the turns and straightening out easily with nice, positive control on the rudder. The rig felt a little undersized and underpowered, reflecting typical use of the boat, but no doubt there would be plenty of sail to power the

Argo up nicely in anything from a Force 4. We still drove the Argo up onto the plane quite easily, pulled by the asymmetric spinnaker with a couple of adults as ballast. It was very well-mannered in those easy conditions, but if things get more frisky in stronger winds, you can pull down a reef in the Dacron radial cut mainsail – a single line control pulls down luff and leech at the same time – for a big reduction in power and heeling moment. You could also roll up the jib, since the Argo sails well enough under mainsail alone.

The Argo is supplied as standard with a bright yellow triangular buoyancy mat, which can be attached to the top of the mainsail, providing back-up flotation for the sealed mast. Using this is recommended for anyone who is not 100 per cent confident of managing capsizes. Our crew made the classic mistake of hanging on as the Argo went over, which pulled it into full inversion without the buoyancy mat attached. The Argo has a double elastic fitted to the head of the centreboard, which ensures it cannot fall back inside the case with the boat inverted. This is an important safety precaution, ensuring the crew can use centreboard to right the boat – or a rescue team if the crew are trapped underneath the hull.

Verdict

★★★★★☆☆☆☆

I am happy to give the Argo a top overall score for price, performance, durability, fittings and user-friendliness. But is it your kind of boat? I would recommend the Argo for two adults or teenagers up to about 75kg apiece, who may like to sail with a couple of children. Sailing schools and institutions will make up their own minds if it's big enough for their use, but it does seem far too small for a theoretical maximum payload of four adults!



“The Argo has replaced the larger and more demanding Xenon for the Endeavour Trophy”

It would be a good boat for novice sailors who want a challenge, with the promise of rewarding and exciting sailing ahead, without things getting dangerous or nerve-wracking

for crew. Equally, it could be a good choice for dinghy sailors with intermediate ability who are looking for a really easy-to-own boat that ticks almost all the boxes for occasional fun. □

“No one would pretend the Argo is particularly light, but launching and landing at Datchet was easy singlehanded”

COMPARISONS



RS Vision
Extremely successful dinghy by RS. Comptec PE3 is the RS version of triple layer rotomoulded sandwich for their range of low-cost, user-friendly dinghies with a good turn of performance.

Length 4.6m
Beam 1.75m
Hull weight 125kg
Upwind sail area 12.2sq m
Gennaker 12.6sq m
PY 1096



2000
Phil Morrison 1998 glassfibre dinghy design that has become a modern classic, now by LDC. Sparkling performance in a fresh breeze, without over-challenging less experienced crews.

Length 4.44m
Beam 1.77m
Hull weight 140kg
Upwind sail area 11.7sq m
Gennaker 10.12sq m
PY 1090

ANSWER BACK

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